

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: Müfide Kadri's Photograph

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Context

Anonymous portrait photographs are all too familiar to historians of photography. More often than not unknown faces posing for the camera of an unidentified nineteenth-century photographer appear in archives, libraries, collections, and also on flea market stalls enshrouding the historical, as well as personal circumstances leading to the photographic moment in a haze. However, rare instances, when both the photographer's and the sitter's identities are known, offer an enlightening glimpse into the rich sociocultural texture that the mute portrait conceals. In addition to this, should the photograph in question also bear material traces such as handwriting or marks on its recto or verso, the outcome will be a fuller historical contextualization, shedding light on various issues ranging from production, circulation, and consumption of the photograph. This brief essay focuses on one such example from the Ottoman Empire, a portrait photograph of the artist Müfide Kadri (1890-1912) on the back of which she wrote a dedication to her friend, also an artist, Vildan Gizer (1889-1974). The analysis developed here evaluates her photograph not only as a visual image but also as a material object and examines the interconnections between portrait photography, gift exchange, gender, and female friendship among Ottoman Muslim women at the turn of the twentieth century in Istanbul. By means of the portrait under discussion, the paper argues that gender played a significant and hitherto not sufficiently explored role in building alliances between Ottoman Muslim women through photography. Portrait photography orchestrated by a female photographer in Istanbul allowed Ottoman Muslim women to freely express themselves in front of the camera in the way they would like to be seen, transcending the expectations of society.

Although today neither the current location nor the fate of the only extant portrait photograph of Müfide Kadri is known, there are two publications where the portrait appeared in print. The first one was in 1982, and the second in 1988, which necessitate a brief note on the materiality of photographs and its importance both for archival practices and the historiography of photography. In the first instance, the

photograph was reproduced showing its recto and verso sides, and it accompanied researcher and writer Taha Toros' biographical article on artist Müfide Kadri, as a part of an article series devoted to the pioneering Turkish women artists from late Ottoman to early Republican periods.¹ The second case was a longer publication, again by the same author on the same subject.² However, this time Toros preferred to reproduce only the recto side focusing on the visual image on the photograph, thereby condemning to oblivion the handwriting at the back, which was, in fact, an integral part of the meaning of the portrait.

Since the late 1990s, materiality has been a critical term in photography studies owing to the engaging theoretical discussions initiated by such scholars as Geoffrey Batchen and Elizabeth Edwards. For example, Batchen has observed that “the photograph is an image that can also have volume, opacity, tactility, and a physical presence in the world,” and for this reason, it needs to be considered beyond its visual content.³ Similarly, visual and historical anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards has underlined the connection between material culture and photography by arguing that “photographs are not simply images but also *things* that people use in their everyday lives, collect in museums, or display in galleries...[T]he physical nature of photographs has been central to their understanding and social functions since the advent of the medium.”⁴ In the same vein, the portrait of Müfide Kadri needs to be analyzed not only as a visual representation of an Ottoman Muslim woman, but also as an object that was passed from one woman to another within the framework of gifting as a sign of mutual trust, bonding, and female friendship, which strictly excluded men. Here, a closer look at the photograph to examine the figure of the artist along with the portrait's iconographic implications will be combined with informed deduction regarding the identity of the photographer. At the same time, evaluation of the material aspects of the photograph,

¹ Taha Toros, “İlk Kadın Ressamlarımız (2),” *Sanat Dünyamız*, no. 25 (1982): 34-41.

² Taha Toros, *İlk Kadın Ressamlarımız / The First Lady Artists of Turkey* (Istanbul: Ak Yayınları, 1988), 22.

³ Geoffrey Batchen, *Photography's Objects* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Art Museum, 1997), 2.

⁴ Elizabeth Edwards, “Material Culture and Photography,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph*, ed. Robin Lenman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 395.

including the handwritten dedication in Ottoman Turkish, will demonstrate that portrait photographs had an essential place in the gift exchange practices between Muslim women in Istanbul in the first decade of the twentieth century.

In his article, Taha Toros presents the portrait photograph in question to his readers as “Müfide Kadri’s picture handwritten for Vildan Hanım,”⁵ and for the same photograph, he writes the following caption in his book: “Müfide, Painter and musician, photograph signed in 1907 to Vildan Gizer,”⁶ thus identifying both the model and the recipient of the picture. The figure in the portrait, Müfide Kadri, led a short but historically quite significant life, as she became one of the early Ottoman Muslim women who chose painting as their professional career long before the foundation of the School of Fine Arts for Women [*İnas Sanâyi-i Nefise Mektebi*] in 1914. Being the adoptive daughter of a wealthy man, Kadri Bey, who was the Manager of the Artisans’ and Traders’ Office at the Municipality of Istanbul [*Şehremaneti Esnaf Kalemî Müdürü*], Müfide Hanım took private lessons from such prominent artists of her time as Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910), Salvatore Valeri (1856-1946), and Fausto Zonaro (1854-1929).⁷ During her lifetime, cut short by tuberculosis at the age of 22, she made portraits, genre paintings, still-life scenes, and romantic landscapes. Müfide Hanım was actively engaged in the art scene of her time, for instance, she was a member of the Ottoman Society of Painters [*Osmanlı Ressamlar Cemiyeti*],⁸ she participated in several exhibitions in Istanbul and Munich, and she received the Medal of Arts [*Sanayi Madalyası*] in 1907 for her artistic practice,⁹ and the Medal of Honor for the paintings she exhibited in the 10th International Art Exhibition in Munich in 1909.¹⁰ Moreover,

⁵ Toros, “İlk Kadın Ressamlarımız (2),” 36.

⁶ Toros, *İlk Kadın Ressamlarımız*, 22.

⁷ Toros, “İlk Kadın Ressamlarımız (2),” 36, and Wendy M. K. Shaw, “Where Did the Women Go?: Female Artists from the Ottoman Empire to the Early Years of the Turkish Republic,” *Journal of Women’s History* 23, no. 1, (2011): 20, doi: 10.1353/jowh.2011.0008.

⁸ Toros, “İlk Kadın Ressamlarımız (2),” 41.

⁹ BOA, İ.TAL. 428/10 (23 Cemazeyilahir 1325 [August 3, 1907]).

¹⁰ X. Internationale Kunstausstellung was organized in Königlicher Glaspalast. In Hall 53 entitled “Türkei,” Müfide Kadri exhibited three paintings: “Interieurstudie,” “Studie,” and “Studie.” *Offizieller Katalog der X. Internationalen Kunstausstellung im Kgl. Glaspalast zu München 1909* (Munich: Verlag des Zentralkomitees der X. Internationalen Kunstausstellung, 1909), 314-315, <https://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/0000/bsb00004016/images/index.html>; and S.C., “Ex-

she was a pioneering figure in fine arts education serving as the first female art teacher at several schools including the Süleymaniye Girls' Exemplary Middle School [*Süleymaniye Numûne İnas Rüşdiyesi*],¹¹ and the Istanbul Teachers' Training School for Girls [*Dârülmualimât*].¹² Likewise, Vildan Gizer, to whom Müfide Hanım dedicated and gifted her photograph, was also one of the early Ottoman Turkish women painters. Vildan Hanım, too, took art lessons from Salvatore Valeri, who was a teacher of painting at the School of Fine Arts [*Sanâyi-i Nefise Mektebi*] in Istanbul. She painted portraits and landscapes; nevertheless, she did not actively take part in the Istanbul art scene.¹³

The portrait photograph taken in 1907 shows Müfide Kadri not as a typical Ottoman Turkish Muslim woman wearing a *yashmak* and a *ferace*, but instead she appears dressed according to the latest European fashion. At the same time, she holds an open book in her hand, and her gaze is turned away from the camera as if to suggest that she paused her reading for a moment to ruminate on the text. Hence, the props seen in the portrait, e.g., the stack of books on the small coffee table, add to the overall impression that Müfide Kadri wants to portray herself as an enlightened intellectual Turkish woman upholding Western values.¹⁴ In other words, she clearly distinguishes herself from any hints of religious conservatism. Likewise, she visually sets herself apart from the previous generation of Turkish women, who had not had access to the level of education she had. Her profession as a painter and a painting teacher provides her financial freedom, authority, and sense of accomplishment, which contribute to her

position Mufidé Cadri Hanem," *Stamboul*, September 11, 1912, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bd6t551098s/f2.item> .

¹¹ Toros, "İlk Kadın Ressamlarımız (2)," 38.

¹² Burcu Pelvanoğlu, "Painting the Late Ottoman Woman: Portrait(s) of Mihri Müşfik Hanım," in *A Social History of Late Ottoman Women: New Perspectives*, eds. Duygu Köksal, and Anastasia Falierou (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 159, and Shaw, 21.

¹³ See Taha Toros, "İlk Kadın Ressamlarımız (3)," *Sanat Dünyamız*, no. 26 (1983): 34-37.

¹⁴ In the 1920s and the 1930s, these kind of identity performances by Turkish women in studio photography intensify during the early Republican era chiming in with the rising nationalist and Kemalist ideology. Hence, Müfide Hanım's portrait can be regarded as a precursor to this modern female image-making in front of the camera. See Özge Baykan Calafato, *Making the Modern Turkish Citizen: Vernacular Photography in the Early Republican Era* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022), 29-61.

self-confidence evident in the portrait embodying the ideas of female liberation, belief in progression, and modernity.

Müfide Kadri's photograph is quite exceptional in that had it not been for the Ottoman Turkish handwriting identifying the sitter, one could have easily mistaken her for a non-Muslim woman. This is mainly due to the historical preconceptions about the representations of Muslim women in Ottoman photography. The late nineteenth-century tourist market, for example, was replete with Orientalist photographs harking back to pictorial conventions, which claimed to represent Turkish women accurately. As is well known, these were staged imaginary harem scenes in which women, often non-Muslims, posed as Muslims wearing exaggerated exotic costumes. Furthermore, Engin Özendes states that, since it was not possible for Muslim women to pose in this manner, the Ottoman studio photographers had to use non-Muslims, prostitutes, or sometimes even men as their models for their Orientalist photographs purporting to represent Ottoman Muslim women.¹⁵ Other portrait photographs of Ottoman Muslim women belonging to the upper classes, however, unlike these Orientalist photographs in wide circulation, remained strictly within their limited social circle of family and close friends. Although further research is needed to shed light on the experiences of Ottoman Muslim women in photography studios, several portrait photographs which have emerged from family archives reveal that Muslim women, such as Abdülhamid II's daughter Ayşe Sultan (Osmanoğlu), poet Nigâr Hanım, or composer Leyla Saz Hanım preferred to pose for the male photographers veiled and in a *ferace*, especially before the Young Turk Revolution in 1908. Moreover, it was only later that an Ottoman women's magazine such as *Kadınlar Dünyası* (1913-1921, excluding 1914-1918) could publish photographs of unveiled Turkish women, which Serpil Çakır defines as "groundbreaking" and "a first."¹⁶ Nevertheless, for Muslim women, having one's portrait taken veiled, or unveiled, depended on

¹⁵ Engin Özendes, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Fotoğrafçılık 1839-1923*, 2nd ed. (Istanbul: Yem Yayın, 2017), 48.

¹⁶ Serpil Çakır, *Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi* (Istanbul: Metis, 2016), 135.

various factors, among others, the photographer's gender, and the sitter's social, economic, and political status.¹⁷

Although Taha Toros did not indicate who took Müfide Kadri's portrait photograph, closer inspection of the details, such as the spindle back chair on which she sits, and the floral backdrop, ascertains the photographer as Elisa Zonaro (1863-1945). Both elements appear regularly in the Italian photographer's studio photography, which spanned from the 1890s until 1910 in the Ottoman capital.¹⁸ Elisa Zonaro, like other female photographers who worked in Istanbul, had easier access to women, including Ottoman Muslim women, who wanted to be photographed.¹⁹ In many accounts, it has been pointed out that women felt more comfortable posing for a woman photographer. Hence, her gender allowed Elisa Zonaro to approach Ottoman women clients without facing any sociocultural hesitations, and vice versa, Ottoman Muslim women found it reassuring to have her as their photographer. This gender-based alliance between women made it possible for Müfide Kadri, an aspiring young artist in her prime, to pose for the camera under the careful direction of the female photographer in the way she wanted to be remembered by her close female friends. It is impossible not to notice Müfide Hanım's pride in her portrait, for she deemed it worthy enough to be her "souvenir" to her close friend Vildan Hanım, whom she addressed as her "dear sister." Such a portrait, where the Muslim woman's face and hair are not covered, could not be circulated in a social network of men, hence it is a portrait reserved for women's eyes and female spaces. In other words, portrait photography executed by a woman photographer opened an alternative visual space that acted as a stage for Ottoman Muslim women like Müfide Hanım, which allowed them performances of identity and liberal expressions of self. These photographs of self-expression, in turn, became one of the most intimate and—together with

¹⁷ On gender and photographic accessibility in the Ottoman context, see Alev Berberoğlu, "Unwritten Histories of Photography: Elisa Zonaro, an Italian Photographer in Ottoman Istanbul" (PhD diss., Koç University, 2023), 159-169.

¹⁸ See Berberoğlu, "Unwritten Histories of Photography."

¹⁹ See Teresita Menzinger, "Il Pittore del Sultano: La degna compagna di un grande artista. Un matrimonio a Costantinopoli," *La Donna*, no. 63, August 5, 1907, 15-16.

handwritten dedications—personalized presents they could give to those female friends they held dear, and served to strengthen their bonds of affection.

Müfide Kadri's photograph taken by Elisa Zonaro in 1907 is a significant case, which shows the role of portrait photography in female friendship by means of gift exchange among educated well-to-do Ottoman Muslim women at the turn of the twentieth century in Istanbul. Combined with the production stage of this portrait, the handwritten dedication that Müfide Hanım penned on the verso of the photograph brings a new understanding of the uses of photography among Ottoman Turkish women. Further research examining similar photographs in their materiality will certainly add to the developing field of photo history studies and the role of gender in the Ottoman Empire.

Transcription

Sevgili hemşirem Vildân hanımefendiye yâdigâr-ı 'âcizânemdir. Fî 18 Temmuz sene [1]323. Müfide

Translation

To my dear sister Ms. Vildan, a humble souvenir from me.

On 18 Temmuz [1]323 [31 July 1907]. Müfide

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Facsimile



Taha Toros, "İlk Kadın Ressamlarımız (2)," *Sanat Dünyamız*, no. 25 (1982), 36.