

Chapter XIX

The Many Gates of Ottoman Art*

The point of this paper is to consider Ottoman art from the outside: what is the interest of Ottoman art to any theory of the history of art or to the aesthetic impulses of men and women everywhere and anywhere? The question is all the more pertinent and important since the four “great” centuries of Ottoman art and culture, from *c.* 1400 to *c.* 1800, are times during which the world underwent truly extraordinary changes, from the discovery of America to the French Revolution, from Masaccio to David, Alberti to Boulée, Gutenberg to Newton, and so on. The issue is not whether or not these changes affected the Ottomans or whether the Ottomans contributed to them, although both questions have been raised in the past. The question is rather: since the Ottoman empire and therefore an Ottoman art existed and, to a large degree, flourished during these centuries, what did their existence mean to a changing world? And I dedicate these remarks to a very old friend, Doğan Kuban, with whom I have argued and disagreed for some thirty-five years, but from whose lively imagination, insatiable curiosity about everything everywhere, and especially intellectual integrity, I have learned so much about Turkey, the Turks and the Ottomans.

Following a pattern borrowed from the classical Persian lyrical poetry so prized at the Ottoman court, I propose that there were seven gates to Ottoman art, to which I have given unpoetic names: Inner, Outer, Satellite, Imported, Collecting, Intermediary, Aesthetic. I shall elaborate on each one of them through a few examples and then conclude with a broader program of thinking about Ottoman art. I shall ask questions rather than provide answers and propose directions for thought and work rather than establish formal paths for investigation.

* Dedicated to Doğan Kuban, friend and colleague of many years. First published in *Art Turc/Turkish Art*, tenth International Congress of Turkish Art (Geneva, 1999), pp. 19–26.

Inner

What I mean by “inner” is what most research on Ottoman, and for that matter on any other, art has been: an explanation of its creativity within its own context. And much has been done and is being done to elucidate everything from [20] the evolution of mosque architecture to changes in the taste of patronage and the varieties of costume and ceramics. The inner workings of Ottoman art are, for the most part, the proper concern of the specialist, but they can also be important for broader issues of the study of forms. I will give two examples.

The first is the best-known one and involves the Ottoman dome. Doğan Kuban strikingly defined Sinan’s domes as simultaneously organic exercises in geometry and reflections of man’s life as the basic module of conception and composition.¹ The uniquely Ottoman transformations of the dome deal with a form which may or may not have had a consistent single history going back to Eskimo igloos or to reed-covered huts, which may or may not have had consistent symbolic meanings or practical functions, but which was certainly part of an architectural language prevalent from Central Asia or India to the Atlantic and beyond. The reasons for the Ottoman achievement become almost immaterial in the broader philosophical question whether, like the Baroque dome of Western Europe, the technical purity and the abstraction of the Sinanian dome are not ultimate and final developments of domes to the point where the form can be neither modified nor simplified any more. I shall return shortly to another aspect of this characteristic of the classical Ottoman dome, but, in the meantime, my contention is that this dome is philosophically important in that, by exhausting its structural possibilities, it has, in a way, escaped history.

My second example of inner “treasure” is Matrakçı’s *Beyan-i Menazil-i Sefer*, the illustrations dated in 1537 of a description of Süleyman’s expedition of 1533–36 in Iraq. Much has been written about these illustrations. Scholars have tried to identify and explain individual places, to reconstruct cities in the sixteenth century, to establish conventions for representing different types of buildings, to define the semiotic value of the visual terms used (are they signs or symbols or depictions?). Did Matrakçı work from memory or had he made sketches? How were pictorial conventions for the representation of architecture and of nature transformed? New questions or problems arise every time one opens the publication of the manuscript.² This is unusual enough, but it is not the point I wish to make about these images. Their importance for Ottoman studies is self-evident, but their interest lies in something much more complicated.

¹ D. Kuban, “The Style of Sinan’s Architecture,” *Muqarnas*, 4 (1987).

² H. G. Yurdaydin, *Matrakçı’s Beyan-i Menazil* (Ankara, 1976).

For instance, there are no personages in them and the only living beings are a few animals, unevenly visible in the pictures according to a rhythm which does not make very good sense. The absence of people gives to all the cities and buildings a deserted, dead, feeling, or else they appear as toys assembled to resemble some sort of reality (Aleppo's citadel, for instance), but which could not possibly evoke that reality. The representation of the mausoleum of Oljaytu in Sultaniyeh does not *look* like the actual building, but evokes its size, brilliance of decoration, numerous corner towers, and many other details [21] which are not supposed to make the viewer identify a specific building he has never seen and never will see, but to let the viewer's imagination operate in recalling the glories of Ilkhanid princes made visible to Suleyman. The arrangement of the city of Khoy may suggest a city with trees between houses arranged in neat rows, but may also indicate that this particular city was different from other cities or that all cities are different from each other. We may never know what the original expectation of these images was, but the fascination of Matrakçı's paintings is that, just as with Sinan's domes (but without their technical quality), the images which are given still provide a range of possible interpretations, they open up the onlooker's field of vision and enrich him with visions and questions on the fundamental issue of how the human eye and memory recognize an architecture they has never seen and how they interpret it. These images are at least interesting as specific documents and most fascinating as examples for any theory of representation.

Outer

My "outer" gate has not been as popular in recent years as it was in the past. It consists in identifying and elaborating on the impact of Ottoman art outside of the empire's boundaries. The psychological make-up of the past two or three decades has seen something foolish, at times even embarrassing, in arguing whether St Peter or the Selimiye had better domes, or why the traditional French painter Van Loo represented "The Concert of the Sultan" as a wonderfully silly European costume party. The large series of allegedly Turkish women or of aristocratic men and women dressed up in Ottoman or Indian clothes remains as an interesting illustration of various Western European psychological problems which will culminate in the more dubious "Orientalism" of the nineteenth century. At its most benign, the *turquerie* was the acknowledgement of a quality possessed by the material culture of several Asian traditions, and so-called "Turkish" themes predominated for a while because the Ottoman empire was closer than China or India, and because there existed a whole intermediary world of Christians and Jews who were fully part of the Ottoman world, yet who had a privileged connection with Western Europe.

However one is to deal with the detail of this rich body of information in many media, from many lands, and over 300 years, the broad problem is this. There is nothing new about Western Europe finding its arts of luxury in the Muslim world; the phenomenon is as early as the eighth century of our era. But, whereas the earlier instances can be explained by the low level of Western technology, this is no longer true in the Baroque age. We are dealing, therefore, with a decision of taste or, possibly, of economic opportunities. Did the economics of manufacturing and selling textiles, ceramics and other luxury objects in the Ottoman empire affect their export to external markets, like Korean or Japanese cars today? Or is it, as for Jaguars or Mercedes, a European need for expensive exotica that was involved? But what was the nature of that need? What are its impulses? Some combination [22] of taste and economics is probably involved, but the subject certainly merits the attention of historians (for instance, how conscious were the Ottomans of the value of their products elsewhere? Did they, like Chinese textile and ceramic makers, create certain wares or silks for export only?), of social and economic historians of the West, and especially of all those who can see the broader spectrum of cultural history. For, in this “outer” gate, the Ottoman world plays a curious role which is partly typological – one of many forms of exoticism – and partly unique – the Turk is not the Chinaman and the *turquerie* is not the *chinoiserie*. Why the differences?

Satellite

The third gate would have been called “provincial” only a few years ago. I prefer to call it “satellite” now on the possibly mistaken assumption that there is more dignity in being a satellite than a provincial. The silliness of this statement underlines something of considerable importance, which is that what can be called the Turkish artistic expression was transmitted and extended over many territories. The major instrument for that transmission was the Ottoman empire. Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, the whole Levant, Iraq, and all the countries of the Balkans are covered with buildings copied from or inspired by Istanbul architecture; clothes and objects as well as the terminology of visual and material forms are often Turkish; cooking as well as other practices of daily life acquired an Ottoman taste. All this is well known and it is important to realize that the monuments of that art have now become signs and symbols of local Bosnian or Syrian national heritage, not remains of Turkish or Ottoman taste.

The historian or the critic is faced with an interesting dilemma of our time, which is whether the chronologically correct definition of an Ottoman art independent of its ethnic – Turkish or other – components should take precedence over the politically correct definition of national and ethnic

pride and allegiance. Should a mosque in Plovdiv be called Bulgarian, Ottoman, or Turkish? Can it be all three?

A further complication is that, while the Ottoman phenomenon is well known, there is another Turkish “satellite” formation which is now beginning to emerge again, even though it had been badly damaged by the tragic history of this century. I mean the Mongol or Tatar satellization of Northern Asia and Eastern Europe. In Crimea, the Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Chechenya, the lands of the Volga Tatars, southern Siberia, Kazakhstan and Transoxiana, the Tarim basin, there is a whole world of architectural and material forms which derived from the great Timurid syntheses of the fifteenth century and which was carried out by Turkic rulers and ethnic groups. I have only just begun to realize how narrow-minded has been our Mediterranean or even Central Asian conception of the arts involving Turks of different kinds. Already in the twelfth century distinctions between Turks and Turkmens implied a distinction between two traditions, one which gravitated toward major centers of power [23] – Baghdad, Herat, Samarkand, Istanbul – the other which spread everywhere and often split into all sorts of local entities. There is here, once again, a fascinating broad topic for further research and intellectual refinement on the part of some energetic young man or woman. Several separate orbits of artistic life can be connected to the political, linguistic and social presence of Turks in the post-Timurid era. Whether there are genetic ties between these orbits remains to be established.

Imports

I shall be brief on the gate of “imports,” because it is the easiest to deal with. Like any art, Ottoman art was affected by the arts of other lands. Western Europe appears already in details of representation in the sixteenth century and in architecture later on. But the real issue is not to make a list of imported details. It is much rather to note the relative paucity of Western European themes, techniques, or ideas in most of Ottoman art before 1800. The existence of a Turkish Baroque does not mean copying or imitating Baroque forms from Vienna or Italy; it means, much more interestingly, transformations of Ottoman forms in ways which may well reflect a general *Zeitgeist* rather than the direct impact of Western ideas or of a Western taste. The point is interesting both for an overall understanding of what “baroque” means and for the inner operation of Ottoman taste and culture. Another side of the issue lies also in the existence of the two illustrated *Sulnames* with their representations of festivals in a manner so common in European representational art and yet without any suggestion of Western impact. With the Ottomans, it seems, the art of representing ostentatious performances was for limited internal use only – or was it?

The second obvious foreign import in Ottoman art is from China and a specific category of motifs was called “çini.” In contrast with the subdued relationship to European art, Chinese forms and techniques appear clearly in the designs of ceramics and textiles, occasionally in certain categories of drawings, especially of dragons.³ The problem is not that these Chinese motifs existed but why they are present. It is not that designers and technicians of Ottoman times could not develop their own techniques and designs. It is rather that something in the very make-up of Ottoman culture required an acknowledged Chinese component. The assertion of Chinese superiority in the arts of representation was an old cliché of Islamic culture which developed together with the Iranian myths of the tenth or eleventh century. But, while this may explain the sources of the idea in Ottoman taste, it does not provide a psychological explanation for its continuing presence. This explanation lies, I believe, in the choices every culture, even a relatively closed one like the Ottoman, makes about what will be its own exoticism. And within everyone’s need for exoticism, there are gradations. [24]

And then there is, especially in painting after some fifteenth-century examples in architecture, the relationship of Ottoman art to Iran. The issue is not whether the palette of Ottoman miniatures, the scale of their personages in relationship to nature, the composition of groups and other details of technical and formal analysis should be given an Iranian or an Ottoman nationality or genetic structure. These distinctions are as useful or as unimportant as those which distinguish Florence from Siena or Bologna or Bruges from Antwerp: they are primarily museum labels with occasional references to patronage. To any external eye, the common ways of organizing space, depicting people and treating a subject far outweigh differences. But, in dealing with Iran, I am less sure that terms like “impact” or “influence” are pertinent. Rather, just as the Arabic alphabet came with the faith of Islam to acquire unique Ottoman expressions, so did a process for representation developed in Mongol Iran. These features were, I would argue, part of the genetic structure of Ottoman art, not temporary mutants.

It is intriguing that the mere consideration of “imports” into Ottoman art leads in each case to entirely different art-historical concerns: parallel structures, exotic needs, common language. This gate, like the following one, illustrates a point made by Kuban many years ago at a symposium we attended together: the Muslim world whose most powerful force was the Ottoman world was the only cultural entity to be in physical touch with every part of the African and Eurasian continents.⁴ But all lands were not

³ S. C. Welch, “Two drawings, a Tile, a Dish, and a Pair of Scissors,” in R. Ettinghausen, ed., *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum* (New York, 1972).

⁴ The occasion was a symposium in Dammam in Saudi Arabia held in the late 1970s. I am unable to lay hands on a copy of its proceedings.

equally present in Ottoman consciousness, another topic for meditation and investigation.

Collecting

The gate of “collecting” has been recognized since the Skira volume on *Treasures of Turkey* published in 1967.⁵ The Ottoman treasure received and kept gifts from many lands and it became as a result the repository of objects and works of art from all over the world. Furthermore, the looting of the treasures of defeated enemies also enriched Ottoman possessions. There is no particular originality in that, as the maintenance of treasures is a characteristic of all empires. It is in fact reasonable to argue that the artistic possessions of most rulers were generally alien and not native and that native productions were kept in courts either for immediate use (clothes or dishes) or for gifts to visitors, foreign or not. The more complicated problem is to evaluate the impact, if any, of these treasures. Around the albums, it seems clear that original Chinese paintings [25] were used as models for other paintings and drawings or as exercises. Are there other examples of use of objects by princes, their households, or artisans attached to the *naqqashhane*? Another question to emerge is whether anyone at the Ottoman court ever initiated acquisitions for the treasure in the manner of German, Swedish, or Russian rulers at that time. I argued some years ago that the *Suleymanname* reflected in its illustrations the relationship between the sultan and the establishment from which the grand viziers of his time emerged, because the book was an internal gift.⁶ But I am not sure that a pattern of internal gifts reasonable for the sixteenth century is still valid for the seventeenth or eighteenth. In short, the fact of collecting works from many lands and for many purposes is in itself an important subject of investigation with ramifications into social and cultural history. But it is not a chronologically stable phenomenon and it contains many variants.

Intermediary

The sixth gate derives from the fact that between 1453 (actually 1517 and the conquest of Egypt is probably a better starting point) and Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798, the Ottoman empire was visually, culturally, psychologically and intellectually the only port of entry into the Muslim world. This single entry affected much of the knowledge Europe in general and scholarship in particular had of the Islamic world. The example I will

⁵ E. Akurgal et al., *Treasures from Turkey* (Geneva, 1967).

⁶ O. Grabar, “An exhibition of high Ottoman art,” *Muqarnas*, 7 (1989).

use is that of Louis-François Cassas, a draftsman and painter attached to the French embassy in Istanbul, who was sent on a mission to Syria, Palestine and Egypt, and who came back with drawings and paintings which have been the subject of a recent catalog and exhibition.⁷

In his work and in the work of many others, an Ottoman conception of the Muslim world became the prism which affected several centuries of knowledge about the Arab world, Iran, Byzantium, the classical world other than Rome, and all ancient Near Eastern histories. Some effects of this prism are silly, like the turbans and robes on the artificial groups in so many pictures. Others are more significant, like the assumption of a *shari'ah* based Sunnism as the norm for the Muslim world, or, in the arts, the aesthetic importance given to calligraphy, engineering logic and structural simplicity. Even when, in the nineteenth century, Andalusia, Egypt, Iran and Muslim India did become entries into very different parts of the Muslim world, it was in Istanbul that the manuscripts and archives were kept, and few scholars of any aspect of Islamic art can manage without leaning on the collections established by the Ottomans and on their vision of the Muslim world available in Istanbul. And it is the much-simplified and reduced Ottoman mosque which has become, from Indonesia to New York, the sign of Muslim presence and the symbol of the true faith. [26]

What is involved in all of this is in fact a very complicated process whereby the imperial and ideological transformations of the sixteenth century, with the incorporation of Jerusalem, Cairo, Mecca, Medina and Baghdad within the space of a dynasty of Turkish ghazis and with their control over an enormous population of non-Muslims, created an Ottoman threshold for access to Islam, to the sources of Judaism and Christianity, and to the ancient cultures of Western Asia. It is easy to identify the threshold in practical ways (for instance, the politics of excavations in the nineteenth century); it is more difficult and more interesting to wonder how much it has affected the intellectual, academic and emotional make-up of all those outside of it who dealt with its space and of those who today are the heirs of that empire. Volney visited Syria and Egypt in the 1780s. Here was a bored Western intellectual who had inherited some money and wanted to improve his mind. His choices, he writes, were either to look at the future and take a trip to the Americas or to understand the past and go to the Ottoman empire.⁸ The implications of his dilemma and of his decision to go eastward are quite interesting. But, for our purposes, what is important is that the Ottoman empire was the guardian of Europe's past: it owned Athens, Jerusalem, the Pyramids and Babylon. In the nineteenth century, this

⁷ Annie Gilet, *Louis-François Cassas, 1756–1827* (Mainz and Tours, 1994). For further comments there are other examples; see Gereon Sievernich and Hendrik Budde, *Europa und der Orient, 800–1900* (Berlin, 1989).

⁸ C. F. Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Egypte* (Paris, 1807).

guardianship became part of the political struggles of the time, but how aware was the empire of this role before 1800?

Aesthetic

My last gate of or to Ottoman art is the “aesthetic” gate. The question is a fundamental one in two parts. One is by what criteria did the Ottoman world itself decide on the quality of the objects and monuments it sponsored, made, or used. The elaboration of an answer lies in some sort of equilibrium between philosophical and theological fashion in Ottoman thought, the make-up of the patronage, and the possibilities of the techniques employed. The other one is of a more universal importance. Can one identify and define the attraction, the pleasure, provided most exclusively by Ottoman art to the sensibilities of today? Are there visually potent values which are most particularly exemplified by works of Ottoman art?

The matter is relatively easy in architecture, where the geometry of construction and the typological standardization of forms have been mentioned more than once. Aesthetic issues are much more difficult to handle when one turns to the ceramics, textiles and ways of writing, which have constantly been collected and praised. Something in the best objects of Ottoman art elicits a sensuous response, whereby one wishes to touch them and/or to contemplate them. The more precise nature of this response still needs investigation and thought, possibly even the development of a particular aesthetic vocabulary. It is this particular gate that requires the most work, because the very nature of the issues it raises has not yet been fully identified.

