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LATE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY OTTOMAN WEDDING COSTUMES AS INDICATORS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Window-shoppers strolling down Istiklal Caddesi in Istanbul today can see the latest in Turkish fashion, including the white, lace-trimmed wedding dresses which also stock bridal shops in Europe and the United States. A century ago, when Istiklal Caddesi was known as the Grande Rue de Pera, prospective brides would have gone there to see the latest in wedding fashions, imported directly from Paris and London.

An Ottoman bride of the second half of the nineteenth century had a wide range of options in the selection of her wedding costume, from the most traditional village garment to the latest Paris original. Her choice would have been determined by her religion, her social status (which in turn involved her family and its financial standing), and her education. European guests at Ottoman weddings describe a variety of bridal costumes, and this same variety exists in the costume collections of Turkish museums.

Dress is a personal and public statement of the wearer's social identity. Unlike many other examples of cultural identification, such as architectural style, interior furnishings, or literature, the adoption of a foreign tradition in clothing does not require the transfer of a complex technology or the use of unfamiliar tools. Costume is thus a social statement that is at the same time of great communicative value and easy to manipulate. In an effort to understand issues of cultural change and social values, paying attention to how a society chooses to represent itself—that is, its costume—will serve us well.

Unfortunately since clothing is often used until worn out and then discarded it is difficult to reconstruct the costume history of even the recent past in great detail. The exceptions to this general rule are the clothing of the wealthy, who could afford to put well-liked garments aside and whose clothing was recorded by outside observers, and wedding costumes or any other highly valued clothing with a ritual association.

Wedding clothes worn by women from a variety of social and economic groups illustrate an unusually complete range of the stages in the transition from traditional Ottoman dress to a European style of clothing and thus provide a particularly clear view of the process of costume change. Wedding dresses reflect the changes taking place among women in many social groups, not just the elite, and represent a rare opportunity to study aspects of society otherwise not accessible to the art historian.

The dramatic changes taking place in the Ottoman empire in the second half of the nineteenth century, as it struggled to redefine itself vis-à-vis European culture, were reflected in nearly all aspects of women's dress. A brief survey of its wedding costume provides a microcosm of this transformation in women's fashion, as well as some preliminary conclusions concerning Ottoman society in the nineteenth century which can be drawn from a study of the changes in dress.

Before examining the wedding costumes in detail, it will be useful to place them in context by reviewing the fashion situation in the Ottoman capital at that time. By 1900 fashion in Istanbul was radically different from what it had been at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The gradual transition from traditional to European dress which had been underway for the previous forty or fifty years was greatly accelerated in the last thirty years of the century. European fashions were adopted most readily by the Greeks and Armenians, perhaps because their commercial contacts with Europeans increased their familiarity with the new fashions, or perhaps because they saw dress as a means of identifying themselves with their fellow Christians.

Among Turkish women change proceeded more slowly. European fashions were adopted piecemeal, as in the substitution of a French-style jacket for the traditional one, and in the increasing use of gloves and stockings noted by one traveler in 1845. A further stage
in the transition from traditional to European styles involved the creation of dresses which were partly traditional and partly European in design. These garments looked very strange to European observers, but they satisfied the desire of Turkish women to appear fashionable and still stay within the bounds of propriety.

In the 1850’s most of the Turkish women visited by Europeans still wore traditional costumes, according to the descriptions published by their European visitors, and traditional clothing continued to be worn at weddings. The 1860’s were the turning point in Ottoman fashion. By the middle years of the decade European dress was sometimes worn by women of the imperial harem, and also by the wealthy Istanbul women who emulated the ladies of the court. The royal visits to Istanbul by Empress Eugenie and the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1866 removed any remaining barriers to the enthusiastic adoption of European fashions by the upper-class women of Istanbul. The Empress Eugenie was renowned for her beauty; the effect of her visit on Turkish women was great indeed. Zeynep Hanım, a wealthy Turkish woman born in about 1890, writes about the royal visitor:

Imagine actually seeing in the flesh, the heroine of your grandmother’s stories, the Empress whose beauty fascinated the East, the Empress whose clothes the women copied, whose language they learnt, the woman who had, though perhaps she may not know it, the greatest influence on the lives of Turkish women.

When the Prince and Princess of Wales visited the empire in the same year, the Princess Alexandra was received by a lady of the harem in European garb. According to an observer in the suite of the Princess, the Turkish woman “was dressed quite in the European style; a low evening dress covered with lace, and a long train, the Turkish star and ribbon over her shoulder, and in short, dressed like any European princess.”

Although it would seem from the accounts of European visitors that old-style clothes had disappeared from Istanbul by the end of the century, this was not the case. Older women continued to wear the traditional dress, as did women who had recently come to Istanbul from provincial areas. Some women who were neither old nor provincial still wore traditional clothing, perhaps for political or religious reasons. Demetra Brown, who visited Istanbul in 1909 describes her visit to the home of an important court figure:

As I said before, this household was a strict one, and the women of the household obeyed all the laws of their creed, and followed the prescribed customs rigorously. Their nails were profusely dyed, and their indoor robes were one-piece garments of very costly materials. Their hair was done up in braids, while gauzy pieces of silk, cut bias, were arranged around their heads.

There was a great range of wealth and sophistication within Ottoman society, and costume change did not take place at an even rate. For the most part, foreign visitors came into contact with the wealthy educated elite, and it was their costumes that were saved and talked about. The clothing worn by the majority of women in the city is mentioned by travelers only in passing and is difficult to trace.

The women of the court and their circle could afford to spend extravagantly on fragile, fashionable garments to be worn a few times. Although other women would have liked to own such clothing, few could afford to. However, as the European writers indicate, by the last decades of the nineteenth century European fashion in one form or another was worn by many Istanbul women of all classes. Their costumes were often assembled in a way that was not pleasing to European taste, in exuberant or gaudy combinations of different colors and fabrics. These costumes, which did not conform to the haute-couture standards of the day, are much more difficult to document, since they were not saved and rarely appear in museum collections. Since even modest examples of wedding costumes were carefully saved and passed down from one generation to the next, however, these garments provide an idea of the variety in dress that existed at one time among the women of Istanbul.

The wedding costumes all share one characteristic—the gold embroidery with which they were decorated—and for all the garments on which it appears, the embroidery is the decorative focus, usually covering the skirt, bodice, and sleeves. Floral motifs are the most common, although there is a wide variety in designs, from graceful garlands draped across the skirt to awkward flowers arranged in stiff rows. The term bin­dalli, or thousand branches, is used to refer to both the embroidery and the garments which the embroidery decorates, and there are some examples in which the delicate arrangements of thin branches actually look as if there were a thousand branches in the design. The embroidery is carried out using very thin gold or gold-colored wire wrapped around yellow thread. The flowers and branches of the design are cut out of card-