

## ENVIRONMENT OF CULTURE AND ART IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

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**Abstract:** Westernisation and modernisation of the Ottoman Empire began to burgeon in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; it became evident in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the most intense interaction and the exact reconstruction process. New way of living which was originated in Europe and representatives thereof became influential as guides and determinants of reconstruction process in the Ottoman Empire. It is possible to point out that the Ottoman Empire which got closer to France for handling military problems, to England for industrialisation purposes and to Italy for architecture and arts had intense communication and the resulting interaction with European states in the course of reconstruction process.

This study aims to give information about the social, cultural and artistic environment in the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909).

**Key Words:** Culture, Art, Ottoman Empire, Sultan Abdul Hamid II.

### General View of the Environment of Culture and Art in 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the Ottoman Empire

It is clear that sultans had a very important role in the ruling of the country as a part of state system of the Ottoman Empire thus, good or bad functioning of the state and events and actions which might affect the society from various aspects were closely connected to personality, behaviours and mentality of the sultan. This fact which is valid for all absolute monarchies rendered the personality of sultans very important for ruling of the state and events, practices and behaviours which might affect the society based on the ruling in a country like Ottoman Empire majority of whose population was illiterate. Therefore, westernisation movements in our history were primarily shaped in line with the personality, mentality, philosophy, behaviours and ruling capacity of the sultans. Artistic issues would inevitably undergo a transformation process depending on the same environment and circumstances (Cezar, 1971: 19).

Although the transfer of some cultural elements had a preliminary function in the adoption of Western art in the Ottoman Empire, the main motivation was the beginning of disintegration of Ottoman society upon the change of land order at the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century (Renda and Erol, 1980: 79). New diplomatic, commercial and cultural relations with European states in 18<sup>th</sup> century had a significant effect on artistic environment of the Ottoman Empire. One of the most important innovations was surely the introduction of the printing to the Ottoman Empire following the mission of Mehmed Çelebi and Said Efendi in Paris. Said Efendi had İbrahim Müteferrika establish the first printing house in 1726 and initiated the publishing of books in Turkish.

It is evident that westerners exerted efforts for familiarizing themselves with Turkey in that century. Envoys arriving in Istanbul started to bring scientists, intellectuals, painters with themselves even in the Tulip Period. These developments even enhanced and continued in the course of events. Westerners were studying history, state organisation, social structure of Turkey and they were publishing articles and books based on these studies. Painters who accompanied envoys or came on their own were depicting buildings, clothes and way of living in Turkey with their pencil or brushes (Cezar, 1971: 7).

Institutional Westernisation which was accomplished by successively innovative sultans during 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century which were identified as reconstruction period in the Ottoman history resulted in a comprehensive cultural evolution in the empire. This period witnessed the formation of a new cultural and artistic environment in the country and trial of new forms and techniques of each branch of art and gradual institutionalisation of art education. A new phase was also introduced for Ottoman painting in this period (Bağcı et al., 2006: 261). Given that these changes were resulted from impacts of economic depression on social life and culture in the Ottoman Empire and art works of this environment were inseparably connected to historical process thereof, it is clear that westernisation in painting was an extension of social changes (Fischer, 1995: 163).

Commencement of painting education under the auspices of court in the 19<sup>th</sup> century enabled the training of painters who were creating art works in western style. Newly established technical schools offered a modern

curriculum and lectures of math, geometry and technical drawing. Firstly Mühendishane-i Bahri-i Hümayun (Imperial School of Naval Engineering), Mühendishane-i Berri-i Hümayun (Imperial School of Military Engineering) then Mekteb-i Harbiye (School of War) and schools like Sanayi and Mülkiye Mektebi (Industrial and Civil Service Schools), civil high schools, teacher-training schools following Tanzimat reform era were the centres of painting education until the foundation of Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi (Academy of Fine Arts) in 1883 (Bağcı et al., 2006: 300). However, design and painting lectures might have been held in studios of some painters apart from abovementioned official institutions. As noted previously, it is known that some European painters arriving in Istanbul in 18<sup>th</sup> century had studios in Galata district and Levantines, non-Muslim and Muslim painters came and worked in these studios. It should be considered that European painters who stayed in Istanbul for a longer period and worked at court's service in the 19<sup>th</sup> century played a greater role in the adoption of the western painting (Renda, 2002: 948).

Renewal concepts which were tried to be identified as Westernisation process in Turkey brought about the prejudice that the sole factor designating the changes of form was Europe. It is not possible to point out that a particular art environment is deprived of an internal dynamism where connection with its historical creative volition and its traditions is sustained in spite of very powerful exposure and that it is incorporated in modern developments (Tansuğ, 1986: 11).

### **Environment of Culture and Art under the Rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909)**

Sultan Abdul Hamid II who might be identified as innovative due to developments under his rule witnessed very important political events of the imperial history. He announced the first Ottoman constitution (Kanûn-i Esasî) on December 23, 1876. The first parliament consisting of the Sultan-selected Senate and generally elected Chamber of Deputies opened on March 19, 1877. Thus, the First Constitutional Era started. This period which was designated as era of innovations in the empire had impacts not only on political life but also on social and cultural life. The interest of Sultan Abdul Hamid II in fine arts flourished as a result of taste of Ottoman court in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and his presence in visit of Abdul Aziz to Europe before he took the throne (Germaner and İnankur, 2002: 104).

Artistic activities of particularly foreign architects were outstanding under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II who attached importance to culture, art and architecture. Private academy of the French artist Guillemet<sup>1</sup> was active in Pera district prior to foundation of Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi (Academy of Fine Arts) in 1883. Pera as a European cultural zone hosted the activities of foreigners, Levantines or artists of minority. Vividness of artistic life was sustained during First Constitutional Era (1876–1908) which spanned the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (Tansuğ, 1993: 15).

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Desire Guillemet (1828-1878): Is a French painter who came to Istanbul during the reign of Abdul Aziz, the second sultan of the Tanzimat period, during the process of westernization. After being sent to Turkey with an official mission in 1863, he made portraits of Sultan Abdul Aziz, one of them standing on the horse. In the 1870s, the artist produced works showing women from the harem of the Ottoman Palace as well as another copy of the standing portrait of Abdul Aziz. The last piece we know of the artist is II. Abdul Hamid is probably the portrait portraying the first years of his reign. All of these artistic activities, which Guillemet put forward in connection with the two different cultures of Europe and Ottoman, in the context of the relations between the traditional and the modern transformation, have made permanent contributions to the history of contemporary Turkish art (Kıbrıs, 2003). (<http://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/SearchTez>) (Date of Access: 11.12.2013)



**Figure 1:** Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi (Academy of Fine Arts)

It appears that understanding of western painting attracted the attention and support of statesmen and aristocrats resident in Istanbul beginning from the rule of Sultan Abdul Aziz even though this understanding could not be rendered available for a vast majority of public. Thus, “Sanayi-i Nefise Mekteb-i Âlisi” (Academy of Fine Arts) was founded in Istanbul in 1882 upon the initiative of government in order to institutionalise understanding of western art and activities thereof in Turkey and modern artistic activities primarily painting, sculpture and architecture were tried to be taught and made available to majority of public through this school. In fact, obstacles to descriptive painting which was forbidden by Islam and deemed as a taboo thus could not be developed could only be overcome through enduring and extensive efforts. It is a historical fact that European artists particularly Italians arriving in Turkey as well as stance and support of Ottoman administration particularly from the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century played an important role in overcoming these obstacles (Sönmez, 2006: 313).

The most important event for the history of painting was the foundation of Sanayi-i Nefise (Academy of Fine Arts), art education was demilitarised by means of the school. The school which was founded by Osman Hamdi Bey who received education of painting in Paris together with the support of court following a long preparatory period started to operate on March 3, 1883. Osman Hamdi Bey was always criticised due to academic staff which was mainly composed of foreign and non-Muslim academicians such as Alexandre Vallaury for teaching science of architecture and his assistant Pietro Bellò, Salvatore Valéri for oil painting, Warnia Zarzecki for sketching, Yervant Osgan Effendi for sculpture and Aristo Efendi for history. However, it might be thought that he established such a group of academicians since he wanted to concentrate on figure which he attached utmost importance (Arli, 2000: 147). The attitude of Ottoman sultans was also evident from the fact that they ordered court painters who was invited from West such as Zonaro, Chlebowski to create large paintings depicting the victories of their ancestors (Çağman, 2002: 931).





**Figure 2:** Ertuğrul Süvari Alayı'nın Galata Köprüsü'nden Geçışı  
(Passage of Ertugrul Cavalcade from Galata Bridge), 1901  
Fausto Zonaro  
Oil on canvas,  
117x202 cm.



**Figure 3:** Kağıthane, Date Unknown  
Stanislas Chlebowski  
Oil on canvas  
62x102 cm.

Factors resulting in the acceleration of cultural and artistic environment of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and dynamics reflecting in the art works of the period might be summarized as follows (Yasa-Yaman, 2011: 20);

“Famous photographers of Pera took the photos of urban life, monuments, historical surrounding, bazaars, streets, peddlers, ceremonies, portraits of notables of that period, members of foreign royal families visiting the empire, travellers, admirals of Ottoman Navy, foreign navies, new hospitals and schools, official ceremonies, daily life and events, life of women particularly in public and private areas, portraits of important people and albums and postcards became popular under the rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Picture, engraving and particularly photographs were important sources affecting the theme-related repertoire and vision of painters.”

Reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II was also important for portrait-painting of sultans since Sultan Abdul Hamid II ordered the Europeans such as H. Bertaux, F. Zonaro, W. Reuter to create the oil portraits of preceding sultans. Sultan also established a museum inside Yıldız Palace and exhibited the portraits of sultans and some paintings from court collections as well as artefacts such as coins, porcelains, manuscripts etc. (Renda, 2002: 947).



**Figure 4:** Antikacı (Antique Dealer), Date unknown  
Salvatore Valéri  
Oil on canvas  
60x44 cm.

## Turkish Artists in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman Art Environment

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century only foreign painters did not give work in the Ottoman Empire. During this period, the artists who went to Europe and trained in perspective, shadow, color toning and the use of these techniques developed themselves in painting Western style paintings. When we are going to touch Turkish painters of this period, we should not mention "Military Painters". The Ottoman state is clearly based on the military plan, and this is also the area where it is most sensitive. The reorganization of the military order in the direction of westernization led to the establishment of military schools with the name of Mühendishane-i Bahr-i Hümayun (1773), followed by Mühendishane-i Berri-i Hümayun (1793). These schools and military officers, such as the Harbiye (1831), were



later turned into artistic studies in the hands of their talents and created a military painter who is unprecedented in the world (Tansuğ, 1993: 11).

Some artists, military or civilian school graduates who make their paintings using the photographs taken by Abdullah Brothers<sup>2</sup>, the first famous photographer of Istanbul, are much unknown to life stories, and they come as a unique group in 19<sup>th</sup> century painting activities. These artists, such as Hüseyin Giritli, Hilmi Kasımpaşalı, Fahri Kaptan, Necip, Selahaddin, Salih Molla Aşkî, Ahmet Bedri, Münip, Ahmet Şekûr, Ahmet Ziya Şam, İbrahim, Mustafa, Şefik, Şevki, Osman Nuri are known as one, two or three paintings (Tansuğ, 1986: 85).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the strong representatives of the new understanding of painting towards the West became artists who were sent to painting education in Europe. After the Tanzimat the innovative sultans Sultan Abdul Mecid and Abdul Aziz sent these artists to Paris for education as well as established a school under the name of Mekteb-i Osmani in Paris in order to educate them and the school which served between 1860-1874, it was obtained. There are records of the paintings of the painters, such as Ferik İbrahim Pasha (died in 1891), Hüsnü Yusuf Bey (died in 1861) and Ahmed Emin Bey (died in 1891) who were sent abroad during Abdul Mecid period, as well as canvas paintings (Bağcı et al., 2006: 301). In addition to all these artists who made up the Ottoman art scene, we can also consider Şeker Ahmed Pasha (Ahmed Ali died in 1907), who was first educated at the Academy of Fine Arts at Mekteb-i Osmani and later at the Paris Fine Arts Academy, as the pioneer of these painters. Şeker Ahmed Pasha, attracted the attention of Sultan Abdul Aziz at the 1867 Paris World Fair, was appointed as a minister in his turn and was also commissioned to create a collection of paintings at the same time. Şeker Ahmed Pasha also organized the first collective art exhibition in Istanbul in 1873 (Bağcı et al., 1996: 301-302).



**Figure 5:** Otoportre, (Self-portrait), Date unknown  
Şeker Ahmed Paşa (Şeker Ahmed Pasha)  
Oil on canvas  
116x84 cm.

<sup>2</sup> It is the commercial name of Vicen (1820-1902), Hovsep Abdullahyan (1830-1908) and Kevork (1839-1918) brothers, all of whom are Armenian-renowned as the founders of the art of photography in Turkey. In 1858 a photographer shop was opened in Istanbul near Tunel. They were rewarded by Abdul Aziz and Abdul Hamid II with the title of artist painter (painter of the sultan).

Another painter who went to Paris and studied was Süleyman Seyyid (died in 1913). Süleyman Seyyid's soft brush technique and strong light use, which are mostly known for their still life but also have scenes, figurative paintings and portraits, draw attention. Both Şeker Ahmed Pasha and Süleyman Seyyid depart from the 19<sup>th</sup> century viewers who took photographs or engravings as examples (Bağcı et al., 1996: 302). From Turkish painters who went to Paris for the first time, Şeker Ahmed Pasha and Süleyman Seyyid's naturalism and Barbizon School's<sup>3</sup> orientation to the landscape are linked to the world of art from 1860-70, as well as their own worldviews. They have become spectators of Courbet's image (Germaner, 1999: 119). Another representative of the painters who studied in Paris is Halil Pasha (died in 1939). His distinction from his other is that he is closer to the impressionist painting with his vibrant colors, thick brush strokes, flickering light stains (Bağcı et al., 1996: 303).

Osman Hamdi Bey (died in 1917) is another artist who had not attended military school in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but had studied in Paris. Osman Hamdi, who is also an archaeologist and founder of both the Archaeological Museum and Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi, has a privileged place in Ottoman art. The greatest contribution of Osman Hamdi Bey, who is the forerunner of figurative illustration and portraiture, is that he has placed human beings, especially women, in monumental dimensions. In Paris he was influenced by orientalist movement and used Ottoman decorations and clothes in his paintings. But like European Orientalists, he has not tried to create a mysterious Eastern world of imagination. Realistic decorations and people are part of the Ottoman culture. Osman Hamdi established the School of Industry in 1883 and established the institution of painting education. Painters studying here will bring more innovative trends to painting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of these painters will continue their activities during the Republican period and will accelerate the republican era (Bağcı vd., 1996: 303).



**Figure 6:** Osman Hamdi Bey

The Ottoman artist who went to Paris met a metropolis that attracted the pain of industrialism unlike orientalists who were fascinated by the mystical life of the eastern cities. For the first time, they discovered the existence of great museums, galleries and intense art scene. While European artists working in the east gradually moved away from

<sup>3</sup> The Barbizon School is used to describe the landscape picture style of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was applied by a French painter group between 1830 and 1870. It is from the Barbizon village near Fontainebleau (France) where the painters of the school come together. Among the leading names of the Barbizon school are Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Théodore Rousseau, Jean-François Millet and Charles-François Daubigny. Barbizon painters were part of the road to reality when romanticism prevailed in visual arts.

academic education and valid rules, the Ottoman artist found himself in a new style of workshop education (Germaner, 1999: 119).

Some Ottoman painters who did not go to Europe also took an important place in the history of painting. They seem to be influenced by Orientalist painters who came to Istanbul. For example, Hüseyin Zekai Pasha (died in 1917) was known for his landscaped buildings. Ahmed Ziya Akbulut (died in 1938), who made the same kind of paintings, wrote two books on the perspective of Amel-i Menâzır and Ameliye-i Fenn-i Menâzır (Bağcı et al., 1996: 303). Hoca Ali Rıza (1857-1930) was the painter who attracted attention with the innovative style of 19<sup>th</sup> century Turkish painters who had not been educated in Europe. As a matter of fact, Hoca Ali Rıza and Halil Pasha, Şeker Ahmed Pasha and Süleyman Seyyid form the bridge between the painters who brought impression of Turkish painting to the beginning of the 20th century (Renda, 2002: 952-953).

## Conclusion

It is pointed out that Western figurative painting was first introduced by Italian Gentile Bellini under the rule of Mehmed the Conqueror in the researches on Turkish art history and development of Turkish painting. Accordingly, it is known that portraits of Selim III, Mahmud II and their successors were created as a part of portrait painting of sultans. However, the depiction of public, scenes from daily life, ceremonies, feasts, cafes etc. in the imperial territories started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it gained. This process is included in Turkish painting history as “arrival of Western painting to Ottoman Empire or Turkey”.

It is consequently known that numerous European artists arrived in Ottoman territories in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and some of them came upon the court invitation and some of them were residing in Istanbul for work. In all these developments, it is possible to say that the contribution of Turkish artists as well as European or foreign artists in the development of the Ottoman art scene and in the establishment of art in the Western sense is possible. It is the "art" that is able to effect and spread quickly and easily among the societies. Collecting the source of art, together with being connected to the culture structure of the powerful society, has freedom and individuality depending on it (Cezar, 1971: 2). In the 18th century and the first half of the nineteenth century, which constituted the first period of Westernization in the Ottoman Empire, art traces a culture change that new conditions pose. In this environment, it can be seen that both in architecture, in the field of painting, Western forms are adopted to a great extent, and in some places they are copied and copied in some places. The miniature, the sole dominant species of Turkish painting, has also gradually left its place in the Western sense (Renda, 1977: 193).

As a result, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman culture-art scene emerged as a result of the co-productions of foreign and Turkish artists and the influence of these artists in the 20th century. In the formation of contemporary Turkish art lies the tradition of Turkish painting which comes from the miniature tradition and completes the evolution with Western artifacts.

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