

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**Equating Mimesis with Being Civilized:
Republican Transplantations in Turkey
with a Focus on Visual Arts.**

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Focusing on the cultural reforms in the early Republican era in Turkey, this study attempts to illustrate the dimensions of the aesthetic switch that caused a rapid transition from non-mimetic Ottoman visual traditions (Koranic calligraphy, manuscript painting, geometric ornamentation, etc.) to European style easel painting. Despite its eastern cultural heritage that consists mainly of Turco-Islamic constructs, the concept of “visual arts” in today’s Turkey is understood in a predominantly Eurocentric mindset. As a young republic established in the first quarter of the 20th century, Turkey had gone through enormous changes in its cultural climate in a considerably short period and westernization movements created a particular memory loss with respect to traditional components of Turkish visual culture. This loss, however, is rarely mentioned in Turkish art history literature. In this study, based on an interdisciplinary review of history, this problematic stance is discussed.

Introduction

Despite its wide cultural heritage that consists mainly of Turco-Islamic constructs, the concept of “ visual arts” in today’s Turkey are understood in a predominantly Eurocentric mindset, and this is due to the chronologically strengthening choices made in the last three centuries in which almost every institution of the Ottoman societies was redefined according to modernist European criterion.

Founded by the military elite of the 1920s after the Independence War, the essential objective of the Turkish Republic was to build a secular nation-state by erasing the centuries-old Ottoman theocracy which urgently entailed devising a new national culture for people. That’s why nationalization process assigned a peculiar role to culture policies. Almost all of these policies, however, were “imposed from above” and a particular project of “westernization” put its imprint on all policies relating to culture and art from the founding years of the Turkish Republic.¹

The presumption that any sort of “progress” has to be imported from the west was so strong that many intellectuals in the republican era claimed that meaningful change can take place only by sudden changes that break radically with the past, given the fact that, for them, the past was not a solution but the problem itself.² In such a climate the east

was defined as the cultural territory of taboo and the west, far from being a mere geographical description, was considered the domain of modernity and its presumed value was measured against an 'east' which was considered as standing for backwardness itself.³ Ziya Gokalp, for instance, a prominent cultural theorist in the first half of the twentieth century, wrote:

There is only one road to salvation: To advance in order to reach — that is, in order to be equal — Europeans in the sciences and industry as well as in military and judicial institutions. And there is only one means to achieve this: to adapt ourselves to western civilization completely.⁴

Influenced by Gokalp⁵, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the leader of the Independence War and the first president of the Republic, initiated a new program which sought adapting Turkish society to European civilization through transplanting European concepts, institutions and ideals. In terms of women rights, democratization, freedom of press and similar issues, the transplanted concepts in the long term made positive contributions to life in Turkey. However, some reforms made in cultural life are still being discussed in terms of their necessity, magnitude and affects. Derived from the middle name of Atatürk, the modernization program is historically called Kemalism and I shall argue in the following paragraphs that the Kemalist cultural agenda to a great extent neither sought transition from the old to the new nor called for a wide-scale discussion on how to construct a new cultural climate. Given the intensity, rapidness and resolute steps taken in the first decade of the Republican Era, I believe the medical term transplantation can be considered more suitable than terms such as transition or construction to characterize the way Kemalist cultural agenda operated. Even if transition and construction took place, they can genuinely be observed after 1930s. It will therefore be fair to argue that the masses were largely not the subjects but the objects of the Kemalist program and this made the early history of Republican era in the cultural life of Turkey a set of stories about the transplanting attempts of subjects and the symptoms of transplant rejection in the objects.

Although we see the eminent effects of modernization first on the political institutions level, its deeper effects unfold in identity and symbolic capital construction on civilization level and in defining new concepts regarding ethic and aesthetic values.⁶ The transplantation mentality of the Republican elites identified the differences between civilized and uncivilized in terms of *alaturka*⁷ and *alafranga*. As O'Connell acutely puts it:

[A]*lafranga* became synonymous with the modernist interests of an emergent bourgeois elite while *alaturka* represented the symbolic capital of a outmoded Ottoman past: a past which was no longer consistent with the westernizing interests and the modernist aspirations of the newly established Turkish Republic.⁸

And as the result of such positioning, actions such as wearing a tie, shaving the face, going to theatre, eating with fork, walking hand in hand as wife and husband on the street, dancing in ballrooms, shaking hands, wearing a hat, writing from left to right, and listening to classical western music were considered the ideal characteristics of the "progressive and civilized" Republican citizen.⁹

If transplantations carried out in the first years of the republic in various fields were successful to a degree, they were definitely not without complications. One complication is the social amnesia evident in Today's Turkish society. As Shafak argues, Ottomans are considered so remote today that one can not help but think whether they were people of another country.¹⁰ Hilmi Yavuz shares the same idea and adds that "the negative narrative" developed by the Republican elite causes us to see a huge nothingness when Ottomans are mentioned.¹¹

I will now illustrate three areas in which Ottoman legacy was considered void by the Republican culture agenda: Alphabet, Music, and Visual Arts.

Alphabet

Turkish was written with a version of the Perso-Arabic script known as the Ottoman Turkish script (الفب/elifbâ) until May 1928. A decree replacing the Arabic script with a version of the Latin alphabet was issued in the fifth year of the republic. The Latin alphabet transplantation was rejected by a group of intellectuals and some who supported the replacement offered a five-year transition. Ataturk insisted¹² on a rapid change and the new alphabet was enacted in a couple of months. On January 1, 1929, it became unlawful to use the Arabic alphabet to write Turkish.

The alphabet transplantation along with attempts to purify Turkish was a main vein in the republican reform agenda. Arabic and Persian words were dropped systematically from dictionaries and new words derived from archaic Turkish origins were resurrected. All these attempts unfolded some complications which, from the point of the republican reform program, can be considered as desired outcomes. The following generations neither felt practical need nor had any opportunity to learn Arabic letters. This provided the republican elite with a society deprived of its centuries-old Ottoman roots. In that sense, the alphabet transplantation prepared a suitable climate for new transplants.

Alphabet change succeeded in a short period of time through laws and educational policies while on the other hand those who foresaw the irreparable damage caused by such transplantation in the socio-cultural texture of Turkey such as Meric, an outspoken opponent of the Kemalist linguistic "reforms" claimed that no other nation had experienced such "disaster."¹³

Music

Republican cultural program's interest in music started when they stopped the operation of Oriental Music Section in 1926. This institution was the only official conservatoire-like institution where music was taught. Other moves followed in the following years and a fixation on polyphonic western music became the main tenet of the republican music reforms. The new republican elite equated polyphony with being civilized while they looked down on traditional and classical forms of Turkish music claiming that such forms must be modernized in the direction they instruct or must simply be removed from the new cultural climate of Turkey. Orhan Tekelioglu in his important article "The rise of a spontaneous synthesis: the historical background of Turkish popular music" explains:

In 1934, for example, a ban was placed on the radio broadcasting of Turkish music [of the Ottoman origin]. In an effort to teach the people to enjoy polyphony, elegant light examples of Western music were played not only on the radio, but also in other public

areas of life, for example on the vessels of the Turkish Maritime Lines and at government-sponsored ballroom dances.¹⁴

The persistent concentration of the republican elite on western classical music created some distinctions which found correspondence in the *alaturka* versus *alafanga* dichotomy. The following table shows a simplistic sample of such binary classification:

	ALATURKA	ALAFRANGA
Melodic Conception	<i>Monophonic</i>	<i>Polyphonic</i>
Musical Texture	<i>Heterophonic</i>	<i>Homophonic</i>
Compositional Technique	<i>Improvisatory</i>	<i>Composed</i>

The republican transplantation in the field of music based its main assumption on the "polyphony-being civilized" equation and even after the first decades of the republican era daring proposals such as banning all monophonic music in Turkey was still being discussed in official meetings.

Meanwhile, the Fine Arts Academy operated as an institutional mechanism for republican control. Through selective budgetary allocations and through restrictive admissions procedures, the Fine Arts Commission was able to reconfigure Turkish musical taste to suit the aesthetic interests of republican orthodoxy.¹⁵

Due to the 1934 ban on Turkish music radio broadcasts, Arab radio stations gained popularity among republican citizens. It was basically a complication aroused by the polyphony transplantation attempts of the republican music agenda. The Turkish listener at large hardly showed much interest either in the polyphonic music being composed by Turks, or in the western classical music that was being played so they tuned in to Arab radio stations playing Arab music.¹⁶

Visual Arts

Just as the change of the alphabet has been in the expense of a major loss of connection between the society and the old literature causing a chronic memory loss, the transition from the firmly-rooted Turco-Islamic pictorial tradition into the Western practice of easel painting has been in the expense of forsaking the old visual tradition. What I prefer to call as a "taste transplantation" not only changed the centuries-old aesthetic climate in visual arts in Turkey, but also erased the main tenets of Ottoman visual culture in an irreversible manner. However, it is interesting to witness that major art history texts in Turkey does not shed enough light on the sad demise of Ottoman visual art since most of them are busy introducing and celebrating the new Eurocentric aesthetics.

Yet, one can ponder the question whether history of Turkish art might have been written in any other way given the fundamental changes Anatolian people had to pass through in the last three centuries. Indeed the field of art history in the Western sense was almost non-existent in the Ottoman-Islamic scholarship and was itself a product of the modernization movements of the last two centuries in Anatolia. Many art history texts written in Turkey in the first decades of Republican era simply acted as catalyzer for the republican taste transplantation in Turkish visual culture.

As Donald Preziosi noted in 1989, "[a]ll history is perforce a production –a deliberate selection, ordering, and evaluation of past events, experiences and processes.¹⁷" In the

case of Turkish art history, the selection, ordering and evaluation with regard to the Ottoman visual tradition were made in tune with a modernist "progress" narrative which implied that Western figurative painting is a higher art compared with the traditional forms of Ottoman art.

Art history in Turkey was a field mainly established in an era when reactionary attitudes toward the classical Ottoman culture dominated the country's elites and when an erasure of the tradition was perceived necessary for the sake of the new nation-state. Perhaps, for this reason, the field as a whole can not be blamed for its contributions to the then-valid grand narrative.¹⁸ This grand narrative in tune with Gokalp's views, implied that the key to "progress" in any field such as literature, architecture, military, judicial system and so forth can only be obtained from Europe through mimicry.

That's why when one reads, most histories of Ottoman art, written in the republican era, convey to the reader a particular manner of viewing history. As each decade passes in the text, you find yourself with some sort of imposed desire to get rid of "the limited figurative stance" of the Ottoman art and to see a full-scale naturalistic figurative art akin to the examples in the West. Since such texts implicitly construct a rationale which equates acquisition of Western mimetic figurative art with being modern, the opposite is automatically implied: non-figurative art or art works that keep their distance to mimetic visual art are symbols for underdevelopment.

A sharp manifestation of the republican mindset regarding Ottoman art was openly discussed in an article written in 1929 by Mustafa Şefik Tunç, a "conservative modernist" who had actively contributed to Turkish intellectual life until 1950s. In his article, Tunç accuses Ottomans of neglecting the Turkish genius in art by ruling it out with religious excuses such as considering artists of figurative painting as deserters of the Islamic faith. He identifies the art forms of the Ottoman era such as manuscript painting and calligraphy as perversion. "This perversion," Tunç goes on to claim, "is a sickness, and so there could exist no fundamental flow of art."¹⁹

Throwing a glimpse at many Turkish art history texts will reveal the dominantly Western conceptions in histories written by foreign and indigenous authors. Even at the surface level, many Turkish authors do not use the Ottoman art terminology to name, explain, and discuss the concepts of traditional arts. The word miniature for example, has not been used in the Ottoman context until the Westernization movements; yet, almost all historians in Turkey name this particular painting form with this Italian word derived from Medieval Latin. Even this choice of wording reveals the dominantly Western discourse in which the first texts of Turkish art history were crafted.

In addition, the Eurocentric classifications imported and then transplanted onto Turkish soil often do not fit the way the Ottoman artistic tradition was configured. *Hüsni Hat* (Koranic calligraphy), for instance, was the most respected art and the *hattats* (calligraphers) occupied the highest rank of all artisans in the Ottoman context for centuries. On the other hand, calligraphy in the European tradition was considered to be a "minor art" which ranks way behind figurative painting. These incompatibilities were either not taken into account or they were considered problems on the way of national progress. Some art history texts preferred to focus on pre and post-ottoman artistic eras as

genuine Turkish achievements and referred to Ottoman art as only in terms of architecture or in terms of "minor arts" such as calligraphy, ornamentation, etc. Some other texts preferred a negative muteness regarding art before the Republic.

On the other hand, the beginning of the twentieth century was a time when the Orientalist²⁰ discourse was already announcing many Western concepts, among them figurative representation, as conditions for becoming civilized. For orientalist literature Islamic art was considered as a convenient vehicle to underline the otherness of especially non-European cultures.²¹ Orientalist art historians had in mind the assumption that practice of mimetic art was an indicator of being civilized which was another way of proclaiming European artistic superiority over people outside Europe. Therefore, it will be fair to say that most texts regarding Turkish art history, influenced by Orientalism, were caught up in a kind of convenient presumption which neglected, if not ignored, the main tenets of the Ottoman artistic tradition one of which was a well-calculated distance to naturalistic figuration.

For religious, philosophical and socio-cultural reasons, thousands of manuscript paintings created in Turco-Islamic spheres have remained indifferent to the demands of naturalism and even Islamic portraiture has kept its distance to mimetic theory by almost never replicating the likenesses of its sitters. The artistic result reached in such non-mimetic way of representation was a peculiar kind of concept painting distant to realistic depiction. Such paintings were kept in book format, had smaller dimensions in order to fit manuscript pages and met the eye of the beholder on horizontal plane. In addition, a close examination of these paintings illustrates a certain lack of traditional components of mimetic art such as realistic perspective, application of local colors according to light and shade, and loyal depiction of the subject matter in an almost photographic sense. Misinterpreting, denying or blurring these characteristics unfortunately became a way of proclaiming the superiority of new tendencies in Turkish art and the western figurative visual tradition was promoted with an air of salvation pumped in many history texts

The result, which can also be considered the undeniable proof for the success of the taste transplant mentioned here, is that a 14 year-old Turkish boy/girl can name you 5 famous painters from the Eurocentric tradition while he/she would remain mute to similar questions regarding Ottoman manuscript painters and calligraphers.

¹ Tekelioglu, Orhan. The rise of a spontaneous synthesis: the historical background of Turkish popular music. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1996.

² Tekeli, İlhan. Excerpts from Tekeli's *Modernization Project: A Mega Narrative for the Turkish Experience*, 2003. (prepared by Uğur Akıncı). Retrieved October 8, 2004, from http://tork.blogspot.com/Tekeli_Modernity_Project.html#anchor3

³ Tekelioglu, Orhan. The rise of a spontaneous synthesis: the historical background of Turkish popular music. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1996.

⁴ Gökalp, Ziya. *Turkish nationalism and western civilization: Selected essays from Ziya Gökalp*. (Trans. and Ed. N. Berkeş). New York: Columbia University Press, 1959.

⁵ Ataturk was known to be a reader of Gokalp's theories and in a speech, he recognized Gokalp as the "father of his ideas."

⁶ Göle, Nilufer. *Melez desenler: İslam ve modernlik üzerine*. (2nd Ed.). İstanbul: Metis, 2002.

⁷ *Alaturka* is the Turkish spelling of a European Term "alla turca" which means "Turkish style" in English and *Alafranga* corresponds to "Foreign style."

⁸ O'Connell, John Morgan. Fine art, fine music: controlling Turkish taste at the fine arts academy in 1926. *Yearbook for Traditional Music*. International Council for Traditional Music, 2000.

⁹ Göle, Nilufer.

¹⁰ Safak, Elif. Dünya şehirleri ve İstanbul (World cities and Istanbul). *Zaman* online database. Retrieved March 13, 2007 from <http://www.zaman.com.tr/webapp-tr/yazar.do?yazino=512290>

¹¹ Yavuz, Hilmi. *İdeal "Osmanlı" yok*. (Ideal "Ottoman" does not exist). Cogito,19. Yapi Kredi, 1999.

¹² On page 523 in the second volume of "Turk Dili," Falih Rifki Atay wrote the article "Yeni Yazı" in which he reported Mustafa Kemal saying "we should either finish this in three months or never do it."

¹³ Meric, Cemil. *Magaradakiler* (13th Ed.). İstanbul: İletisim, 2006.

¹⁴ Tekelioglu, Orhan.

¹⁵ O'Connell, John Morgan.

¹⁶ Tekelioglu, Orhan.

¹⁷ Preziosi, Donald. *Rethinking art history: Meditations on a coy science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

¹⁸ I use "grand narrative" here synonymous to Lyotard's (1992) concept of meta-narrative. According to Lyotard, a meta-narrative means, in a modernist sense, a story or narrative that legitimizes an idea which is presumed to have great generality and represents a final and apodictic truth. If something is claimed to be apodictic then this something, again in the modernist sense of the word, is absolutely true and knowable without doubt.

¹⁹ Tunc cited in Tansuğ, Sezer. *Gelenek ışığında çağdaş sanat*. İstanbul: İz, 1997.

²⁰ The word "Orientalist" here refers to the following simplistic definition: Orientalism describes a tendency to portray the Near and Middle East in ways which appealed to the assumptions, tastes, fantasies, politics, and prejudices of Western audiences.

²¹ Necipoğlu, Gulru. *The Topkapi scroll: geometry and ornament in Islamic architecture*. Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities, 1995.