

# ARA GÜLER

A Play of Light and Shadow

HANNIBAL



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# Preface

*Ara Güler – A Play of Light and Shadow* showcases the exceptional works of Ara Güler, an internationally renowned Turkish photographer who, from the 1950s onwards, documented the evolution of a young Turkish republic that rose from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. His photographs, taken between the 1950s and 2000, have left an undeniable mark on Turkey's collective memory. This publication, realized with the co-operation of the Ara Güler Museum, is based on the exhibition that is part of Kismet, an initiative by Studio Polat and Foam Photography Museum, which seeks to deepen the understanding of modern Turkey through research, outreach, and exhibitions. The multifaceted works that have never been seen before were made available by the Ara Güler Museum and Ara Güler Archives and Research Center based in Istanbul, which has been established to preserve and share Ara Güler's legacy.

Through his work, Ara Güler created a unique visual language within photojournalism and accomplished an exceptional achievement in presenting the old Istanbul as a historical landscape that still survives today. We dive deeper into his cultural background and how it influenced his art, as well as his experimental work, and how it was affected by his artist friends and contemporaries.

Güler's photographs, taken during the 1950s, have gained new significance since the 1990s, when Istanbul emerged as a global city. They have become objects of nostalgia and consumption, playing an essential role in shaping the city's collective memory. This book is a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of photography, history, and culture, and for those who wish to deepen their understanding of modern Turkey through the eyes of one of its most iconic photographers, Ara Güler.

We are grateful for the outstanding efforts of the Ara Güler Museum and Ara Güler Archives and Research Center to facilitate the realization of this publication and would like to thank Özge Baykan Calafato, Demet Yıldız Dinçer and Kim Knoppers for their outstanding contributions to the book. Special thanks to Umut Sülün for his expertise and Kim Knoppers, who proposed the idea of an exhibition about the work of Ara Güler.

Ahmet Polat & Claartje van Dijk





→ Old Galata Bridge, Istanbul 1954

↓↓ Ayvansaray, Istanbul, 1969













# An Icon from Turkey: Unraveling Layers of Ara Güler's Photography

by Ahmet Polat and Claartje van Dijk





The exhibition *Ara Güler – A Play of Light and Shadow* is part of Kismet, an initiative created by artist Ahmet Polat to foster a deeper understanding of modern Turkey through research, outreach, and exhibitions. In 2022 this was further developed into a collaboration between Studio Polat and Foam Photography Museum Amsterdam. It has become a multi-year project based on the longstanding cultural, diplomatic and economic connections between Turkey and the Netherlands, focusing on the complex and rich perspectives of Turkey's culture, as seen through the practice of image makers. *Ara Güler – A Play of Light and Shadow* was made in collaboration with the Ara Güler Museum.

**Claartje van Dijk (CvD)** In 2023 the Turkish Republic has existed for a hundred years. This is a moment to reflect on what this century has meant for the country and for its inhabitants. During a short period of time following the founding of the Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk implemented sweeping societal changes. People from different civilizations, ethnicities and cultures had to take on Turkish citizenship. Between the 1950s through the 1980s, this once multi-ethnic profile of Turkey altered drastically. Despite these radical changes, what I find interesting is how the legacy of this historically eclectic society is still very present in Turkey today. The Ara Güler exhibition represents a visual history, an aesthetic narrative about a developing state, through the eyes of one of today's most iconic photographers from Turkey. Foam will also exhibit the work of contemporary Turkish artists and see their vision of the country today. Our aim is to visualize different voices about Turkish identity.

**Ahmet Polat (AP)** While it is important to note that an exhibition alone cannot fully capture the entirety of Turkey's culture and history, my father taught me a valuable lesson: To understand where we are going in life, we must understand our past. Thus, to understand

modern-day Turkey better, we must examine its past. Ara's work provides a unique perspective into Turkey's history, allowing us to witness how he documented historical events and faced the difficult parts of the country's history head-on. Moreover, Ara's profound love for Istanbul and Turkey shines through in his work, which is a crucial aspect of the exhibition's strength. In this respect, I would like to share a story about Gaziantep, a city that was recently hit by devastating earthquakes. It is an area that Ara Güler photographed and documented. During my visit to the city at the end of 2022, I had the opportunity to explore some of the newly curated museums and presentations, including the exhibition *The Gaze of History: Archaeology in Ara Güler's Photographs*, realized by the Ara Güler Museum.

As you said, Ara Güler's photography serves as a powerful reminder of the significance of comprehending Turkey's young history. During my travels across the country, I've always noticed a subculture of curiosity among the Turkish population. People inquire about my background and roots, and we often engage in extensive discussions about the potential connections we may share. This eagerness to form links and recognize national identity is characteristic of a young republic like Turkey. Ara's work and exhibitions, such as *The Gaze of History: Archaeology in Ara Güler's Photographs*, are crucial in providing more context to these stories, even to their own community.

**CvD** The Ara Güler exhibition features four sections: *The Iconic*, *The Historian*, *The Ambassador*, and *The Personal*, which showcase Ara's multifaceted work beyond his renowned style. *The Iconic* section pulls the viewer into the exhibition and introduces them to the outspoken aesthetics Ara Güler is known for, such as the series of the Armenian fishermen at Kumkapı, which first appeared in the newspaper *Jamanak* in 1952. These photographs established Ara's powerful aesthetics in

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← Karaköy, Istanbul, 1950s

↓↓ Karaköy, Istanbul, 1961











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**BIG DAY**  
**FORNERS**

**SAFETY**

**WALKING**

# Colophon

## Photographs

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