Starting in the 1860s, the museum and the exhibition space gained prominence in the Ottoman cultural realm as new and effective channels for the public display of imperial power and rootedness. As early as 1863, a sizeable national exposition (the Sergi-i Umümî-i Osmanlı) modeled on contemporary European expositions was held in Istanbul in the hope of encouraging the consumption of local Ottoman products (fig. 1). The most spectacular efforts to promote the modern imperial image, however, were occasioned by the world expositions held in the major cities of Western Europe and the United States. The ultimate loci of “pilgrimage to the commodity fetish,” as Walter Benjamin described them, the world expositions were the most prestigious arenas of global commercial exchange and fierce international rivalry in the nineteenth century. Prescribing absolute and universal criteria of achievement for all participants, the fabricated atmosphere of the international expositions had a formative impact on the changing modes and perceptions of representation throughout the century.

Fig. 1. Exterior of main hall, 1863 Ottoman Exposition. (After *Le monde illustré* 312 [April 4, 1863])
Attentive to the use and effectiveness of exposi-
tions in promoting imperial prestige, the Ottoman
state participated in almost every major world expo-
sition following the trend-setting Great Exhibition of
London in 1851.3 Even in the less inflated shows of
the earlier years, the financially burdened Ottoman
state went to considerable pains to fabricate an ideal
vision of its imperial domains for the eyes of a wide
international audience. In their great stride towards
reform and modernization, the Tanzimat bureaucrats
were well aware that the state’s participation in an
exposition was, in all its stages, a profoundly political
act. 4 In the first place, mobilizing all the provinces
to take part in a grand project of self-representation
was an effective strategy for demonstrating the con-
trol and authority of the centralized state, as well as
for creating a sense of cohesion among the diverse
inhabitants of the loose-jointed empire. Furthermore,
the organized displays of the collected material within
the international arena of the exposition helped pro-
mote an image for outside viewers of the Ottoman
Empire as a stable, orderly, and unified political en-
tity. Since ambiguous feats such as “cultural and so-
cial advancement” were rendered fully measurable
within the materialistic, comparative setting of the
nineteenth-century exposition, the Ottoman exhib-
its were constructed with meticulous care to picture
the empire as a strong and progressive monarchy on
an equal footing with its European counterparts.

This study focuses on a photographic album of
traditional Ottoman dress entitled the Elbise-i ‘Osmâ-
niyye: Les Costumes populaires de la Turquie (Istanbul,
1873) (hereafter abbreviated as Elbise), which was
commissioned by the Ottoman government on the
occasion of the 1873 World Exposition in Vienna.
The 1873 Exposition, designed as a showcase of the
thriving Vienna bourgeoisie, was the largest, costli-
est, and most ambitious event of its kind for the time.5
Although it failed to provide the desired “eastward
pull” to the competitive orbit of world expositions
(since the industrialized superpowers displayed a rela-
tively low profile in the event), the Vienna Exposition
was a major ground of encounter for the feverishly
reshaping “ramshackle empires” of Eastern Europe.
Owing to the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s idealized
vision of itself at the center of the new world order,
acting as a stable mediator between the East and the
West,6 countries with lesser competitive status in the
previous expositions, such as Russia, the Ottoman
Empire, and Japan, received an exceptionally larger
share of the total exhibition area. The Russian sec-
tion, for instance, comprised some of the most ap-
plauded exhibits in the exposition, with a variety of
ethnographic shows,7 fine arts exhibits, and a vast
collection of handcrafted objects. As the Danube
monarchy’s closest ally and most important trade
partner in the East, the Ottoman Empire enjoyed
considerable presence and visibility in an exposition
that was, as its organizers claimed, designed to dim
all previous events of its kind in “bringing together
the whole Orient in full originality.”8 With the stra-
tegic location and unprecedented scale of its allotted
exhibition area in the exposition hall and the sur-
rounding park, the Ottoman section was expected to
constitute the centerpiece of the vast array of “Ori-
ental exhibits” in the Vienna Exposition.

The Ottoman state would have turned this propi-
tious event into a crowning show of force had it not
been facing one of its most debilitating financial cri-
ses. The inevitable budgetary drawback required a
drastic reduction in the number and scale of pavil-
ions that had initially been proposed for the Otto-
man section in the exposition grounds (fig. 2). This
was, however, a sacrifice that ran the risk of lending
Egypt (nominally a part of the Ottoman Empire but

Fig. 2. Replica of Ahmed III fountain, 1873 Vienna Exposi-
tion. (After L’Esposizione universale de Viena del 1873 illustrata
3 [Milan, 1873])