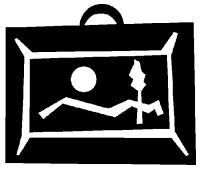
QUICK STUDIES



AS YOU SEE IT

An Ottoman Portrait

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"Untitled," Pierre de Gigord Collection (96.R.14). Photo reprinted with permission of The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California.

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This carefully composed portrait of a high-ranking Ottoman bureaucrat is striking for several reasons. First, at nearly 16 by 13 inches, it is at least four times larger than most portraits of this period and lacks the ornamental cardboard frame into which portraits were commonly placed, instead being pasted directly onto a cardboard support. Second, although there is a long tradition of documenting men at work or places of business in the photography of the late Ottoman Empire, these images tend to privilege traditional occupations (e.g., itinerant merchants or craftsmen) and sites of commerce, such as outdoor markets, the covered bazaar, or shops along the Grande Rue de Pera in Istanbul. Third and finally, in its setting, the objects chosen to be included on the desk, and the pose of the central figure, the portrait insists upon the modernity of the subject as its primary message, raising questions about its intended audience.

What exactly do we see in this photograph? The central figure is positioned directly in front of the viewer, with the implements of the modern bureaucrat arrayed in front of him on the desk: ink jars, blotter, basket for papers requiring attention, and other items, the exact purposes of which are unclear. The subject is working, posed as if a telephone call had just interrupted him, pen in hand while recording an important piece of information in the ledger open in front of him. His attention is focused on his telephone conversation, which in turn directs our attention to his conversation, making it impossible to overlook the presence of the telephone on his desk. Beyond the telephone, we can see through the doorway behind the desk to a large cabinet, presumably filled with documents, upon which are stacked a large number of bound ledgers and other volumes. The central figure is immaculately dressed in a fez and a suit jacket with a vest, wing collar, and tie. His glasses and neatly trimmed beard and mustache contribute to his overall appearance of calm responsibility.

This photograph comes to us with no information regarding either the subject or the photographer. [1] The candlestick telephone and the dress of the subject allow us to date the image very generally in the period of 1881–1910. Even though a photograph of an Ottoman bureaucrat at his desk is extremely unusual, the subject may have commissioned this portrait on the occasion of a promotion or a new job or perhaps even to mark the arrival of the telephone in his office. Less easy to understand is the format of the photograph, exceeding by far the typical size for most portraits, which in this period (as today) were generally meant to be included in an album or framed for display on a table or the wall. In the end, we do not know if the man or the telephone was intended to be at the center of this portrait of Ottoman modernity.

NOTE

[1]The photograph is part of a collection assembled in the 1970s and 1980s by Pierre de Gigord and acquired by The Getty Research Institute in the early 1990s.

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