I met Renata Holod for the first time when I was twenty years old. She has been an enduring presence in my life, always supportive, always stimulating, and occasionally terrifying. I owe many people thanks for their help with this article: David J. Roxburgh for his patience; the audience at the October 2009 symposium Seeing the Past—Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture; Carel Bertram, Mary Roberts, and Sarah Shields for their careful reading of an earlier version of the article; my colleagues at the Freer|Sackler for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions this paper; Zeynep Simavi for research assistance; Ignacio Adriasola and Nina Ergin for pointing out incredibly useful bibliography; and particularly Scott Redford for generously offering me the hospitality and use of the library of the Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations of Koç University, Istanbul. I also thank Julian Raby, The Dame Jillian Sackler Director of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and the Freer Gallery of Art, for his insistence on the importance of deserting the office from time to time for research and thinking.

Istanbul is one of the world's great cities, and like a handful of other such cities—Rome and Paris come to mind—it has a long and rich history of representation in a variety of media. The urban fabric of the city, with its distinctive topography and monumental architecture, immediately attracted the attention of the photographers who arrived there beginning in the 1840s, resulting in a compelling, diverse photographic record of Istanbul now held in collections around the world. While there is a "sameness" to some aspects of this photographic record—for example, the albums produced for a tourist market in the 1870s exhibit a certain constancy of photographic subject matter and style—the corpus also embodies a nearly infinite diversity of format, viewpoint, and image content across time. Opening a photograph album of the city is always exciting: which familiar and which unique images will be included; what impressions of the city will the album create for its viewer?

This essay focuses on one such photograph album from Istanbul. It comes down to us with no information about its original owner or the photographer(s) responsible for the pictures it features. However, it is my assertion that by careful analysis of the individual images, the album as a constructed object, and its context in the history of photography and the historical moment of the city it marks, the album will reveal a great deal about the intentions of its owner in creating it. This powerful and captivating assemblage of images also invites us to open a conversation about complicated ideas: representation, memory, and nostalgia at a particular moment in the history of Istanbul.

In 1919, the date associated with this album, Istanbul was occupied by the Allied Forces and the Ottoman Empire had been divided by the victors of the First World War. These circumstances, while not directly referenced in the album's photographs, are the lens through which we must examine the subjects and arrangement of the images in it. Considering what has been included on the album's pages as well as what is omitted allows us to give voice to a personal record of melancholy and loss across a distance of nearly a century.

The small, almost delicate album is made up of eight pages, each about the size of an 8.5 by 14 inch sheet of paper, folded in half to form an album (fig. 11.1 [all figures are grouped together at the end of this chapter]). The pages and soft cardboard cover are held together by a gold cord, whose knotting along the spine originally formed part of the album's decorative presentation. The otherwise plain cover is labeled “Constantinople,” written in
English across the center, and “Dersaadet,” or Abode of Felicity, in Ottoman Turkish in the lower right corner; the date, 1919, appears in the upper left.² The album’s twenty-four photographs are labeled and neatly arranged, one or two to a page.

I find this slender collection of pictures intriguing in its presentation of Istanbul. The photographs create a distinctive impression of the city, one that must be tied to the experiences of the album’s owner and to the difficult circumstances of a city that was under foreign occupation in 1919. Most of the photographs depict specific buildings or focus on a single site, but there are five images that feature general views of the city, including the two on the first page of the album (fig. 11.2).³ Most of these involve water, which is not surprising, given the topography of the city (figs. 11.2 and 11.9). Two other views are panoramic in their structure (figs. 11.13 and 11.17), and yet another is more of a street scene, looking at a building across the road (its cobblestones and trolley tracks are clearly visible, with a trolley car moving out of the margin on the right) (fig. 11.3). Each of these examples is a beautifully composed and elegant image, showing the city at its best.⁴

Thirteen of the twenty-four photographs are views of buildings. Of these, six are formal shots, apparently intended to provide a clear, unobstructed view of the structure or a part of the structure: the Fountain of Sultan Ahmet III (fig. 11.8), the Mosque of Sultan Ahmet (figs. 11.8, 11.14, and 11.15), Hagia Sophia (fig. 11.9), and one of the numerous views of Eyüp, located on the Golden Horn outside the land walls (fig. 11.12). In these photographs, people are either completely absent or so far off in the distance as to be almost indiscernible. The focus is on the monument.

The other views of architecture take a different approach to the depiction of the site. In these examples, images are composed using elements of architecture or landscape and people to create quiet, contemplative pictures (figs. 11.3–11.17). People are shown using various spaces, for example, crossing courtyards or washing at fountains. However, the figures are always either shown from the back, often walking away, or so far away that their features are difficult to distinguish. The architectural space in the photograph is activated but not overwhelmed by the presence of people. The sites chosen for representation in this way are typically mosque courtyards, courtyard fountains, and cemeteries, and include the courtyard of the Hagia Sophia complex and several different locations around the mosque and cemetery at Eyüp.

Indeed, one of the most striking characteristics of the album is the emphasis on cemeteries and other funerary spaces (figs. 11.4, 11.6, 11.7, 11.11, 11.12, 11.13, and 11.16). Initially, I considered this group of photographs to be examples of landscape, since each one incorporates both topographical and funerary elements. However, if simple landscape views had been the photographer’s ambition, the hills on either side of the Bosphorus and the forests to the north—well within reach of the city—would have provided plenty of scope for images of nature. The fact is that nearly half of the photographs in this small album are devoted to views of cemeteries and tombs. This is highly unusual. The choice of images conveys an impression of the city that is suffused with melancholy and a sense of loss.

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² Constantinople was the most widely used name for the city from the fourth century AD through the Ottoman conquest in 1453 and remained in use among non-Turkish speakers well into the twentieth century. Following the passage of the Turkish Postal Service Law of 1930, after which mail addressed to Constantinople was no longer delivered, the name gradually fell out of use (although my English grandfather, born ca. 1900, still referred to the city as Constantinople in the early 1970s). “Abode of Felicity” was one of the Ottoman names for the city of Istanbul: Nur Bilge Criss, Istanbul under Allied Occupation, 1918–1923 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 20–21.

³ Organizing the album photographs into categories according to their subject matter serves as a useful way of beginning an analysis of this visual document. But it is important to point out that these subject categories are my own construction, not anything intrinsic to the album proper.

⁴ Please see the captions for detailed discussions of the photographs.