

Ottoman Dynasty through lenses of Abdullah Frères' camera

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Until recently, it was widely believed that the Abdullah Frères (the Abdullah Brothers), who introduced photography to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, were honored with the title of royal photographers by Sultan Abdulhamid II.

However, recently discovered documents and records prove that it was not Abdulhamid II but Abdulaziz, the 33rd Ottoman Sultan, who granted them the privilege of serving the Palace.

Bahattin Öztuncay, a researcher and a close friend of Ömer Koç, heir to the throne of Koç Holding, one of Turkey's biggest conglomerates, discovered many unique documents and photos from auctions all over the world. One such treasure he came across in auction was the only existing signed photo of James Robertson, one of the world's first war photographers who died in 1888.

During the auctions he attended, Öztuncay happened upon a number of photos taken by the Abdullah Brothers. He developed an attraction for their work and decided to collect more of the two brothers' work. He soon began a further study of their lives.

The results of his research have been published in a two-volume book titled "Photographers of Dersaadet (Istanbul of Ottoman times)". The book was published by Aygaz Publications, both in English and in Turkish. The sponsor was Koç Holding.

Hundreds of photographs collected by Öztuncay are preserved in an aluminum folio and kept in a dark room. "The quality of these photographs taken by the Abdullah Brothers are so high that they could even compete with photographs taken using modern technology today," said Öztuncay. "They are perfectly colored by hand. You cannot see even a spark of silver on them," he added.

The photographs are now a part of a huge collection owned by Koç. Digital versions of them are also the part of the same collection. Öztuncay said Koç plans to open a photography museum, which is expected to be one of a kind, not just in Turkey but also in other parts of the world.

Empire's first photography studio opened on Istiklal Street

The Abdullah Brothers, named Vichen and Kevork, were Ottoman citizens of Armenian descent. They went to Paris in the early 1800s to study photography. For Öztuncay, the Abdullah Brothers' visit to France, after they were recommended by French ambassador in Istanbul to do so, was clearly a turning point in their life.

In 1811, when the two brothers were in Paris, they published a photo album titled "Young", which was composed of photographs of Sultan Abdulaziz, his cabinet and some other statesmen. When they returned to Istanbul, Abdulaziz honored them by granting each the title of "royal photographer".

In the following years, the two brothers became highly popular in Europe. They took pictures of a number of dynasty members, including Alexandra, the Princess of Wales, and Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm of Germany. "Princess Alexandra invited the Abdullah Brothers to open a branch in her country," said Öztuncay. But the Abdullah Frères rejected the offer and opened the first photo studio in the Ottoman Empire just across from the English Hotel, on Grande Rue de Péra, present day İstiklal Street.

A document among archives of Ottoman Bank

“The Abdullah Frères won Abdulaziz’s confidence. They were even permitted to take pictures of some female residents of the Palace. These residents included the Sultan’s two daughters, Refia and Fatma,” said Öztuncay. In full body photos that the Abdullah Brothers colored by hand, two princesses, Refia and Fatma, wear Western-style clothes with their heads uncovered. Öztunçay said began to go down hill for the Abdullah Brothers when Abdulhamid II ascended the throne. During his reign the two brothers suffered serious financial problems. A credit contract that was coincidentally uncovered among the archives of the Ottoman Bank shows the level of financial difficulties the two brothers faced while Abdulhamid II was on the throne.

Sources

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