

SMALL STREET TRADES

A Selection of Images from The Fouad Debbas Collection

Beirut may be a noisy city nowadays, but in fact, it always has been. In days gone by, the spectacle took the form of itinerant traders: vendors of *ka'ak* (crisp bread with sesame seeds), poultry, seasonal fruits, and hot cardamom-infused coffee; porters; almanac peddlers; street cleaners; shoeshiners; bear tamers, and other wandering entertainers. The city was full of their cries, songs, haggling, and the sounds of clicking castanets. Among them, artisans such as potters, tinsmiths, winnowers, and wool and cotton carders set up their stalls. These trades were widely photographed at the end of the 19th and the turn of the 20th centuries. Can this interest in them be attributed to Western photographers, witnesses to nascent industrialization and the disappearance of most of these occupations in their own countries? In Beirut, the widening and paving of old roads and the successive bans imposed by the municipality aimed at abolishing itinerant trading led to the gradual decline of such activities. These trades contributed to a certain vision of the Orient as was reproduced in postcards: a bustling place where life happened outdoors. They were not only a popular subject among photographers; Lebanese artists also painted and sketched them, including the humanist painter Georges Daoud Corm (1896 - 1971).

Image captions:

Jean-Baptiste Charlier

22 albumen prints, Circa 1877

7×7 cm

The Fouad Debbas Collection / Surssock Museum



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The cries of the city

“The Cries of Paris” has become a ubiquitous term evoking the professions and vendors of yesteryear who would wander the streets hawking:

“Oranges, oranges! Who will buy my fair oranges?”

“Pewter, pewter, fine pewter! To use, to muse, get your fine pewter!”

“Grinding! Grinding! Any knives and scissors to grind?”

“Almanacs, almanacs! Who’s without a fine almanac?”

The cries of Parisian markets at the turn of the 16th century were immortalized by the composer Clément Janequin in his *chanson*, *Voulez ouÿr les cris de Paris?* [Hear the Cries of Paris, 1528].¹ But it was through the famous series of etchings, *Cris de Paris* [Cries of Paris], published by Jacques Chiquet in the early 18th century, in addition to *Études Prises Dans le Bas Peuple, Ou Les Cris de Paris* [Studies Drawn in the Lower Folk, or the Cries of Paris, 1737] which brought together some sixty etched portraits of Parisian street trades based on drawings by Bouchardon, that an almost inexhaustible iconographic repertoire developed.² Published in the 19th century, *Les Cris de Paris. Marchands ambulants* and *L’Alphabet grotesque des cris de Paris* contained prints now kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in the department of prints and photographs. In addition to these numerous examples illustrating the French population’s interest in such popular imagery, one might also cite literary, descriptive, and fictionalized narratives such as Marcel Proust’s

Nougat merchant (TFDC_635_003_0032)



32. Marchand de Nougats



30. Coupeur de tabac

Tobacco cutter (TFDC_635_001_0050)

La prisonnière [The Prisoner] and Emile Zola's *Le ventre de Paris* [The Belly of Paris], among others.³ From Paris to Strasbourg to London, every city documented its cries. According to a study by Vincent Milliot,⁴ amateurs of images of the Cries formed a new category of collectors. In France, these collectors belonged to the social strata favored by the Ancien Regime, and were mostly nobles or officers, but artists, painters, engravers, sculptors, and the honest bourgeoisie also collected hundreds or even thousands of images.

In these cries, as in the thousands of postcards in The Fouad Debbas Collection, the people are assigned the role of guardians of ancestral traditions and enactors of fixed rituals. They convey a reassuring feeling of permanence and an image of a conscientious, docile workforce. From Paris to Beirut, from West to East, the professions are similar and the people interchangeable. From water-carriers to barbers, the illustrations of Edmé Bouchardon and Jean-Baptiste Charlier feature the same postures, and convey courtesy, self-control, and poise. These street traders are valorized as figures of popular culture, as part of Parisian and Eastern heritage. Such images were a product of the late 19th century's interest in folklore, applied to an urban setting. However, similar creations existed tending towards caricature, as illustrated by the postcard series *Vie comique en Syrie* [Comic life in Syria], published in Beirut by Sarrafian at the end of the 1920s, at a time of sweeping modernization of the city. Stereotypical imagery of the Orient persisted until much later, due to the dissemination of such images across Europe.



The golden age of postcards, a wind of modernity

The second half of the 19th century (1860 - 1910) brought a new modernity to the Ottoman Empire, marked by a series of social transformations, the emergence of new classes, and a large-scale modernization program. Through the Tanzimat reforms and the Arab renaissance or *nahda*, rural and urban space was reorganized and witnessed significant change. New traders and new intellectual classes appeared: an urban elite was born.

The invention of the illustrated postcard dates to this period, the last third of the 19th century, when technical and scientific innovations converged and enabled Europe to extend its hegemony over the rest of the world. Photography, printing, and the postal system were united to create a tool for communication, knowledge, and also entertainment through the depiction of faraway lands. Publishers and distributors from Germany, Austria, Britain, France, and Italy divided the world up between them and installed their local branches in Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem: Sarrafian Bros, Dimitri Tarazi, André Terzis et fils, Aux Cèdres du Liban, Michel I. Corm et Cie, Farid Haddad, L. Férid, and many more took over the photographic archives of professional studios such as Bonfils.⁵ The names of the photographers vanished, to be replaced by those of the publishers; through postcards, the images became widespread though all the while giving the impression of reflecting reality.



Wood carder (TFDC_635_008_0509)



Locust bean merchant (TFDC_635_009_0510)

However, the images produced at the end of the 19th century do not focus on the ongoing modernization and oncoming revolution. Instead, they seem frozen in time. The Fouad Debbas Collection, which contains many photographs depicting street trades, portrays a lost or disappearing world rather than a world in transition. The Orient depicted in these images is an eternal Orient, almost silent, in which street life offers a reassuring image of permanence. These traders, barbers, and almanac peddlers are called upon to symbolize a picturesque urban landscape attacked by modernity; a modernity from Europe, which had assigned itself a *mission civilatrice* based on demonstrating the superiority of its model.

Beduin playing the rebaba (TFDC_635_010_0511)



Jam merchant (TFDC_635_012_0514)

The genre of street photography

The street scene genre in photography is certainly an heir or contemporary of the paintings, drawings, and prints popular in the 19th century. The studio catalogues of professional photographers listed, under the categories “Varied costumes”⁶ and “Types, scenes and costumes,” all activities and occupations, as well as portraits of local people, for the purpose of ethnographic recording. The postcard was well-suited to such imagery and would be used to reproduce this repertoire and provide a major source of revenue for photographic studios.

Photographs and postcards were sold as travel souvenirs for tourists. They soon became a vehicle for a portrait of the Orient as depicted by the photographers and publishers. Travelers, tourists, and residents used postcards as a fast, succinct, and frugal means of communication. Objects were to follow suit, as souvenirs to be collected and exchanged. These street scenes depict daily and male-dominated activities, although women are to be found among the water-carriers, vegetable sellers, and those milling flour and making bread.

Snake charmer (TFDC_635_013_0515)



Bread merchant (TFDC_635_014_0517)

The professions portrayed in these photographs are feigned, acted out, often in front of a false backdrop. These so-called “street” trades in fact rarely see the street, and result from the photographer’s staging within the controlled setting of the studio, which explains the disjuncture between the sitter and his or her surroundings.

Sometimes, scenes were choreographed in the studio in front of a false backdrop, but at other times, the photographer did install his studio in the street but still cut the subject off from its social, urban environment. The photographed subjects are clearly unsure of what they should be doing. They were perhaps not used to being photographed, but were they at least the individuals they were supposed to represent? Was this barber really a barber, or did the “client” risk having his throat cut off in the photography studio? None of the “subjects” smile. Their only confidence seems to stem from the instrument or tool defining their profession that many carry. Although these objects alone prove their identity, one again senses an uneasiness: the shoemakers and grinders photographed by Jean-Baptiste Charlier await the photographer’s instructions before posing.

Often, such portraits of a *dragoman*, barber, or poultry vendor taken in the studio were followed by a series of photographs of streets and markets teeming with the real actors of public life. The reading of an album or a series thus included a discovery of the context which was, to put it bluntly, not photogenic, and therefore not marketable.



Water-carrier (TFDC_635_016_0521)



Licence merchant (TFDC_635_035_0523)

Street trades were not a defining feature of photography of the Orient – they were also part of a European iconographic tradition. Eugène Atget, for example, began to document Parisian street life in the 1890s, and in particular its small trades, through photography and reportage. In these images, one can identify a desire to document a disappearing world; the aim was to classify professions through functional and formal criteria.

Lebanese artists have also drawn on the spectacle of daily life to portray their own “Orient.” Disregarding colonialism, but to some extent nostalgic for a bygone era, the work of these artists provides a unique insight. Whilst portraiture, landscape painting, and Bedouins were genres taken up by the second generation of Lebanese artists in whose style one recognizes an Orientalist manner, illustrations by Georges Cyr (1880 - 1964) and sketches by Georges Daoud Corm (1896 - 1971) testify to a profound humanism.

Persian engraver (FFDC_635_018_0528)



Yogurt (le bon) merchant (FFDC_635_021_0530)



Small trades

Street activities and trading in Beirut and the Orient were widely photographed, and many prints and postcards depicting them are present in The Fouad Debbas Collection. Some of these professions can be easily understood by the contemporary viewer, but others require some explanation, which can be found below.

Sakas, or water-carriers, roamed the city, distributing water to pilgrims and beggars, and singing “Sebyl Allah, ya atshan Sebyl!”⁷ In Egypt, they were called *hamalis*.

Other cold drink vendors sold *souss*, *jellab*, *khchaf*, and *tamr hindi*: macerated licorice, raisins, dried apricots, and tamarind, respectively. These elixirs were garnished with pine nuts, almonds, or pistachios. With glasses, metal tumblers, an ewer and a container for the precious liquid carried on the vendors’ front or back, their paraphernalia undoubtedly made quite a racket in the city.

The Arabic coffee vendors of nowadays are almost unchanged from their earlier counterparts: they walk around clicking tiny cups together like castanets and serving doses of very concentrated and cardamom-infused coffee.⁸

Barabain (TFDC_635_022_0537)



Arab milling machine operator (TFDC_635_024_0539)

Cotton carding was a profession mostly exercised by Jews in numerous cities in the Orient. It involved preparing cotton for spinning, which would then be used to stuff cushions, pillows, and mattresses. The carder's tool made a high-pitched noise, and was often referred to as *rubata*, after the name of the musical instrument producing a similar sound. Conscious of the musicality of this carding tool, some were perforated in a decorative manner to amplify their sound.⁹

The porters were those that carried heavy loads. Renowned for their strength, they came from the mountains, were often barefoot or poorly-shod, and wore patchwork clothes and a mountain hat that protected them from the sun and the cold. Their recognizable accessory was a large wicker basket on their backs, held in place by straps and ropes across the forehead. Porters mainly worked at the port and in the souks. A number of photographs reveal to us that porters sometimes began working before reaching adulthood.

The *dragoman* was an interpreter. Essential to any commercial transaction between Turks and foreigners, the dragomans were trustworthy men assigned to the service of ambassadors, and spoke several languages: Turkish, Greek, Arabic, English, French, Italian, and sometimes German. Some dragomans have been remembered by history, including Selim G. Tabet, Nicolas Bassoul, and Nicolas Sursock, who in 1865 became the third dragoman of the Russian consulate in Beirut.¹⁰

Kaffe-ginder (TFDC_635_025_0542)



Arab armorer (TFDC_635_027_0545)

"A dragoman of the French legation, M.D., a young man well-versed in every language and custom of the Orient, was our guide, and interpreted words, places, objects, and people for us. These irrevocable diplomats of the Orient, the embassy dragomans, are the Orient itself personified in Europeans that bridge two countries to better serve their nation. Without them, all diplomacy would be impossible or subject to the infidelity of ordinary interpreters. Dragomans are our permanent ambassadors. The ambassador inspires and negotiates; the dragoman executes. They are as vital to diplomacy as the word is to thought. Our ambassador in Constantinople has the good fortune to have in M. Cor an exemplary model of such men, who veil under a modest title the immense services rendered to their countries, and in MM. D. and N, two young diplomats worthy of his example and his instruction. The dragomans of this standing are now well-known in France. They are to our embassies what our pilots are to our air fleet."¹¹

The Fouad Debbas Collection also includes images of vendors of fruit, vegetables, cake, dates, bread, sugar cane, fish, as well as carpet traders, public scriveners, bazaar guards, itinerant barbers and hairdressers, peddlers, cobblers, wool spinners, tinsmiths, knife-grinders, saddlers, potters, tanners, and wandering entertainers.

Lemonade merchant (TFDC.635.030.0553)



Arab saddler (TFDC.635.033.0580)

Potter in Beirut (TFDC_635_034_0681)



Bazaar guards (TFDC_635_003_0638)



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The Fouad Debbas Collection

The Fouad Debbas Collection is a photographic collection comprising over 30,000 images from the Middle East – namely Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Turkey – from 1830 till the 1960s. It was built over the course of two decades by Fouad César Debbas (1930-2001), who was an ardent believer in the importance of collecting and preserving images as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage.

Housed in the Surssock Museum, the Collection consists of photographs, postcards, and stereoscopic views, in addition to loose albumen prints, etchings, and books, all of which relate to the region. The Collection, Orientalist in character and replete with commercial clichés, forms an important part of the Surssock Museum's collection, highlighting photography's key role in the development of modern art in Lebanon.