

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COSTUME IN THE HOWIE FAMILY PORTRAIT

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(see images after text)

The cabinet card, *Dr. Ghosn Howie, Sarah Howie and children Elmas and Sebhiat Howie*, taken in 1892 by photographer J. Fraser Bryce (1852 - ?) in his Toronto studio, shows the Howie family in exotic, Middle Eastern dress. The father, Ghosn Howie (1853-1916), an internationally-known Presbyterian preacher from Lebanon, stands the tallest—the paterfamilias of the group—his left hand resting on his wife Sarah's shoulder. Sarah Howie (1860-1944), a well-published author and poet of her time, kneels next to their daughter Sebhiat, extending her right arm to the child's shoulder while holding a large, ceramic jug in the left. Their other daughter, Elmas, sits to the left of her mother, at her father's feet, clutching a woven basket. Ghosn and his daughters wear Arabic-style clothing and headdresses. Ghosn's typical of a shepherd, while Sarah's embroidered dress and cap more closely resemble traditional Armenian fashions usually worn for special occasions.<sup>1</sup> As a cabinet card style photograph, the image of the family is mounted upon a 16.2 x 10.6 cm piece of card stock, its reverse revealing three textual selections: the first, a poem by Sarah Howie; the second, an extract from Elizabeth Llyod's, *Milton's Prayer of Patience*; the third, an extract from John Milton's sonnet, *On His Blindness*.

Further research on this photograph reveals that this image offers a number of clues about the individuals represented. The father, Ghosn Howie, was an evangelist and missionary as well as a Presbyterian preacher.<sup>2</sup> Born in Shweir, Lebanon to Greek Orthodox parents, Ghosn was converted to Presbyterianism by Scottish missionaries who financially helped him attend the School of Arts in

Edinburgh at age 21.<sup>3</sup> There he excelled as a student despite an inexplicable blindness that had stricken him three years earlier.<sup>4</sup> Howie moved to Halifax in 1885, travelling while giving lectures and sermons for just over a year and a half before settling at St. Mark's Presbyterian Church of Toronto, the city in which he would meet his wife, English emigrée Sarah Spurr.<sup>5</sup> The couple married in 1889. Sarah was a prolific writer and poet focusing mainly on Biblical and Christian topics that were published in the *Palestine Post*, *New York Times*, *Family Friend Magazine*, and *Canada Presbyterian* among other journals and newspapers. Since her husband was blind, she also wrote many of his lectures and articles for him.<sup>6</sup> Ghosn continued his schooling while travelling throughout central Canada, giving lectures and sermons, and ultimately earned a M.A. and Ph.D. from the Illinois Wesleyan University of Bloomington.<sup>7</sup> Numerous newspaper articles of the period mention his work, including the *Canada Presbyterian*, *Montreal Daily Witness*, and *Toronto Daily Mail*.

The Howie family eventually emigrated to Lebanon in 1893, where they remained, Ghosn and Sarah having six more children there.<sup>8</sup> Sarah, who had studied the history and archaeology of the stelae—carved stone slabs erected at sites bearing funerary, territory, or military meanings—by the side of the Dog River on the outskirts of Beirut, spearheaded an archaeological dig and discovered a statue left by ancient Egyptian armies. She wrote a small pamphlet on her search and discovery,<sup>9</sup> in addition to articles she penned for the *New York Times*. The event was also written about in numerous publications including the *Bryan Times*, the *American Journal of Archaeology*, and the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. An article in the Ohio-based paper *The Bryan Times* states the religious significance of the discovery: “If scientists should confirm Mrs. Howie's ... views as to the identity and age of these sculptures, then destructive criticism which ascribes to Leviticus a date later than the days of Hezekiah and Josiah will have a ... difficulty to get over, in view of the fact that Hezekiah and Josiah destroyed all such 'figured stones.’”<sup>10</sup>

There are various and differing published accounts of Ghosn Howie's life. In a biographical article about Ghosn in the *Canada Presbyterian* from 1892, the preacher comments “The story of my life lacks the essential elements which constitute an interesting discourse or book.”<sup>11</sup> I suspect that maintaining a mystique favoured the reverend's popularity and his career, for the details offered in this article, as well as his biography authored by his wife, suggest the contrary. I believe this is the same reason that the family is dressed in Middle Eastern costume in this portrait.

Ghosn and Sarah's granddaughter, Dr. Lina Zeine, reveals that the family did not normally dress in this way: “Ghosn dressed mostly in a black pastor-type suit and white collar, and Sarah and the children dressed in western clothing.”<sup>12</sup> According to their granddaughter, Ghosn, Sarah and their children sometimes dressed in this Middle Eastern costume on special occasions during his ministry travels, as well as to have photos taken to send back to the Mission in Scotland or Toronto. She further notes that, since they looked more “exotic,” they would receive better press.<sup>13</sup> A telling statement, this suggests that the family took advantage of the interest in the “Orient” of that period.

With Orientalism becoming popular in the writing and painting of the nineteenth century, a cultural fascination and curiosity surrounding the Middle East followed in tandem.<sup>14</sup> Academic painting of the period depicts the Middle East—then largely under Ottoman rule, grouped together with Asia, broadly, as “the Orient”—as mysterious, exotic, sensual, and notably “other,” or different from, the Western world. Appropriating the clothing, and by extension the cultural identity of the Orient would have undoubtedly garnered much interest in the reverend and his family: the *Montreal Daily Witness* from March 24, 1893 announces “The Doctor and Mrs. Howie will appear in Arabic costume” at an upcoming lecture in Montreal.<sup>15</sup>

In her text, *'Clothes Make the Man': The Male Artist as a Performative Function*, art historian Amelia Jones cites “the uses and effects of bodily adornment, [and] the crucial role of clothing in interpersonal articulations of identity among subjects,” and further writes that, “Hegel notes that it is *clothing* that allows communication to occur between subjects, that allows one to speak to the other as a discrete being (signified as 'different' through dress).”<sup>16</sup> Jones explains that clothing acts as a signifier of identity; it is what communicates identity between individuals and what separates identities between individuals. For Ghosn and his family, exotic, “Oriental” clothing worn at lectures and events expressed an identity equally exotic and novel, and roused curiosity and interest in his work and his persona. This identity is further reinforced by a full-length portrait, drawn for the December 7, 1892 issue of the *Canada Presbyterian*, which also depicts the preacher in the same Middle Eastern costume, as opposed to his everyday, pastor style of dress.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the costume Ghosn dons in the Howie family cabinet card as well as the newspaper illustration likens him to an Arabic shepherd.<sup>18</sup> I suspect that this also carries with it the connotations of 'The Good Shepherd,' likely alluding to Ghosn's work as a preacher and especially as a missionary.<sup>19</sup> This Arabic shepherd costume also connotes the Holy Land, and further reinforces the reverend's devoutness and his connection to God.



DR. GHOSN HOWIE

ELMAS AND SEBHIAT HOWIE  
J. FRASER BRYCE  
107 KING STREET WEST, TORONTO

SARAH HOWIE

Dr. Ghosn Howie, Sarah Howie and children Elmas and Sebhiat Howie (1892)

J. Fraser Bryce (Canadian, 1852 - ?)

Albumen cabinet card

Library and Archives / MIKAN 3986074

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem  
&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3986074](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3986074)>.

# GHOSN BRANCH HOWIE

OF

LEBANON, PALESTINE



While some with eager haste, the crowded streets,  
Their business to pursue, are wont to hie,  
I tread, in lone y solitude, the paths  
Which leads me nearer, nearer to the sky.

Alone, yet not alone, for is not He,  
The Lord of all, forever by my side?  
How then can I be lonely, when he saith,  
"My peace forever with you shall abide."

Excelsior, my motto; and with Him  
My soul aspires to the celestial height;  
I faint not, nor am weary when He leads,  
For doth the Lord not give the blind their sight.

His word I trust, and when the morning breaks  
On that eternal shore, how sweet to know,  
The King in all His beauty, it is He  
Who guides my feeble footsteps here below.  
S. F. HOWIE.



I am weak, yet strong,  
I murmur not, that I no longer see—  
Poor, blind, helpless, I the more belong,  
Father Supreme! to Thee.

O, Merciful One!  
When men are farthest, then Thou art most near;  
When friends pass by, my weakness shun,  
Thy chariot I hear.

On my bended knee,  
I recognize Thy purpose clearly shown;  
My vision Thou hast dimmed, that I may see,  
Thyself, Thyself alone,

I have nought to fear,  
This darkness is the shadow of Thy wing.  
Beneath it I am almost sacred—here  
Can come no evil thing.



\* \* \* \* \* "God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best  
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best—His state  
Is kingly; thousands at His bidding speed,  
And post o'er land and ocean, without rest—  
They also serve Him, who only stand and wait."  
SELECTED.

DR. GHOSN HOWIE  
PALESTINE EVANGELIST  
WILLARD TRACT DEPOSITORY  
TORONTO

Nov. 24th, 1892

Dr. Ghosn Howie, Sarah Howie and children Elmas and Sebhiat Howie (Reverse) (1892)

J. Fraser Bryce (Canadian, 1852 - ?)

Albumen cabinet card

Library and Archives / MIKAN 3986074

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam\\_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec\\_nbr=3986074](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3986074)>.





DOCTOR HOWIE.

*Doctor Howie (1892)*

Artist unknown

Illustration in newspaper

*The Canada Presbyterian* (Toronto). "Sketch of Dr. Howie's Life." December 7, 1892.

Early Canadiana Online.

## NOTES

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- 1 Vana Nazarian, interview by author, Concordia University, 4 Dec. 2011.
  - 2 Sarah Frances Howie, "Ghosn El Howie," Biography (Mar. 1985).
  - 3 "Sketch of Dr. Howie's Life," *The Canada Presbyterian*, Toronto (7 Dec. 1892) Early Canadiana Online.
  - 4 Howie.
  - 5 Howie.
  - 6 Howie.
  - 7 The subject of this degree is not mentioned; and Howie.
  - 8 Howie.
  - 9 Lina Zeine, E-mail interview by author, 30 Nov. 2011.
  - 10 The Bryan Times (Ohio), "Rock Inscriptions Found in Canaan," 6 Nov. 1902  
<<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=799&dat=19021106&id=q7xaAAAAIBAJ&sjid=bFIDAAAAIBAJ&pg=4660,2506902>>.
  - 11 "Sketch of Dr. Howie's Life."
  - 12 Zeine.
  - 13 Zeine.
  - 14 An artistic movement that appropriated and intentionally exoticized the culture of the Near East.
  - 15 Montreal Daily Witness, 24 Mar. 1893.
  - 16 Amelia Jones, "Clothes Make the Man: The Male Artist as Performative Function," *Oxford Art Journal* 18:2 (1995): 18.
  - 17 "Sketch of Dr. Howie's Life."
  - 18 Nazarian.
  - 19 In Christianity, Jesus is often referred to as The Good Shepherd, a popular icon in the western artistic canon.



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