



ARIT LECTURE

The Elusive Fashion Stories of Enslaved Women in late Ottoman Istanbul

by Dr. Nancy Micklewright

at ANAMED Auditorium and on ZOOM
Monday, May 5, 2025 at 6:00 pm Istanbul



In person lecture at Anamed Auditorium, İstiklal Caddesi, 181, Merkez Han, Beyoğlu
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Enslaved women and domestic servants are generally left out of Ottoman fashion history but in this talk, I seek to uncover the hidden stories of their clothing and their dress practices. The presence of enslaved women in Ottoman harems has long been recognized, but it is only in the past three decades or so that enslavement practices in the Ottoman Empire have been a focus of sustained scholarly attention. For this project, I turned to archival records, photographs, paintings and written accounts of harem life give a sense of the material objects which these women owned, and perhaps to locate some of their garments. The images in particular provide certain impressions of how Black women were positioned, how enslaved women or domestic servants dressed, and the clothes they wore.

In this talk, I will focus on the extensive writings by nineteenth-century British visitors to Ottoman harems in Istanbul, comparing the subjectivities of the authors, their own positions regarding slavery and their descriptions of their harem visits as one way of understanding enslavement in the harem. A second key resource for this talk are the depictions of the harem and of harem women which are ubiquitous in the visual record of the Ottoman Empire. Travelers, photographers, Orientalist painters, and Ottoman painters all produced images of the harem which range from the completely fictional to reasonably accurate depictions of Ottoman home life, and from the frankly erotic to gently romanticised views of Ottoman women. Examining this written and visual material in the context of Ottoman and international debates about slavery and the institution of the harem more generally, provides a picture of enslavement in Ottoman harems different from that derived from archival documents such as inheritance registers or other court records.

Dr. Nancy Micklewright writes primarily about the history of photography and fashion history in the Ottoman Empire with a focus on gender. Her latest book, *Fashion in Late Ottoman Istanbul: Photography and Identity in a Global City*, will appear in 2026. This year, supported by a Fulbright Senior Research Grant, she is in Istanbul working on a new project, *Dressing the Republic: Women and Fashion in 1920s Türkiye*. Previously she has received research fellowships from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Pasold Research Fund and the American Research Institute in Turkey. Through 2019 she was Head of Public and Scholarly Engagement at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, where among other duties she served as the editor-in-chief of the journal *Ars Orientalis*. She has published widely on aspects of photographic practice in the Ottoman Empire, travel albums, local engagement with photography and related issues. Her edited volume, *Mohamed Zakariya, a 21st century Master Calligrapher*, was published in 2022 by Fons Vitae. She has a PhD in the history of Islamic art and architecture from the University of Pennsylvania.