

# TAKING OVER THE CROWN IN CAMILLE ESKELL'S THE FEZ AS STORYTELLER

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Camille Eskell's exhibit, "The Fez as Storyteller," takes up a piece of traditional male attire and uses it to tell a new story about gender, identity and migration. It follows the fez, the Ottoman headgear, from its moment in the twilight of the Ottoman Empire and mixes it with Eskell's complex heritage as an Iraqi-Jewish American woman. Along this journey, Eskell pulls in her family's role as merchants of the headgear, circa 1890 in Bombay. She pairs that with her family's ties to synagogue life in India, gender stereotypes, and cultural baggage. The fez is uniquely positioned to tell this story, having evolved from a symbol of the modernized monarchy of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century to a symbol of the oppression by this monarchy in the early 20th century.

The fez is a cultural object that marks a politically charged crossroad in the history of the Middle East and North Africa. In the world after the French Revolution, the Ottoman rulers were aware that they were the only major empire of the pre-modern Islamic world to survive with institutional continuity and a degree of sovereignty. Though the Empire had always stressed tradition, this new context demanded its modernization.<sup>1</sup>

One of the elements of this new modern identity for the Ottoman Empire was the fez. In 1829, Sultan Mahmud II banned the turban, which had been the traditional male headgear for centuries, and declared the fez to be the head covering of all Ottoman officials, regardless of religion or rank. The fez became a homogenizing status marker that placed the state at the center of Ottoman life as the sole remaining arbiter of identity.<sup>2</sup> Yet a century later, with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk outlawed the fez and invalidated it as a symbol of the regime of Ottoman traditionalism. Later, the military officers who overthrew the monarchies in Egypt and Libya also condemned the fez as a royalist symbol.

"The Fez as Storyteller" refers to this moment of transition in Ottoman history: the rise of the fez as an invented tradition expressing the "religious egalitarianism"<sup>3</sup> of a modern Ottoman monarchy, and the fall of the fez as the "hat of the oppressors," a symbol of the traditionalism of that same monarchy.<sup>4</sup> Addressing this moment through its material and visual expression, "The Fez as Storyteller" opens a field of political imagination, allowing a rethinking of the civic vision embodied in the fez, while considering a group that has historically been excluded from this vision—women.<sup>5</sup>

Eskell's work is a meditation on her family's involvement in the production and distribution of the fez in Bombay, while confronting the personal and collective consequences for women as second class citizens in the West and the East into the 20th century. In "The Fez as Storyteller," Eskell questions the traditional status of Baghdadi Jewish women in relation to her own life. In her work, the fez is an armature used to reimagine her experiences as a first generation Iraqi-Jewish American woman, attesting to the persistence of and resistance to patriarchal traditions.

Marriage Turban Fez: to Have and to Hold, embodies a rebellion against the subordination of women to men by creating a new hybrid form of marriage headgear. The masculine forms of the fez, turban, and tzitzit are combined with a French lace bridal veil to create a fez designated not for men – as patriarchs, as enlightened monarchs or as civil fraternity, but for a woman taking hold of the patriarchal crown and of her own fate. The turban and French lace recall a period of 19th century American feminist history, when "bold, daredevil, turban-headed females" seen on the streets of Philadelphia<sup>6</sup> emulated the headdress of middle-class female French revolutionaries.<sup>6</sup> Resonating with various political and religious traditions, the design turns the fez into a headgear signifying a reconstruction of civil and religious gender roles.

Both F-Ezra: Made a woman (2017), and Red Fez: Boy, Woman, Byculla, Bombay (2012-15), share a design combining fez hats and photographic imagery showing Eskell's parents and the Bombay synagogues they attended, making references to the secondary status of women in Jewish tradition. F-Ezra: Made a Woman features a fez decorated with photo portraits of Florrie Ezra, Eskell's mother, and others with the Knesset Eliyahoo Synagogue seen in the backdrop. The glamorous, charismatic

appearance of the women's portraits posits an ironic relationship to the caption below, the Hebrew morning blessing recited by men who give thanks for "not being created as a woman, heathen or slave." A long braid replaces the fez's tassel, and a veil attached to the lower fringes of the fez is reminiscent of some types of Islamic women's face coverings. The veil shifts from its traditional materiality to one weighted by brass studs, transitioning from delicate to armored, allowing the functions of coverage and separation to be supplemented by qualities that connote struggle and self-preservation.

Red Fez: Boy, Woman, Byculla, Bombay embodies resistance to the marginal place of women in Jewish rituals. The fez incorporates photos of Camille's father as a young boy, standing proudly in the center of the main prayer space of Bombay's grand Magen David Synagogue. For contrast, another photo depicts a woman standing in the synagogue's top floor gallery. The combination of the photos recalls the exclusion of women in Jewish tradition which is demonstrated through the synagogue's architecture that gives men exclusive access to the main spaces and sacred areas while women are relegated to limited space at the margins. In her work, this marginal space becomes a place for the artist to ask questions and play with possibilities.

Eskell's hybridized garments make use of psychological and cultural layers that recount an intricate personal narrative. "The Fez as Storyteller" originates with her ancestors in India and travels into the dynamics of the troubled domestic relationships that were determined by gender roles and social expectations. The synthesis of cultural signifiers in Eskell's work and her critique of gender biases places her in dialogue with a league of contemporary artists examining identity and the histories embedded in their materials

Deringil, Selim (January 1993). "The Invention of Tradition as Public Image in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1808 to 1908". *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 (1): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Quataert, "Clothing Laws, State, and Society in the Ottoman Empire, 1720-1829," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Aug., 1997), pp. 412.

<sup>3</sup> Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 3–81.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Hedges, "Fez Journal; Last Refuge of the Tall Tasseled Ottoman Hat", *New York Times*, March 22, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> On the exclusion of women from the civic vision in the French Revolution see: Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge, 1988); Ziff, Madeline. (2019). On the exclusion of women from the civic vision in Ottoman dress revolution and its civic vision see:

"Women, Minorities and the Changing Politics of Dress in the Ottoman Empire, 1650–1830". In G. Riello & U. Rublack (Eds.), *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective*, c. 1200–1800 (pp. 393-415). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 43-47; on the Ottoman dress revolution for men see: Donald Quataert, "Clothing Laws".

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Searight, *The British in the Middle East* (New York, 1970): 168-169

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