

AMIR M O H T A S H E M I



Portrait of Sultan Abdulmejid I (Tasvir-i Hümayun)

Istanbul, Turkey, circa 1839-1851

Watercolour on ivory

9.3cm high, 7.5cm wide

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This portrait miniature was made before 1918 with a surface area smaller than 320 square centimetres and it has been registered with Defra.

This oval miniature portrait depicts Sultan Abdulmejid I (r.1839-1861), the 31st sultan of the Ottoman Empire. He is wearing a red fez, and a dark, European-style uniform with gold embroidery in the front and a red, also embroidered, high collar. Attached to the front of his collar is an order. He sits on a chair upholstered in red material that has an elaborate frame bearing scrollwork and a centrally set stone. The background of the portrait is blue with decorative scrolling motifs.

Like his father Mahmud II, Abdulmejid I was a great believer in reforms and ushered in the era of the Tanzimat or 'reorganization' (1839-1876). This period witnessed social and political changes including movements towards secularism, and reshaping the Ottoman Empire following European models of governance. In line with these changes, visual representations of Ottoman rulers began showing a more 'Western' tone, emphasising realistic and individualistic characteristics.

Miniature portraits such as this one were likely inspired by mid-18th to mid-19th-century European examples on ivory and enamel. These portraits first gained popularity in the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Mahmud II (1808-1839), and served as diplomatic gifts. Four examples of this kind depicting Abdulmejid I are illustrated in K rkman, pp. 585; 589-91. The first, signed and dated 1888, is by Armenian artist Josef Manas, while the last three are by Armenian artist Sebu  Manas, signed and dated 1852, 1855 and 1856/57.

The order that Abdulmejid I wears hanging from his collar in this portrait is also depicted in other

paintings of him. Two such examples include a miniature portrait by Jean Portet, painted in 1850 and housed in the Topkapı Sarayı Museum, Istanbul, Accession Number 17/215; and an oil painting by David Wilkie, painted in 1840 and housed in the Royal Collection Trust, London, Accession Number RCIN 407268. It was not until 1851 that Abdulmejid I issued his own order, the Order of the Medjidie. This order is star-shaped with seven points, and can be seen in later paintings of him such as those mentioned above by the two Armenian artists.

Literature:

Baskaya, F. E. and Özgüner, E. A. Twisting Realism: The Representation of Power in the Portraits of Ottoman Sultans in the Early Photographic Era, The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2015: Official Conference Proceedings, The IAFOR Research Archive, downloaded 01/2019.

Kürkman, G. Armenian Painters in the Ottoman Empire: 1600-1923, Vol. II, Matusalem Publications, Istanbul, 2004.

Vernoit, S. Occidentalism. Islamic Art in the 19th Century, The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, Vol. XXIII, The Nour Foundation, London, 1997, pp. 72-73; 77-79.