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### Toward Understanding the Photogenic New Citizen

*Performance in Vernacular Photography from the Early Turkish Republic, 1920s–1940s*

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
## ARTICLE NAVIGATION

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# Toward Understanding the Photogenic New Citizen: Performance in Vernacular Photography from the Early Turkish Republic, 1920s–1940s

[Özge Baykan Calafato](#)

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## Abstract

This portfolio looks at photographic self-representations of Turkish citizens of a newly established nation-state from the 1920s until the 1940s. The article explores the ways in which modern Turkish women and men performed their interpretation of the photogenic in photographic self-representations and how these self-representations negotiated the Kemalists' idea of modern citizenship in the early republican era. The desired selves performed in vernacular photographs were influenced not only by the Kemalist revolution but also by class aspirations of the citizens and wider sociocultural developments of the time. In addition, this portfolio reveals some of the complex circulation networks for photographic exchanges, as also suggested by inscriptions produced at the time, contributing to a deeper understanding as to how people constructed their interpretation of the photographic.

**Issue Section:** [Portfolio](#)

**Keywords:** vernacular photography, Turkey, memory, representation, photography archive

Photography arrived in the Ottoman Empire soon after its invention in the mid-nineteenth century and was embraced by the educated elites who utilized it to promote a modernizing empire to a Western audience.<sup>1</sup> From postcards sent out to friends and family to pictures of employees and convicts, photography was rapidly integrated into the public and private spheres at the turn of the century, with photography studios mushrooming in commercial centers like the Grande Rue de Pera in Istanbul (Istiklal Street today) and Frank Street in Izmir.<sup>2</sup> However, the days of glory for affluent photographic studios were disrupted during World War I (1914–1918), followed by the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923), which resulted in the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The disappearance of much of the empire's non-Muslim communities, including Armenians and Greeks who dominated the photographic studios, led to a rapid Turkification of the photography scene in the formative years of the republic, which witnessed a rigorous nation-building process under a strictly secular Kemalist regime.<sup>3</sup>

The obligation to include a photograph in all official documents contributed to the quick increase of the number of new studios across cities in the 1930s. Yet, during this time, the use of studio photography, which was relatively expensive, remained reserved for the urban upper and middle classes.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously, the popularity of amateur photography grew among urban households as smaller and cheaper imported cameras became available in the Turkish market, enabling a wider variety of self-representations outside the studio. However, until the mid-1940s, when studio photography became affordable for a large segment of the Turkish society, it was mostly itinerant (*alaminüt*) photographers who provided access to photography for lower classes in the countryside.<sup>5</sup>

This portfolio looks at how the citizens of a newly established Turkish nation-state performed their interpretation of the photogenic in photographic self-representations and how these self-representations negotiated the Kemalists' idea of modern citizenship in the early republican era, namely from the 1920s until the 1940s. As this portfolio illustrates, vernacular photography greatly contributed to an emerging visual culture and collective social memory in the early republic. Photographs reveal that urban

citizens actively participated in the making of the new Turkish woman and man through their own photographic representations, which were influenced not only by the Kemalist revolution but also by their class aspirations and wider sociocultural developments of the time, from global fashion trends to Western movies. The wealth of vernacular material from those years both in archives and in the market offers a fascinating lens into everyday life of Turkish citizens at the time, as fittingly represented in this portfolio.<sup>6</sup>

This portfolio features a selection from the Özge Calafato Collection, which is hosted by Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, the Arab Center for the Study of Art, New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). The collection includes more than seventeen thousand photographic prints from the late Ottoman era and the modern Turkish Republic and is primarily composed of individual and group portraits taken by studio or itinerant photographers, as well as amateur snapshots taken in a wide range of social settings. It was built for Akkasah between 2014 and 2018 through purchases from secondhand booksellers and antique dealers in Istanbul and Izmir.<sup>7</sup>

Vernacular photographs from the early republic era resonate with many of the social and political tensions of the time, as reflected in the photographs. Photography played a key role in forging a desired classed and gendered identity for the newly minted Turkish citizens who continuously performed, circulated, and negotiated the ideal citizen image imposed by the Kemalist regime. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the ruling elites of the Turkish Republic tasked themselves with making a new Turkish nation, building upon the dynamics of the modernization efforts of the late Ottoman era. The Kemalist revolution was marked by a boundary management between the East and the West and between the desire for radical Westernization and the anxiety to preserve traditions.<sup>8</sup> In vernacular photographs from the early republican period, this boundary management is discernable particularly in relation to the increasing visibility of women and the shifting position of men in the family structure, giving us glimpses into a rapidly secularizing modern social landscape.

The notion of performativity emerges as a key concept for the study of vernacular photographs, especially when one looks at photographic production in periods of drastic social and political change like the early years of the Turkish Republic. Performativity points to how subjects are encouraged or urged to perform a certain self in front of the

camera.<sup>9</sup> Deeming photography as a performative space, Elizabeth Edwards stresses the aspect of theatricality within the photograph and its inscription, through which people assert and negotiate their emerging positions as modern, classed, and gendered subjects.<sup>10</sup> Performativity, revealed through poses, postures, props, and compositions, extends the possibilities of agency for sitters through which alternative histories might be articulated. At the same time, as Edwards notes, photographs themselves “have a performativity, an affective tone, a relationship with the viewer, a phenomenology not of content as such, but as active social objects projecting and moving into other times and spaces.”<sup>11</sup>

In this portfolio, the performativity of the photographs is manifested in the ways the photographs as social objects were imagined to be circulated, stored, and cherished as long-lasting souvenirs among family (figs. 3, 14, 16, 18, and 20), friends and/or classmates (figs. 1 and 7). The performativity of the photographic objects is reinforced by the affective tone educed from the inscriptions, which disclose the intended audience and purpose of the original print and are at times directed to the addressee's future self. For viewers looking at these images today, in a publication, on social media, or in the archive, their relationship with the photographs takes on different meanings, greatly expanding the temporal and spatial reach that the original object was meant for. The ever-evolving digital platforms allow for more accessibility but also extend the intended audience beyond those to whom the photograph was originally intended. The viewers may now also include researchers like myself who reflect on vernacular photographs to explore their broader social histories.

*The following photographs are part of the Özge Calafato Collection (AD\_MC\_007, courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD). To see more of the collection, visit [akkasah.org](http://akkasah.org).*

**Figure 1.**

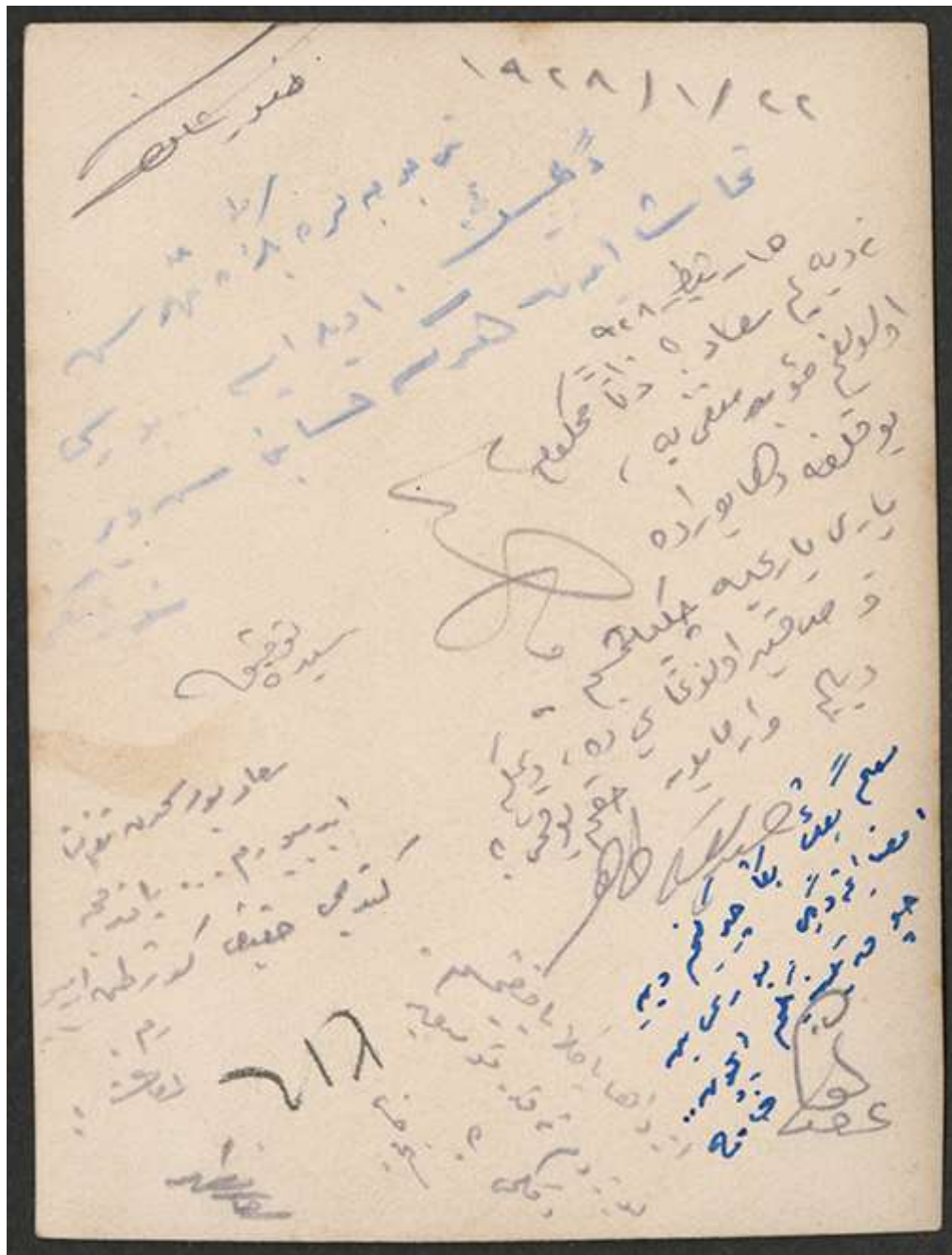


[VIEW LARGE](#)

School portrait, dated January 22, 1928. Gelatin silver print, photographer unknown. AD\_MC\_007\_ref5453. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 2.**





VIEW LARGE

Back of [figure 1](#). Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid. The inscriptions, written by various students, are addressed to a girl named Suad. The “K12” next to the signature refers to a pricing system created by the seller.

Figure 3.

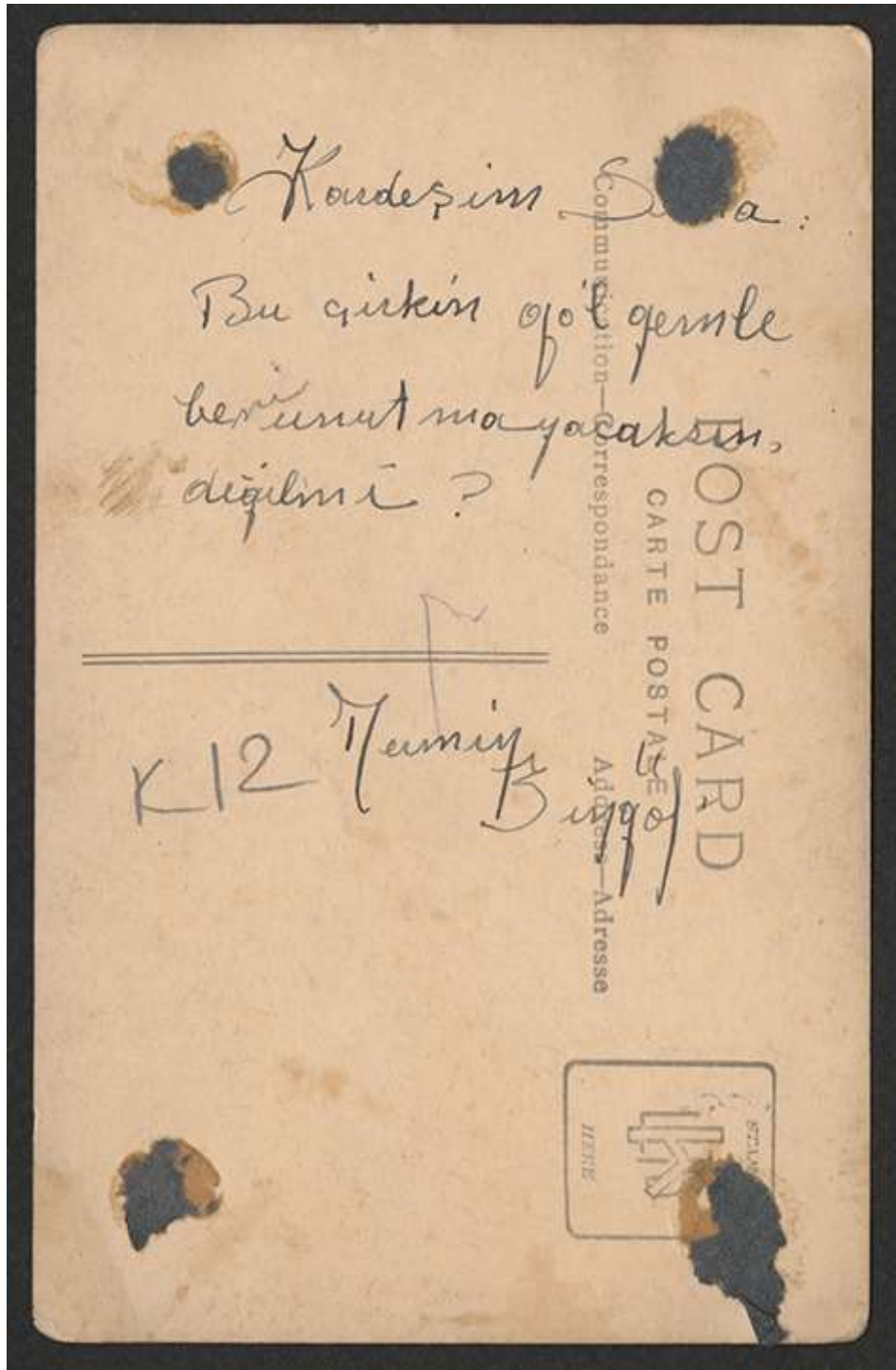


[VIEW LARGE](#)

Studio portrait of a girl named Nermin, with a small bust of Atatürk, ca.1930s. Gelatin silver print, 13.7 × 8.7 cm; AD\_MC\_007\_ref1237. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 4.**





VIEW LARGE

Back of [figure 3](#). Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid. The note reads, "Kardeşim Suna: Bu çirkin gölgeyle beni unutmayacaksın, değilmi? Nermin Bingöl" (To my sister [?] Suna: You will not forget me with this ugly shadow of me, will you? Nermin Bingöl).

Figure 5.



[VIEW LARGE](#)

Foto Cihan, group portrait of five young men, ca. 1930s. Gelatin silver print, 8.9 × 13.9 cm; AD\_MC\_007\_ref3113. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 6.**



[VIEW LARGE](#)

Portrait with a young woman and a girl, ca. 1930s. Gelatin silver print, 23.7 × 15.5 cm; AD\_MC\_007\_ref48. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 7.**



[VIEW LARGE](#)

A school portrait with a skeleton, ca. 1930s. Gelatin silver print, 13 × 7.8 cm; AD\_MC\_007\_ref1918. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 8.**



[VIEW LARGE](#)

Woman with crossed arms, standing indoors, ca. 1930s. Gelatin silver print, 13.6 × 8.5 cm; AD\_MC\_007\_ref83. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 9.**





[VIEW LARGE](#)

Foto Sait, Beyoğlu, Istanbul. Street portrait of a man in a light-colored suit, October 1942. Gelatin silver print, 13.8 × 8.7 cm; AD\_MC\_007\_ref1952. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

Figure 10.



VIEW LARGE

Back of [figure 9](#). Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

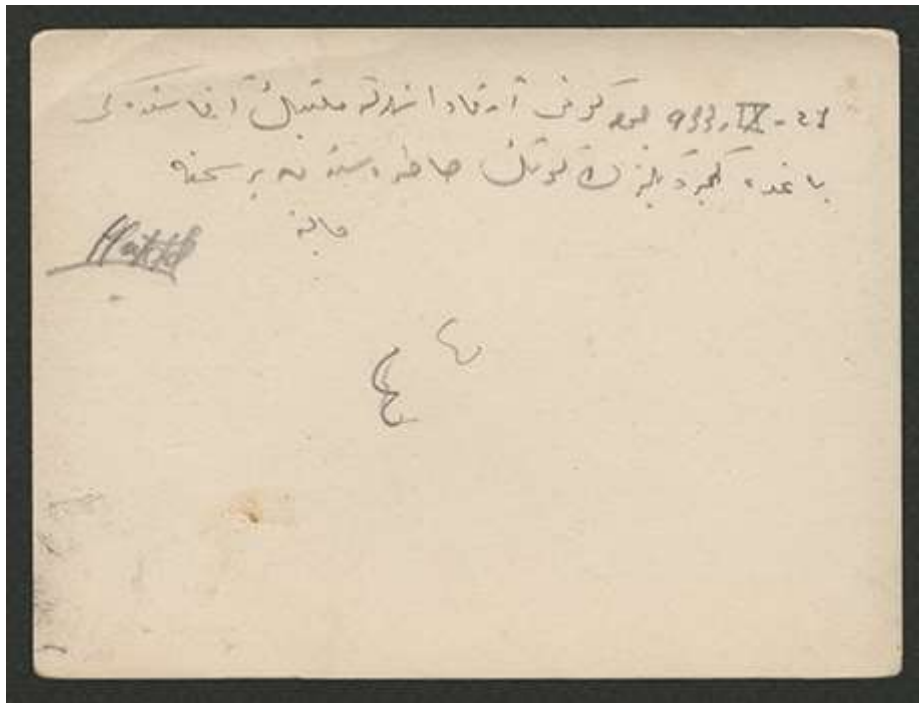
**Figure 11.**



VIEW LARGE

Six men eating fruit in a vineyard, September 21, 1933. Gelatin silver print, 9.1 × 12.1 cm; AD\_MC\_007\_ref2296. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 12.**



VIEW LARGE

Back of [figure 11](#). Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid. The note reads, "21-IX-933 / Cuma günü arkadaşlarla . . . arkasındaki bağda geçirdiğimiz o günün hatırasından bir sahne" (A scene of a souvenir from the day we spent with friends in the vineyard at the back of . . . on Friday).

**Figure 13.**



[VIEW LARGE](#)

Man with a pistol and binoculars, ca. 1930s. Gelatin silver print, 8.8 × 5.9 cm; AD\_MC\_007\_ref4671.  
Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 14.**

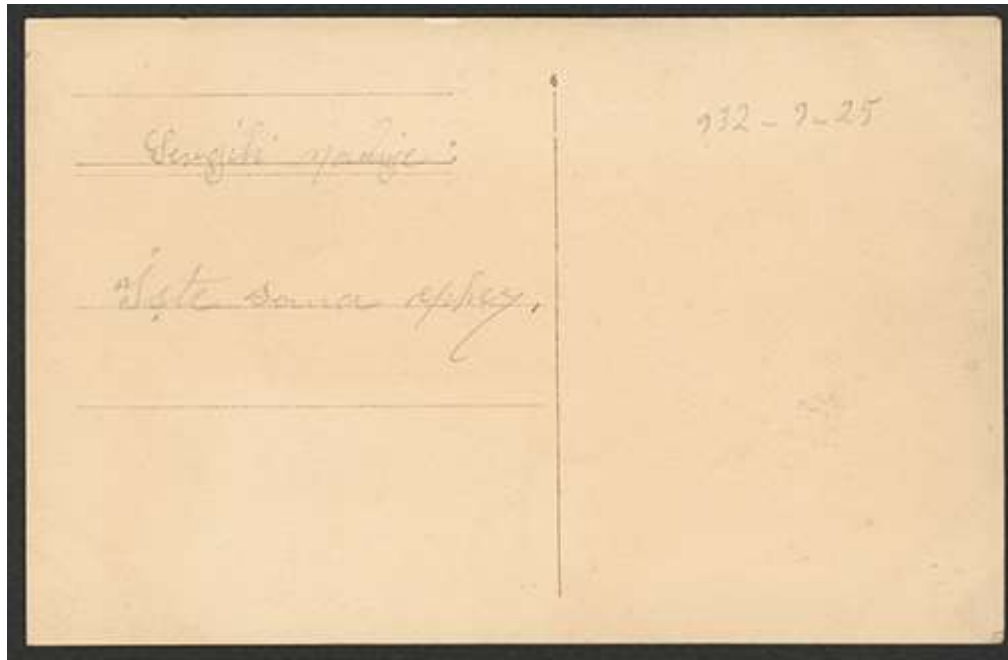


[VIEW LARGE](#)

Foto Nazim. Portrait of a seated young woman, September 25, 1932. Gelatin silver print, photographer unknown; AD-MC\_007\_ref6571. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 15.**





VIEW LARGE

Back of [figure 14](#). Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid. The note reads, "932-9-25 / İşte sana Epher [?]" (932-9-25 / Dear Nadiye: Here is Epher [?] for you).

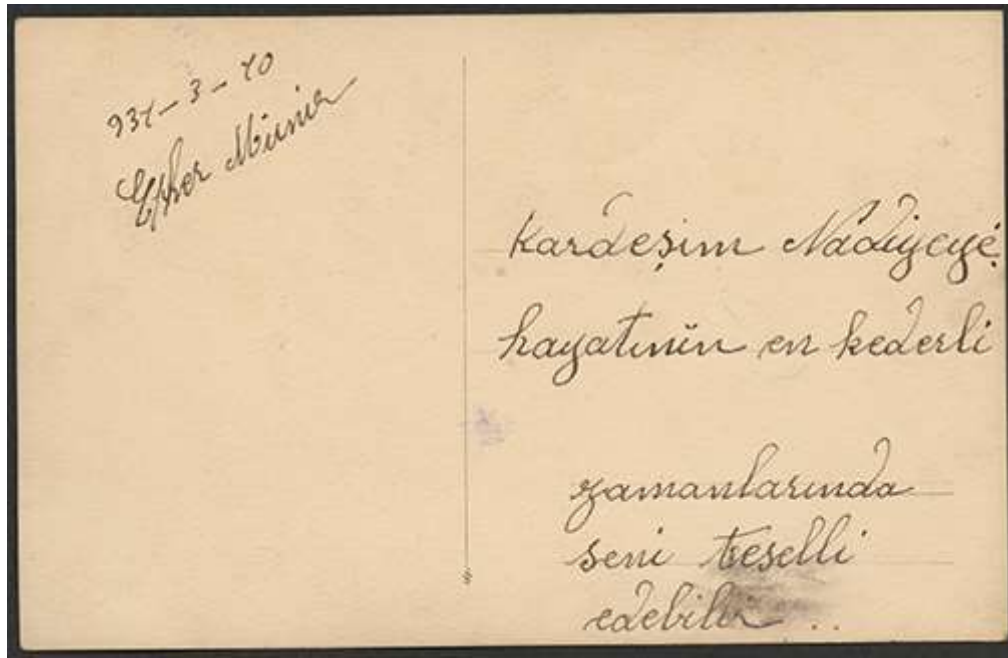
**Figure 16.**



[VIEW LARGE](#)

Studio portrait of a young woman, March 10, 1931. Gelatin silver print; AD\_MC\_007\_ref6526. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 17.**



VIEW LARGE

Back of [figure 16](#). Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid. The note reads, "931-3-10 Epher Münir [?] / kardeşim Nadiyeye hayatının en kederli zamanlarında seni teselli edebilir" (931-3-10 Epher Münir [?] / To my sister Nadiye, I hope this comforts you in the most sorrowful times of your life)

**Figure 18.**



[VIEW LARGE](#)

S Foto Nazim. Portrait of a young woman looking off camera, February 12, 1933. Gelatin silver print; AD\_MC\_007\_ref6527. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid. The inscription reads, "Kardeşime Epher [?] 12-2-933" (To my sister, Epher [?] 12-2-933).

**Figure 19.**



[VIEW LARGE](#)

Back of [figure 18](#). Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid. The note reads, "Nadiye bir az çirkin ama kusura bakma olmaz mı?" (Nadiye, [the picture is] a little ugly but you do not mind, right?).

**Figure 20.**





[VIEW LARGE](#)

Foto Nazim. Portrait of a young woman wearing a shawl, January 1934. Gelatin silver print; AD\_MC\_007\_ref6565. Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid.

**Figure 21.**



VIEW LARGE

Back of [figure 20](#). Courtesy of Akkasah, the photography archive at al Mawrid, NYUAD. Copyright al Mawrid. The note reads, "1-1934 / Çok kıymetli kardeşim Nadiyeye: küçük bir hatıra. Suna" (1-1934 / To my very precious sister Nadiye, a small souvenir. Suna).

What can photographs say about how their subjects understood photography and its function at the time? The increasing popularity of cartes de visite in the latter half of the nineteenth century prompted several Ottoman authors to advise their rapidly Westernizing readers on the "appropriate" etiquette to keep, arrange, and exchange photographic prints. For instance, in 1894, prominent novelist Ahmet Mithat Efendi praised the custom of regularly looking at family albums to evoke happy memories from the past yet warned that photographs should only be handed out upon solicitation since pictures exchanged without request might damage the dignity of both parties.<sup>12</sup> Several decades later, authors of modern Turkey offered similar advice on the use of photographic objects. Photographic inscriptions further help to shed light on the complex social networks in which photographs were circulated and exchanged. They indicate that the gifting or exchange of photographs did not just happen in and across families or among friends but also across various professional relationships and social hierarchies such as the dynamics between students and teachers as the inscriptions in [figure 1](#) bring to the surface.

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the Kemalist regime sought to establish a national infrastructure for administration, education, and healthcare, which meant appointing thousands of government employees, bankers, educators, and health personnel across the country. These employees regularly sent photographs documenting the various phases of their personal and professional life to their families and friends. Meanwhile, newly married couples progressively moved out of their family homes to build a new nuclear family elsewhere. These demographic changes and new fragmentations in the economic and social fabric generated new modes of communication and new concerns for remembrance and forgetting among families and friends, thus prompting complex circulation networks for photographic exchanges, as suggested by inscriptions produced at the time.<sup>13</sup>

Inscriptions also offer an understanding as to how people constructed and expressed their interpretation of what they might have considered “photogenic” and what they might have thought of their own image. Susan Sontag writes, “A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir.”<sup>14</sup> The search for the photogenic implies the concern “to look better in photographs (even when not made up or flattered by the lighting) than in real life.”<sup>15</sup> As Sontag asserts, “That photographs are often praised for their candor, their honesty, indicates that most photographs, of course, are not candid.”<sup>16</sup> How can we, the viewers of these photographs today, negotiate our gaze to make sense of the search for the photogenic in portraits from a century ago? How can photographic inscriptions guide us in this process? For instance, in [figures 1-2, 3-4](#) and, [18-19](#), adopting a common convention of the time, the subjects refer to their own image as “ugly,” for which they apologize ([figs. 18-19](#)) while also hoping that these pictures would save the subjects from being forgotten ([figs. 1-2, 3-4](#)). Indeed, while the young woman in [figure 18](#) refers to her image as ugly, she certainly hopes that “my dear sister” Nadiye, to whom the inscriptions are addressed, would “seek consolation” in these portraits in “most sorrowful times” ([fig. 16](#)). The inscriptions of the period reveal how the anxiety of being forgotten might have overshadowed or was at least on par with the concern to look one's best in pictures. At the same time, as this portfolio suggests, the subjects seem to have experimented with a photogenic self that simultaneously reproduced the desired image for a modern, secular republican citizen. In [figures 14-21](#), much of this experimentation with the photogenic takes place in the same studio space, Foto Nazım, evoking the question of the agency of

the photographer and the intervention of the photo studio in constructing the photogenic.<sup>17</sup>

The perspective of Turkish citizens on photography and what is considered photogenic could also be linked to their “discovery” of photography as a form of entertainment, particularly thanks to the spread of amateur cameras. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, playfulness becomes progressively visible in photographic portraits, particularly in those taken outside the studio space, such as a group of young men eating fruit in a vineyard (figs. 11–12) or a young man in a sailor's uniform dramatically posing with a pistol and binoculars as if on the lookout for some enemies (fig. 13). The inclusion of playfulness helps to broaden and enrich the negotiation of the photogenic, as in the case of figure 1 from 1928, which features a candid moment with a variety of poses and postures, although some of the girls in the picture seem to regret their appearance. Indeed, the notes on the back addressed to a classmate named Suad communicate a variety of opinions and feelings about this image. One of the girls, presumably the one with her eyes closed in the middle, writes that she “hates” this picture since every time she looks at it, she thinks she is “blind.” Another girl regrets being only half visible in the photograph and begs Suad not to forget her nevertheless. On the same print, another classmate notes how much she loves this picture even though their teacher Saim would not sign it since he thinks she looks “ugly” in this portrait.

Some of the other pictures, however, prompt rather curious questions regarding a search for the photogenic. For instance, in figure 3, what did it mean for the girl to pose next to a small statue of Atatürk in a studio portrait? What did the men in figure 5 think of the long shadows in this group portrait, presumably a popular artistic choice for studio photographers at the time, given the number of images with this feature that survive? Why do the two women, possibly sisters, pose in such a serious manner in figure 6? How was the decision made to include a skeleton in a class picture in figure 7? And why does the woman in the blurry figure 8 pose in a rather unappealing corner indoors, turning her back against a cluster of brooms? Against a backdrop of these other examples, the performance of the photogenic seems deliberate in figure 9, where a man in a fashionable, light-colored suit looks off camera while posing for the street photographer in central Istanbul.

For Sontag, “the history of photography could be recapitulated as the struggle between two different imperatives,” namely “beautification” and “truth-telling.”<sup>18</sup> Examining the

notion of the photogenic, which lies at the intersection of these two imperatives, the images in this portfolio offer clues as to how photographers and sitters understood, reinterpreted, reproduced, and circulated photography in the context of early republican era modernity, at times pushing the boundaries of what is usually considered the photographic, both as a medium and as an object. The images imply that the interpretation of the photographic was largely informed by the performance of modernity and class identity, while the desire to be remembered seems to have been privileged over the appreciation of the photogenic at times. A photographic representation might have been allowed to be “imperfect” as long as it served to evoke a shared past or retain a specific memory and as long as the photographic object as a memento was imagined to defy ephemerality.

## Notes

1. For instance, during his reign (1876–1909), Sultan Abdülhamid II commissioned photographers such as the Abdullah Frères to highlight the ongoing modernization efforts of the Ottoman rulers. He also presented two collections of large-format photographic albums to the Library of Congress and the British Museum (now in the British Library) to promote the Ottoman Empire, even though the audience for these albums might have been limited at the time. [Acar, \*Capturing Constantinople\*](#).
2. [Çelik and Eldem, \*Camera Ottomana\*](#); [Ersoy, “Ottomans and the Kodak Galaxy”](#); [Derderian, “Portraits of Unbelonging”](#); [Gürsel, “Picture of Health”](#); [Hannoosh, “Practices of Photography”](#); [Öztuncay, \*Photographers of Constantinople\*](#).
3. [Baykan Calafato, \*Making the Modern Turkish Citizen\*](#); [Özendes, \*Photography in the Ottoman Empire\*](#).
4. [Ak, \*Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türk Fotoğrafı\*](#).
5. [Bölük, \*Fotoğrafın Serüveni\*](#).
6. I would like to thank Nurçin İleri and Ebru Aykut for their expert translations and transliterations from Ottoman Turkish into modern Turkish.
7. Formerly the Akkasah Center for Photography, NYUAD. Since 2020, Akkasah has been a part of al Mawrid, the Arab Center for the Study of Art at NYUAD. Built as the Turkey Collection, it was renamed the Özge Calafato Collection in February 2020 in recognition of my efforts in putting it together. I have had the privilege to work closely with this collection, examining fronts and backs, as reflected in my analysis here. A large part of the collection is available online via [akkasah.org](http://akkasah.org).
8. [Ahiska, \*Occidentalism in Turkey\*](#).



9. Ryzova, “Boys, Girls and Kodaks”; Pinney, *Coming of Photography in India*.
10. Edwards, “Little Theatres of Self.”
11. Edwards, “Photography and the Performance of History,” 18.
12. Mithat Efendi, *Avrupa Adab-ı Muâşeret-i Yahut Alafranga*, 256–60.
13. Baykan Calafato, *Making the Modern Turkish Citizen*.
14. Sontag, *On Photography*, 6.
15. Sontag, *On Photography*, 66.
16. Sontag, *On Photography*, 66.
17. Purchased together from the same seller, [figures 14–21](#) form a curious series of images taken over four years. Addressed to a sister named Nadiye, [figures 14–19](#) are signed by a woman named Epher [?] Münir, while [figure 20](#) is signed by Suna. Similarities in the facial features and handwriting raise the question of the identity of the sitter(s) in these portraits as well as the nature of the relationship between the sitter and the addressee, Nadiye. Indeed, while the Turkish term *kardeş* likely refers to a biological sister in these inscriptions, it may also have been used as a term of endearment. Also, [figure 3](#) is also addressed to a “kardeş” named Suna; however, this name similarity appears to be a coincidence.
18. Sontag, *On Photography*, 66.

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