

Investigating Levni's portrayal of women in the album H.2164

ongoing Master Thesis by Suzanne Compagnon,
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The subject of my Master thesis is the depiction of women in the album H. 2164 completed between 1710 and 1720 by the Ottoman painter Abdülcelil Çelebi Levni. This album, today in the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul, includes depictions of women and men in a format that is very similar to costume albums. It displays a variety of figures in bright and extremely detailed costumes against a sober background. Some of the figures are identified in captions in Ottoman Turkish. The album contains eighteen single sheet depictions of women; not only Ottoman, but also Persian and European.

To what degree are Levni's depictions of women indebted to the iconography of costume albums?

Tracing the development of costume albums from their original European context to their internationalisation will enable us to place the album's depictions into their historical and cultural context. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, we see in the seventeenth and eighteenth century the internalisation by Ottoman artists of certain iconographical elements directly taken from costume albums. Comparing Levni's depictions with the type of depiction of women found in costume albums leads us to question to what degree the concepts underlying costume albums were adopted by the Ottoman court artist Levni for the depictions in the H. 2164 album.



Turkish Gentlewoman, fol. 68, in: Nicolas de Nicolay, Les quatre premiers livres de navigations et de pérégrinations orientales, printed 1568, Lyon, woodcut, 34cm (figure), Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon.

What characterises the depictions of women in this album?

A thorough study of the album has never been published until now, which means the internal logic of the album's organisation is unknown. To remedy this situation, a detailed description and formal analysis of the album will be provided. In addition, the paintings of women will be carefully examined and compared with each other so as to outline the characteristics of Levni's painting style in relation to the depiction of women in this album.



Dāde Bānu, fol.8b, Levni, c. 1710-20 (?), Istanbul, gold and gouache on paper, 16 x 8,9 cm (painting), H. 2164, Topkapı Sarayı. Caption: This is the picture of Dāde Bānu.



Young woman sleeping, fl.11b, Levni, c. 1710-20 (?), Istanbul, gold and gouache on paper, 16 x 8,2 cm (painting), H. 2164, Topkapı Sarayı, Istanbul.



Reclining young woman after a bath, Mohammad Mo'men, 1590s, Herat, pigments on paper, 6,7 x 15, 2 cm (painting), M. 386.5, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

What makes the depictions in this album erotic?

The sensuality of Levni's depiction has until now largely been ignored by scholarship although as one of the first Ottoman artist to show an obvious interest in depicting the sensuality of women, it is well worth studying. The thesis focuses on the way in which Levni creates eroticism visually. In order to understand the pictorial motifs and the visual strategies he uses, his reliance on erotic imagery from Safavid Persia and Mughal India is discussed. In addition, looking at the album as a whole, it becomes evident the relationship between the depictions of men and the depictions of women is crucial to the production of the eroticism of these paintings.