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ARTH4545

New Cartographies of the Middle East: on Studio Photography and its Publication

Preceding the formal invention of photography, the history of the medium and the locus

of the Middle East have been inextricable. Following Napoleon Bonaparte's failure to establish a

French colony in Egypt, the *Description de l'Egypte's* serialized publication between 1809 and

1828 aroused the West with its wealth of camera lucida-aided illustrations of Egypt's landscapes,

architecture, and archeological possibilities.[1] This interest in the region was only heightened by

the invention and wide scale adoption of the photograph; the mid-1800s saw large groups of

wealthy tourists make their "pilgrimage" to the "Orient," and by the 1850s, European

photographers began to situate themselves in proximity to areas of interest like Jerusalem.[2] These

photographers opened studios and sold their images of the Middle East to tourists and European

enthusiasts. The work produced from these studios largely served to satisfy the "desires for

exoticism" common amongst these audiences, relying on tropes to meet these ends.[3] During this

period, the Middle Eastern individual was largely reduced to archetypes like "carpet weavers,

street vendors, beggars, prisoners, and tribesmen."[4]

It was not until well into the nineteenth century that Middle Eastern people saw

themselves behind the camera. As residents began to open their own photography studios in

cities throughout the Middle East, they assumed control of their own image. Yet, the clarity of

the representations of Middle Eastern people in these images varied in a profound manner. With

the photography studio acting as an environment of complete creative control, the intentions

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[1] Perez, *Focus East*, 36.
[2] Perez, 59; Perez, 74.
[3] Behdad, *Camera Orientalis*, 5.
[4] Nafīsī, *Portrait Photographs from Isfahan*, 262.

behind the production of photography were entirely formative of the images they produced. Likewise, the photobook medium serves as a vehicle for the delivery of the narratives that conceived them. In the last 25 years, Middle Eastern artists and academics have taken it upon themselves to reinterpret and republish the work of studio photographers in the form of photobooks; and historically, photography was making its way into publications during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Thus, the inclusion of studio photography within the photobook form presents an interesting predicament when it comes to presenting a conception of the Middle East. *The direction of the relationship between the production of studio photography and its acquisition or informing of photography book narratives define the depth of the Middle Eastern individuals depicted within them.*

As Narrative Informs Photography

When ethnographic purposes are a motivating force in the creation of photography, depictions of the individual are limited to the periphery. Ethnographic studies that utilize photography have strong roots in the Middle East, created by both European and Middle Eastern photographers. A pertinent example of this practice is well manifested in *The Popular Costumes of Turkey in 1873*, The Ottoman Empire's Vienna World's Fair contribution in the same year. Taking shape as a 12 by 15 inch tome featuring 74 studio photographs and 320 pages of text, the companion to the Ottoman Pavilion presents itself with a scientific gravitas. Photographed by the Syrian-Armenian studio photographer Pascal Sébah and commissioned by Turkish painter and bureaucrat Osman Hamdi Bey, the book describes each region of the Ottoman Empire through images and pairs each with a brief overview of the history, cultural practices, and emerging economic trends of the regions depicted.[5] The descriptions provided by each photograph,

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[5] Nolan, "You Are What You Wear," 178–79.

however, depict the Middle East through strictly utilitarian means. Each photograph featured in

The Costumes of Turkey differentiates Middle Eastern ethnicity on the basis of clothing alone,

and this is a direct product of the impetus behind the book; the simplest way to visually represent

a culture that is foreign to most of the 7.3 million in attendance at the 1873 Vienna World's Fair

is through the people's ornate and visually distinct cultural garments.[6] This rational approach,

however, relinquishes the individualism inherent to each subject in exchange for the creation of a

clearly defined ethnic typological expression.
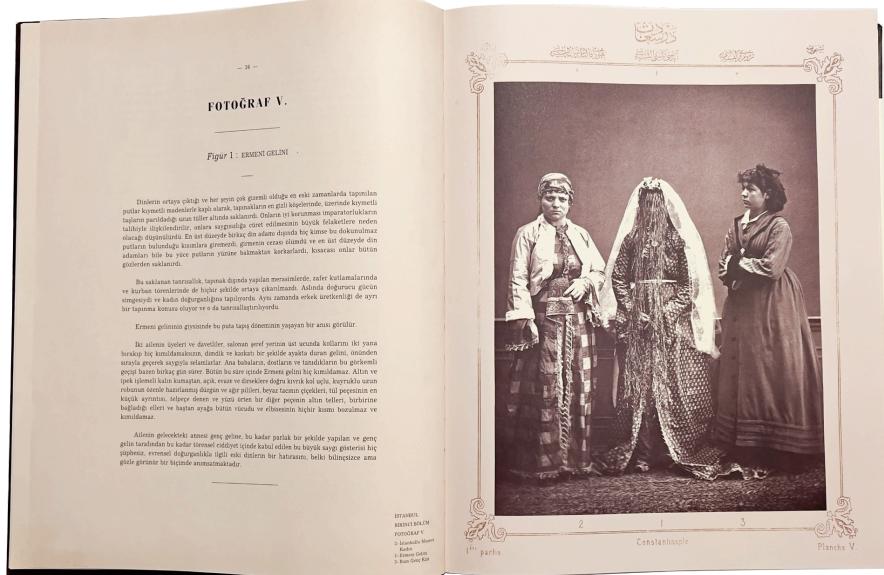
Figure 1. Osman Hamdi Bey. 1873 yılında Türkiye'de halk giysileri: elbise-i osmaniyye.

Karaköy-İstanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 1999, 36-37.

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[6] "Vienna World's Fair 1873."
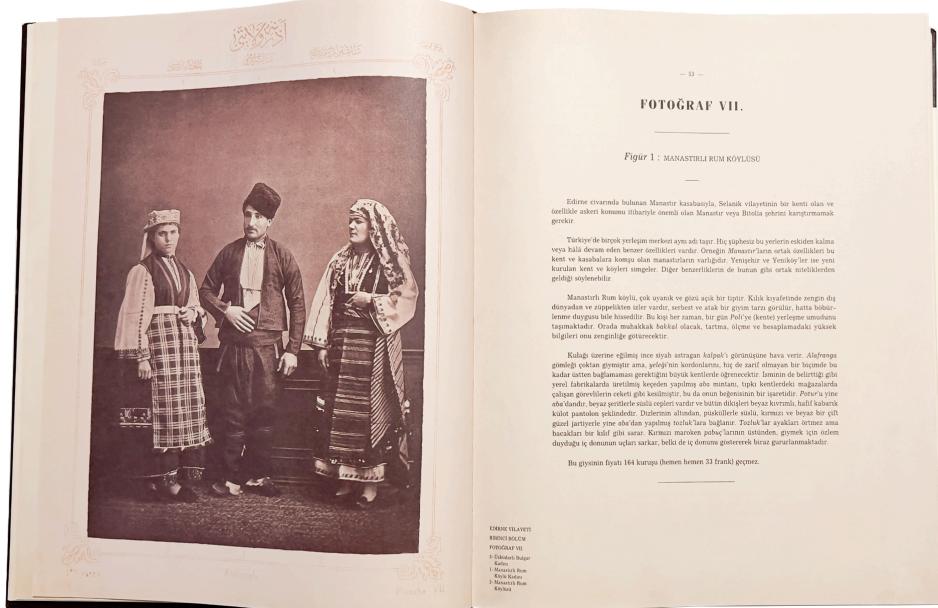
Figure 2. Osman Hamdi Bey. 1873 yılında Türkiye'de halk giysileri: elbise-i osmaniyye.

Karaköy-İstanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 1999, 52-53.
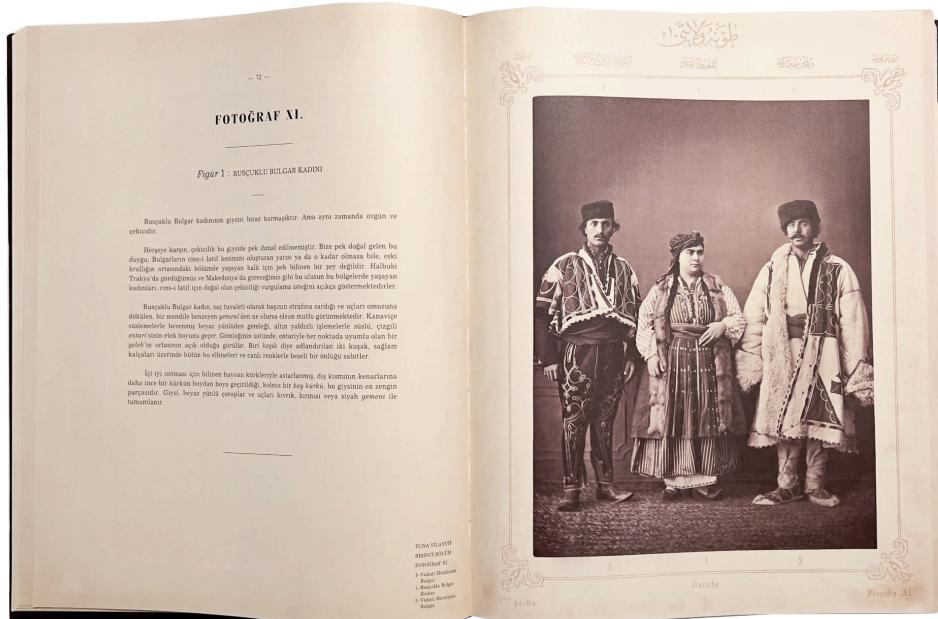
Figure 3. Osman Hamdi Bey. 1873 yılında Türkiye'de halk giysileri: elbise-i osmaniyye.

Karaköy-İstanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 1999, 72-73.

The serial collation of *The Popular Costumes of Turkey* serves the purpose of conflating dress and ethnicity, fulfilling the ethnographic purpose of the book. The volume's large size and page count may seem imposing at first, but the internal logic of the book is incredibly simple. The book divides itself by region of the Ottoman Empire, and each chapter is further subdivided into descriptions of the ethnic and social groups found in each region along with their depictions. Shown in Figures 1 through 3, the text that further describes the historical and social contexts of each person's clothing succumbs to each image's ability to garner the viewer's attention. Furthermore, with the book explicitly not being available for purchase, it is clear that *The Costumes of Turkey* was only meant to be experienced in an ephemeral moment at the World's Fair.[7] Therefore, it would be hard to believe that viewers were as concerned with reading the text as they were with viewing the images. Thus, the visual effect of each image takes precedence over the anthropological information found within each section. As each page is turned, only the images are presented clearly to the viewer. By this process, each image is uncritically compared to the previous one by visual means alone. Across the length of the volume, the viewer's eye is trained to distinguish individuals by clothing—the unique element in every photograph—not their history, language, or culture that is further described in the text. This process establishes the framework with which the ethnography in this book is performed; costume and ethnicity become interchangeable identifiers.

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[7] Nolan, "You Are What You Wear," 197.
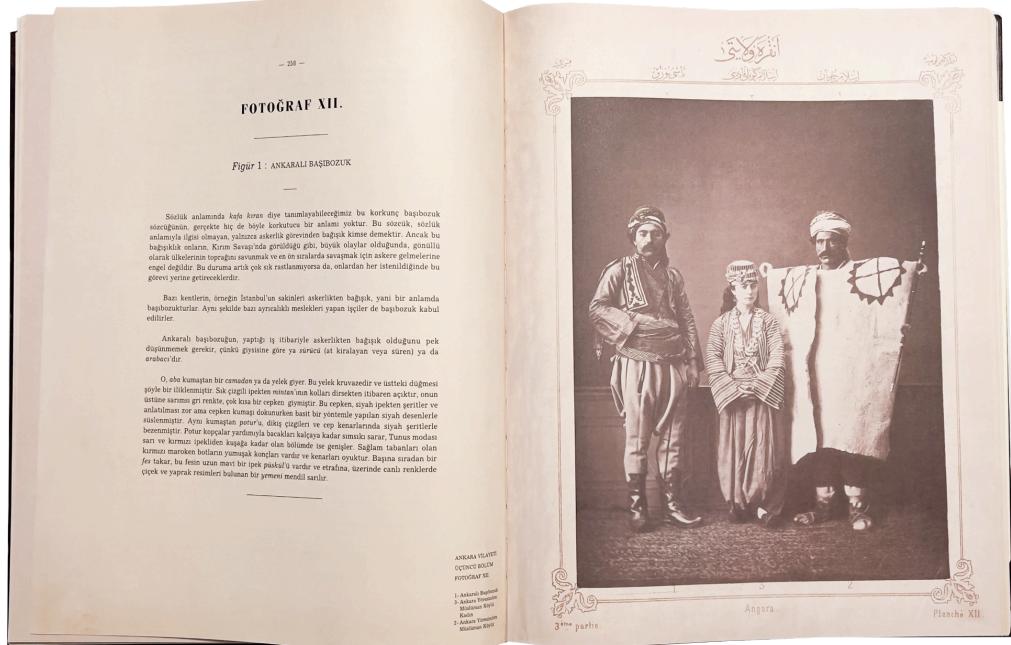
Figure 4. Osman Hamdi Bey. 1873 yılında Türkiye'de halk giysileri: elbise-i osmaniyye.

Karaköy-İstanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 1999, 258-259.

The constitution of the images themselves utilize this established relationship in order to reduce the individuals photographed to archetypical models. Each image in the volume presents those pictured with austerity. Made apparent in Figure 4, the space between the camera and each subject and the solemnity with which they hold themselves allow for the observation of their clothing, but not for the recognition of the individual. Each image maintains a distance from the subjects that neither calls attention to their surroundings nor to their face; this separation makes apparent the most immediately discernible article in each image—the subjects' clothing. Furthermore, the effect imparted by any small semblance of joy, pride, or grief seen in the figures' unfeeling expressions and mannerisms pales in comparison to the attention garnered by their ornate garments; each person pictured is simply wearing the clothes they are seen in, not

coming into them. These visual dynamics deftly serve the book's intended purpose: to allow the viewer to look at a photograph of an individual but instead see a whole, or what they believe that whole to be. Through the direct relationship between dress and ethnicity perpetuated by this book, each subject becomes an archetype of the ethnicity they represent. By using the composition of each photograph to relinquish individual identity, Sébah and Bey use individual photographs as vehicles for the representation of entire ethnic groups.

The articulation of this effect reveals itself clearly as the actual identity of the individuals photographed are revealed to not correlate with their representations truthfully. Diligent viewers may notice that there exists multiple instances in the book where people appear multiple times. In Figures 5 and 6, a bearded man who is at first labeled an "Armenian laborer from Erzurum" is elevated to a "Priest" in the subsequent plate.[8] This sartorial transformation relies on the assumption that the viewer disregards the identity of the man and simply notices his clothing. Furthermore, this change of clothing supersedes all of the social and economic processes that actually catalyze such a transition, if possible. And it accepts that, because he is now wearing different clothing, the man is somehow somebody else completely. More outstandingly, the inclusion of the French-born Ottoman nobleman in charge of the Empire's representation at the World's Fair, Victor Marie de Launay, in Figures 7 and 8 shows the man transforming from an Armenian teacher from Üsküdar to a typical Turkish man from Bursa.[9] These costume changes—effectively ethnic and social alterations—convey the idea that the individual in this volume serves the same function as a mannequin, having the ability to change ethnicity and class at will simply through a change of clothing.

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[8] Nolan, 193–94.
[9] "Launay, Marie de | Vitrosearch"; Nolan, "You Are What You Wear," 194.
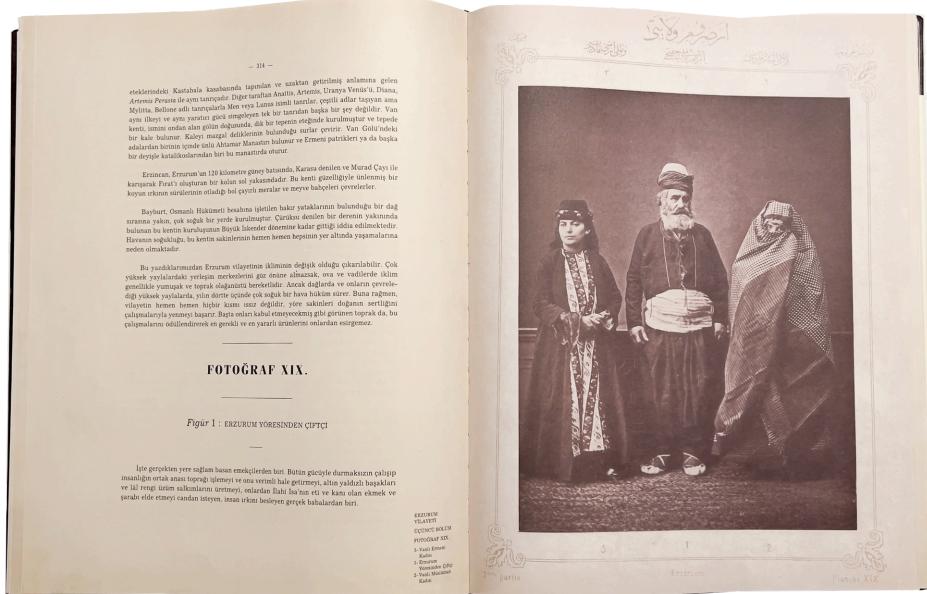
Figure 5. Osman Hamdi Bey. 1873 yılında Türkiye'de halk giysileri: elbise-i osmaniyye.

Karaköy-İstanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 1999, 314-315.
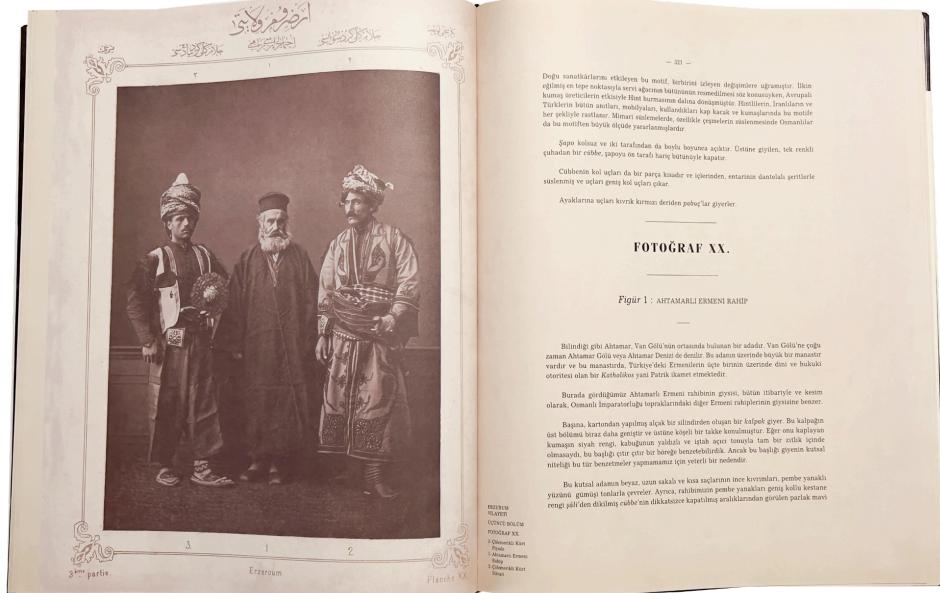
Figure 6. Osman Hamdi Bey. 1873 yılında Türkiye'de halk giysileri: elbise-i osmaniyye.

Karaköy-İstanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 1999, 320-321.
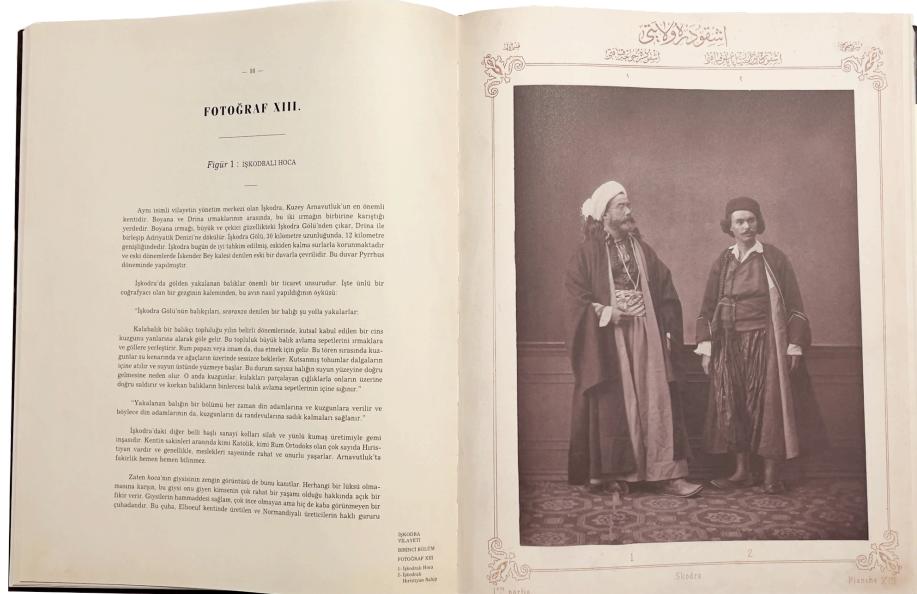
Figure 7. Osman Hamdi Bey. 1873 yılında Türkiye'de halk giysileri: elbise-i osmaniyye.

Karaköy-İstanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 1999, 88-89.
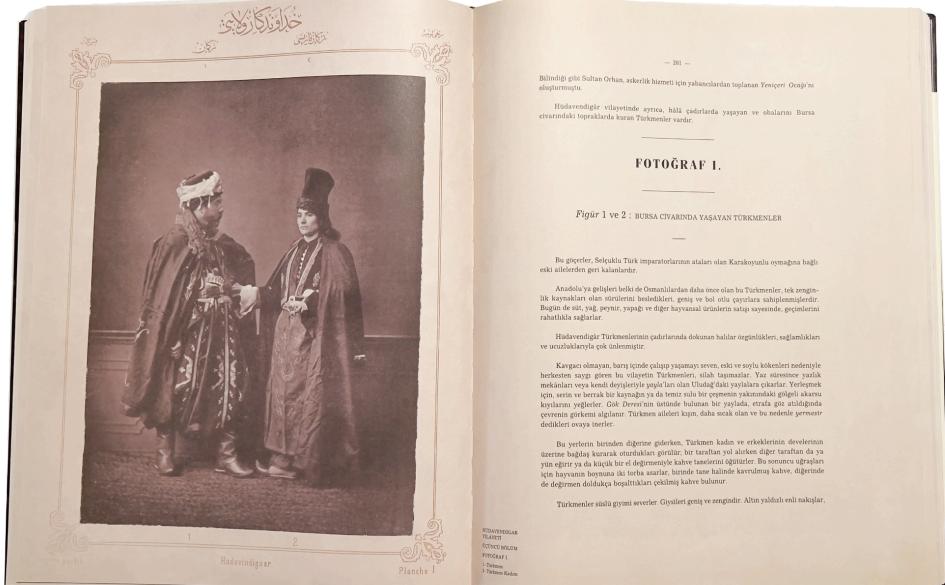
Figure 8. Osman Hamdi Bey. 1873 yılında Türkiye'de halk giysileri: elbise-i osmaniyye.

Karaköy-İstanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 1999, 200-201.

From a modern viewpoint, it is clear that the depictions of Middle Eastern people present in *The Costumes of Turkey* are incredibly reductive, but it must also be understood that the book served an important function in its contemporary setting. It can be argued that, despite its clearly Middle Eastern origins, *The Costumes of Turkey* relies on the Orientalist mode of "ethnic or professional typecasting" to quantify the Middle East along clearly defined borders.[10] Given the stage of a World's Fair, however, this method may have been the most effective way to garner interest in the Middle East from a foreign audience. At a time where the growing popularity of travel groups made the Middle East accessible to the European middle class, there was a strong Western desire to "escape to far and exotic countries" amidst the latter half of the nineteenth century.[11] Given this new stream of tourism, the Ottoman Empire took it upon themselves to make the Middle East a destination that seemed accessible to foreign travelers, and one of the forms of this adaptation was the process of deconstructing Middle Eastern culture into discrete typologies. This directly manifests in the images seen in *The Costumes of Turkey*. This is why UCLA Professor Ali Behdad cites the book in order to support his claim that Orientalist photography is not necessarily symptomatic of a European lens, but it is rather a product of "cultural contact between the West and the East."[12] This dogged commitment to ethnic and social typologies for the sake of Western audiences informed the creation of the formulaic images seen in the book, and the commitment to this encyclopedic pursuit trumps the expression of individuality within the work as a whole.

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[10] Behdad, *Camera Orientalis*, 5.
[11] Perez, *Focus East*, 45.
[12] Behdad, *Camera Orientalis*, 7.

As Photography Informs Narrative

In the decades following the publication of *The Costumes of Turkey*, studio photography

transformed from a practice specialized by mainly European and select few Middle Eastern

photographers to a decentralized network of resident photographers stationed in the cities that

they lived in throughout the Middle East. The studios they opened served to capture the

quotidian activities and achievements of its patrons. Within the archive of the Arab Image

Foundation, the Lebanese non-profit organization with the purpose of preserving the rich history

of Middle Eastern studio photography, there exist over 500,000 photographs that served the

purposes of personal identification, documentation of important events, and recreation.[13] It is

from the archives of the Arab Image Foundation that Lebanese authors, artists, and historians

Karl Bassil, Zeina Maasri, Akram Zaatari, and Walid Raad acquired the images used in their

exhibition and its published counterpart, *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography*.

Published in 2002, *Mapping Sitting* produces a depiction of the Middle East that

challenges the rigid interpretations perpetuated by books like *The Costumes of Turkey*. Besides

the one page introduction and the index that contextualizes each image, a portrait of the Middle

East presents itself through images alone. The book's second section, *ID*, is mosaicked across 14

spreads with 310 portraits whose negatives were recovered from the Armenian-owned Studio

Anouchian in Tripoli, Lebanon.[14] In this case, the numerous arrays of portrait photographs

visually represent the wide gamut of people that live in Lebanon. Yet, despite taking a form more

akin to a yearbook than an ethnography, "types" of people still reveal themselves within these

arrays. The articulation of these types, however, span broader social, economic, religious, and

ethnic contexts than those seen previously; this is due to the fact that the photographs featured in

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[13] "About | Arab Image Foundation."
[14] Bassil, *Mapping Sitting*, 281.

the book are products of unstaged individual expression and only through their assemblage within *Mapping Sitting* are these types revealed.
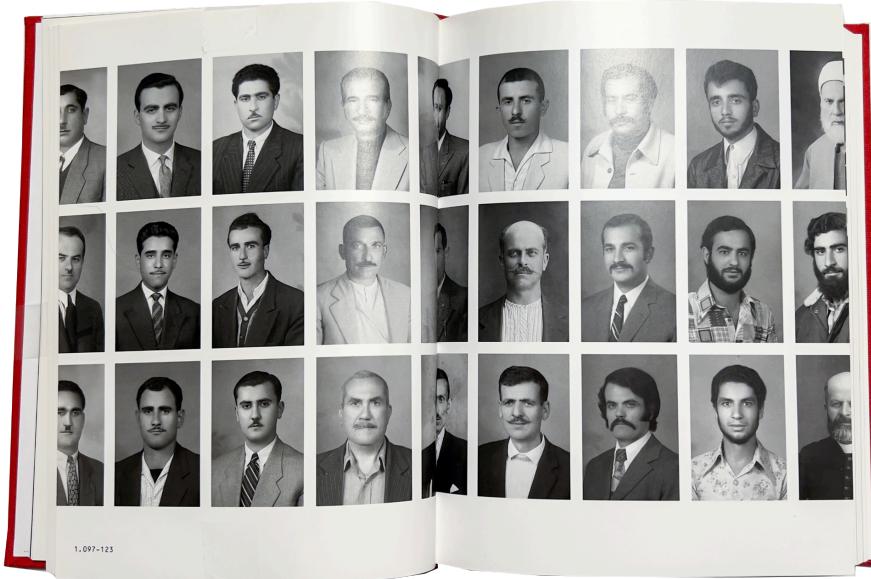
Figure 9. Bassil, Karl. *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography*. 2nd ed. Beirut, Lebanon: Mind the gap, 2005, 62-63.

The intimate awkwardness that pervades many of the pages within *Mapping Sitting* deconstructs the scientific austerity with which Middle Eastern people have previously been depicted. A latent humor lines the book's second section, *ID*. As shown in Figure 9, each portrait is made intimate with the short physical distance between the camera lens and the people photographed. Just like maintaining eye contact with a person in the same room, there is at first a tension between the viewer and those photographed as a product of this closeness. As a result of this abrasive encounter, the viewer is forced to scan the page in search of respite; as each unfortunate haircut, awkward grin, or overly-intense stare reveals itself, this tension transforms

into humor. In an essay on the role of studio photographers in Iran, writer Josephine van Bennekom argues that Iranian studio photographers "portray people as themselves and not as interesting anthropological specimens."[15] This is certainly also the case for Antranik Anouchian and his work seen in *Mapping Sitting*. No person pictured here serves the purpose of portraying the ideal Lebanese subject; their quirks, inalienable from an individual's personality and outward appearance, are on full display throughout these pages. And it is this fact that prevents any abstraction of the individual from each photograph. By utilizing photography that is candid in the fact that the individuals photographed are not meant to evoke any other expressions besides their own likeness, *Mapping Sitting* builds a visual encyclopedia of the individual in the Middle East.
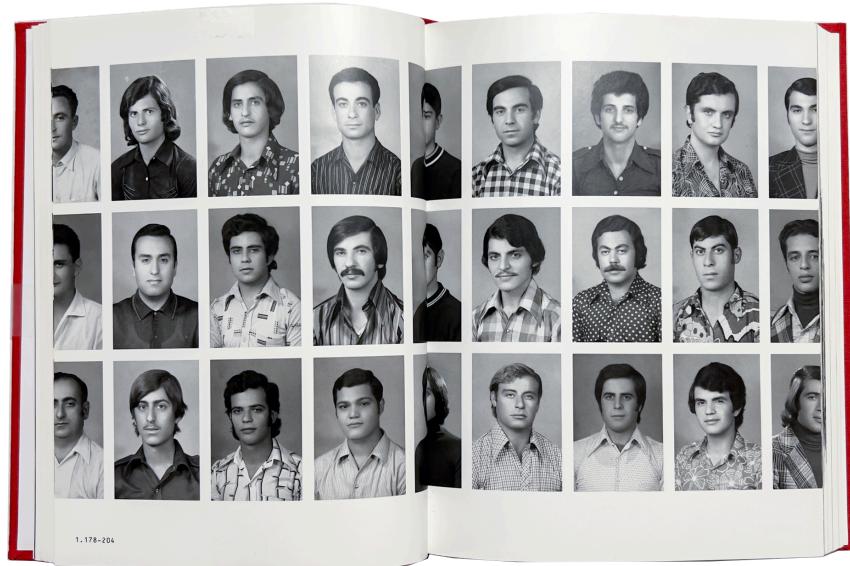
Figure 10. Bassil, Karl. *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography*. 2nd ed. Beirut, Lebanon: Mind the gap, 2005, 68-69.

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[15] Nafīsī, *Portrait Photographs from Isfahan*, 262.
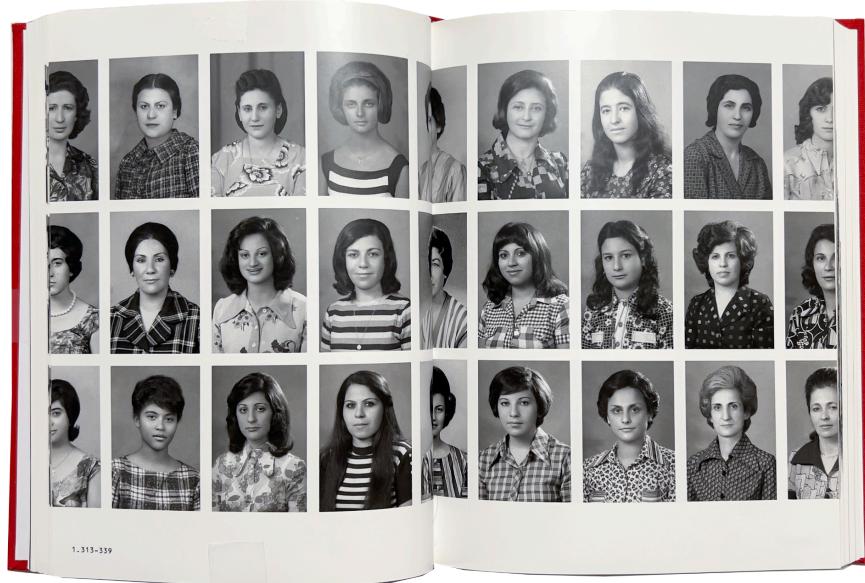
Figure 11. Bassil, Karl. *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography*. 2nd ed. Beirut, Lebanon: Mind the gap, 2005, 78-79.

However, the book's use of image arrays arranges individuals into apparent visual typologies that, at first, seemingly contradict the book's own purpose. Within the same section, each image's proximity to one another prompts the viewer to relate each photograph through visual means. The men and women pictured in Figures 10 and 11, for instance, are placed into association with one another based on the patterns on their clothing. Beyond this very literal similarity, more time spent on each spread leads to further correlations between individuals; by virtue of their facial hair, hairstyles, expression, complexion, or posture, in particular, commonalities become visual typologies. These types, however, don't evoke the sober rationale of labels like "Turkish Laborer" or "Armenian Priest," but instead exist in the same realm of identifiers like "The Uncle" or "The Sister." These typologies stem from the clothing, hairstyles, and demeanors seen in each image. While these characters may reveal themselves more easily to

people of MIddle Eastern backgrounds—those who may see the people around them within the pages of this book—visual throughlines are still recognizable. Instead of relying on scientific understandings of Middle Eastern culture as seen previously, *Mapping Sitting* presents intuitive groupings of people that rely upon the perceptions that viewers have amassed throughout their lived experiences.

These groupings, despite not presenting themselves with the same academic poise as those within *The Costumes of Turkey*, assume a wider spectrum of meaning while retaining each subject's individuality. The value of the visceral typologies found in *Mapping Sitting* come not from their scientific applications, but from the way in which they summarize a wide range of contexts; elements of class, ethnicity, nationality, and social relations manifest in the individual expressions seen in each image, physically and metaphorically speaking. While not exactly tracking these trends, the book serves as a primary document that catalogs the way in which they materialize. The forthright nature of the studio photography used in this documentation is productive of a multifaceted depiction of Middle Eastern society—one that is capable of appealing to the sensibilities of modern audiences and one that wholly relies on the expression of the individual.

On Studio Photography

The comparison of these two works is not meant to disavow one and celebrate the other; it is meant to critically examine the intentions with which studio photography has been produced and how it has been utilized to depict Middle Eastern people. While attitudes have certainly shifted regarding ethnographic studies that serve their function to the point of individual erasure, books like *The Popular Costumes of Turkey in 1873* fulfill an incredibly important historical

purpose; these artifacts allow historians to literally view how Middle Eastern culture was presented to audiences amidst a period of intense cultural interest in the region. The book holds evidence to attest how photography beguiled consumptive attitudes towards the Middle East through strictly material readings of the region. The photography studio, in this case, was activated to give form to these desires, and the result of this process manifests clearly in the specimen-like nature of each image.

By contrast, the found image format of *Mapping Sitting* allows for the studio photography within it to champion its own intentions—to display the individual within the larger context of their setting. Identification portraiture serves the function of admitting the individual into the larger infrastructure of society. By incorporating these photographs, *Mapping Sitting* becomes a historical document, tertiary in perspective, that attempts to draw cartograms of the societal trends within the Middle East throughout the twentieth century. This is only made possible, however, by the positive relationship between the production of the studio photographs and the book itself; the social typologies seen in *Mapping SItting* are products of the intimacy inherent to resident photography. The sincerity with which *Mapping Sitting* represents Middle Eastern people is a gift that acts as a testament to the critical role resident photographers played in documenting the Middle East in the twentieth century; without larger machinations involving the interpretation of their photographs, resident photographers drew out the individual from each subject and recorded them into historical record as they presented themselves.

The introduction to *Studio Practice*, a monograph of the resident photography of Hashem el Madani, concludes with an interview with the photographer based in Saida, Lebanon. At the end of this interview with Akram Zaatari, Madani is asked if there is any person that he would have liked to photograph but was not able to during his career. His succinct response speaks to

the communion at the core of his practice: "I would have liked to photograph all the residents of

Saida, because this is where I live."[16]

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[16] Madani, *Hashem El Madani*, 17.

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