



## **ESSAYS: OSMAN HAMDI BEY NEW INTERPRETATIONS**

### **WHAT'S IN A NAME? OSMAN HAMDI BEY'S *GENESIS***

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Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910) is one of the most studied characters of late Ottoman cultural history. Quite a number of reasons can be invoked to explain this phenomenon, from Osman Hamdi's pioneering role in the arts to his striking character of a polymath, from his prolific artistic production to the relative dearth of any serious rival during his lifetime. The list could be extended *ad infinitum* and would be confirmed by what is one of the best indicators of public interest: the incredible market prices that his paintings have reached in the last ten years or so. This "overstudying" to which Osman Hamdi has been subjected is further characterized by a systematic disregard for historical context and a tendency to seek meaning in the artist's paintings. Every point in the artist's life becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: given a general knowledge of Osman Hamdi Bey's artistic, intellectual, and political inclinations, all it takes is a proper "reading" of one of his paintings to discover what was intended from the very beginning. The agenda, moreover, is rather limited: the discussion revolves around the question of whether or not Osman Hamdi Bey was an Orientalist, and if so, whether his Orientalism is comparable to that of his western contemporaries. The verdict is almost unanimous: he may have been Orientalist in style, but his intentions were quite different from that of European painters of the

same genre. Osman Hamdi Bey has always represented the Orient in a more dignified, respectful, accurate, and personal way, resulting in a major difference with his western counterparts, whose art sought to create an exotic, erotic, violent and timeless representation of the East.

This vision of Osman Hamdi Bey as an Orientalist “redeemed” by his patriotism has been used for almost a century now, starting with Adolphe Thalasso in 1911.<sup>1</sup> True, a few authors of the 1930s and 1940s, at the height of Kemalist nationalism, have considered Osman Hamdi Bey’s painting to have been of doubtful authenticity,<sup>2</sup> decadent,<sup>3</sup> or even corrupt,<sup>4</sup> but in the following decades, especially thanks to the biography Mustafa Cezar devoted to him in 1971,<sup>5</sup> he was again brought to the foreground as a major artist whose Orientalism was attenuated, excused, or even cancelled out by his national and/or local identity. This characterization has become the dominant paradigm and has been taken up by a number of authors with varying degrees of emphasis on Osman Hamdi Bey’s autonomy in his artistic and intellectual production. İpek Aksüğür Duben saw in him a combination of empathy and reformism that differentiated him from western Orientalists, but also noted that he was a victim of the *Tanzimat* dilemma between East and West, a fact was reflected in the coexistence of bi- and tri-dimensionality in his paintings.<sup>6</sup> Ussama Makdisi has characterized him as an active promoter of a form of Ottoman Orientalism directed against the peripheral populations of the Empire,<sup>7</sup> while Zeynep Çelik has insisted on his capacity to “speak back to Orientalist discourse,”<sup>8</sup> suggesting that his use of Orientalist forms may have been directed against western Orientalism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thalasso 1911, 21-22.

<sup>2</sup> Adil 1937, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Dranas 1940, 137.

<sup>4</sup> Berk 1943, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Cezar 1971.

<sup>6</sup> Duben 1987; Duben 2007, 43-48. A rather similar stand was adopted by Germaner and İnankur (2002, 300-11).

<sup>7</sup> Makdisi 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Çelik 2002.

The most extreme statement in this direction is, without any doubt, Wendy Shaw's interpretation of Osman Hamdi Bey's paintings as a form of "subversion of Orientalism," one step further from Çelik's "resistance," in a conscious desire to undermine the very essence of this ideology by seemingly agreeing with it through stylistic emulation:

Posturing as admiration, mimicry often masks the seeds of political resistance. The more European Osman Hamdi appeared in dress, profession, and painterly expression, the more his activities aimed to counterbalance the cultural effects of European dominance over the interpretation of antiquities in their historical and nationalist context. The similarity between his multifarious professional activities and those of European institutions designed to present the Orient as territory in need of colonial expansion camouflaged his subversive anti-imperialist and Ottoman-nationalist agenda. At the same time, the appropriation of the Orientalist gaze allowed Osman Hamdi to use his paintings as expressions of the political motivations and frustrations behind his activities as the director of the Ottoman Imperial Museum.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most telling example of this bias is the case of the famous *Mihrab*, depicting a woman sitting rather stiffly in a bright yellow décolleté dress on a Koran lectern, her back to a highly ornate tiled *mihrab* (fig. 1). At her feet, a dozen large books, all manuscripts, lay strewn on the floor, while a thin smoke rises from a gilt brass incense burner. This is, no doubt, one of Osman Hamdi Bey's most enigmatic paintings, which has provoked a number of speculative interpretations about its possible meaning(s). Interestingly, however, Wendy Shaw's take on this work is specifically geared towards her concerns: museums, heritage, and nation building.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously Shaw has a very specific reading of the painting: what counted most were the artifacts and the setting as illustrations of the painter's concern with heritage, and the sublimation of a female image as a symbol of secularism and as a national metaphor. For most other interpreters of this image, the emphasis was much more specifically on the blasphemous and "feminist" message the painting conveyed. Holy books thrown all over the floor, trampled by a

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<sup>9</sup> Çelik 1996, 204.

<sup>10</sup> Shaw 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

woman in a bright yellow décolleté dress, sitting on the very stand that should be devoted to holding the Koran, and turning her back to a prayer niche: it is probably difficult to imagine a more offensive way of attacking the very foundations of Islamic tradition in the name of promoting female independence and autonomy. That is exactly what the Eczacıbaşı Virtual Museum tries to prove, although without explicitly accusing the artist of blasphemy:

In this section we will try to analyze the most discussed work of art of Osman Hamdi Bey. Mrs. V. Belgin Demirsar in her study wrote that “when all of these are put aside ... and the work is analyzed as a picture we can say that it is very successful. Anatomically the figure was correctly pictured and the essential purpose of Osman Hamdi was this.” My interpretation is that Osman Hamdi’s themes of the “BOOK,” of “BOOK READING,” and of the “WOMAN” are contrasted and compared with each other and that the artist puts his preference on the side of women, worldly life and pleasures in this work. The artist was 59 years old when he completed this work and his wife Naile Hanım was 45 years old. The work, dated 1901, is in a way greeting the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where “the importance of women” increased enormously. The woman in the picture is quite young and this makes us assume that Osman Hamdi might have used an old picture while drawing the figure. The single candlestick and its huge candle makes the viewer think about Freudian sexual interpretations and in the foreground the incense box scattering fumes symbolizes the opposite pole of spiritualism. The artist seeking the “secret of life” in books in many of his works now seems to have decided that the thing that gives meaning to life are “women and what they symbolize”... The dark stain of the altar’s niche continues with the dark tones of the volumes at the bottom and of the carpet, then the orange/yellow dress of the woman shows her pink-white flesh, the white stain of a single candle on the left and the different shades of white in the open pages of the books balance each other.

The artist who in his dedications to his daughter wrote her name as “Nazly” (pronouncing it in French) and talked to his children in French exhibits the identity of a person who has adopted western ways and thought, but lives in the Ottoman society, and all this shows in the iconography he has chosen. The importance of the “Altar” is the clarity with which it shows all this.<sup>12</sup>

I will refrain from commenting on the reference to the phallic candle, or from listing similar candles in practically every interior painted by Osman Hamdi; nor will I insist on the prophetic kind of feminism that is attributed to him through this work. Despite all its obvious shortcomings, this description has the merit of summarizing in compressed form, almost like a

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<sup>12</sup> Haşim Nur Gürel, “The Altar of Osman Hamdi,” <http://www.sanalmuze.org/arastirarakogrenmekeng/osmanhamdi.htm>. I have made corrections to the English text.

caricature, what Turkish scholarship has had to say about this painting in the past four or five decades. Insisting on the fact that it represented “an attractive woman sitting straight up with holy books at her feet,” Aksüğür Duben discovered in it a “radical and rebellious attitude.”<sup>13</sup> Sezer Tansuğ was less appreciative, and saw it as an extreme and shocking case of Orientalism: “No Orientalist painter in Europe has been so far as to seat a young Armenian female model on a Koran stand in a mosque mihrab and to spread pages from the Holy Koran at her feet.”<sup>14</sup> The list could be extended to include non-Turkish scholarship that tends to repeat the same arguments.<sup>15</sup> Some of the details used as evidence may seem obvious; some are much less. Is this a painting of his wife, a Frenchwoman, or is this woman Armenian? Could it be that the slightly protruding belly is an indication of a pregnancy? Are the books scattered over the floor really Korans? And most of all, are we really sure that this painting was always called the *Mihrab*?

Perhaps a good way to start would be to look back at what Osman Hamdi’s biographer *cum* hagiographer, Mustafa Cezar, had to say about this particular painting:

It seems that with this interesting painting, the most meaningful and intriguing of all his works, Osman Hamdi Bey, by placing a young woman in the midst of objects of great value to mankind, wanted to symbolize the privileged status of love and affection. As to the incense burner and its smoke, they indicate the warmth of these feelings and by pointing in their direction they give greater clarity to the painting’s meaning.

Apart from having been treated with a rather bold symbolism for its time, this painting reveals the artist’s tolerant attitude toward religious matters; however we have not been able to determine what name Hamdi Bey had given it. All we have been able to discover, thanks to one of his grandsons, Cemal Bark,<sup>16</sup> is that the model who sat for this painting was the daughter of an Armenian housemaid.

This painting, which tries to explain the most powerful feeling shared by all mankind, and, from the perspective of men, the place of women in the world of the sublime at the center of these feelings, **we have chosen to name *Mihrab*.** (my

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<sup>13</sup> Duben 2007, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Tansuğ 1991, 108.

<sup>15</sup> “Hamdi’s shocking *Mihrab*, in which a young woman in a décolleté dress sits in a *rahle* or koran-stand in the mihrab of a mosque, with religious books scattered under her feet” (Denny 1991, 165); “*Mihrab*, one of his best-known works, painted in 1901, shows a buxom woman in a tight-fitting European-style dress seated on a *rahle*, or folding stand for manuscripts of the Koran, in front of a tiled mihrab” (Aziz 2004, 53).

<sup>16</sup> Cemal Sait Bark (1911-1976) was the son of Osman Hamdi Bey’s daughter Fatma.

emphasis) In doing so, we have taken into consideration the fact that *mihrab* means “the eyebrows of the beloved” and “the abode of hope,” but our readers will perhaps find a more appropriate name for it.<sup>17</sup>

Cezar’s commentary on the painting may not be of great clarity or quality, but the reference to its christening by the author is a precious admission of how these things were done, down to the bewildering suggestion that someone else might come up with a better name and replace the former one. It appears, then, that the entire art historical community has been content with (in most cases, probably unwittingly) taking for granted a name that was coined in the early 1970s by one of their colleagues. Cezar may have truly had difficulty accessing the sources that would have revealed the “real” name of the painting, but that is no longer the case today. The most basic research will soon reveal that this painting was exhibited for the first time in London, in May 1903, at the Royal Academy Exhibition under entry number 135. Its name had nothing to do with the tiled *mihrab* in the background: the painting was called *La Genèse*, in French, or in other words *Genesis*.<sup>18</sup> This, I think, puts an end to the speculation surrounding the question of whether the woman depicted in this painting was pregnant or not. Nor is *Genesis* the kind of name that might have been imposed by the organizers or anybody other than Osman Hamdi Bey himself; it is clear, then, that his intention was to organize the whole scene around the central character of a young pregnant woman.

Who could that woman have been? The idea that he would have ‘retrospectively’ painted his wife’s latest pregnancy, almost ten years earlier, is not very convincing; and it is all the less so when one considers that the woman bears little, if any, resemblance with his wife Marie/Naile. The suggestion that he might have painted the maid’s daughter is tempting, if only because it is reported by a family member, albeit born ten years after the painting. Yet, then again, this does

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<sup>17</sup> Cezar 1971, 324.

<sup>18</sup> *The Academy Notes* 1903, 15; “The Royal Academy” 1903; Graves 1905, 364.

not look like a common practice for a painter who is known to have almost exclusively used himself and family members as models. It seems, therefore, that one should look a little bit closer at Osman Hamdi's close relatives, in the hope of finding a young (and preferably pregnant) woman who might fit the role. Indeed, there is one very good candidate: his own daughter, Leyla, born in or around 1880, and who would give birth to her first child, a little girl by the name of Nimet, on 1 May, 1902. It is more than likely, then, that the young woman in a bright yellow dress with a slight potbelly was no other than his daughter, whom he had chosen to glorify in a highly symbolic painting.

Interestingly, however, and despite our present-day conviction that the painting was of a shocking and revolutionary nature, contemporaries seem to have been much less impressed. The *Academy Notes* had not much to say, except for a very descriptive comment of the scene depicted:

In yellow-lemon Oriental robe, sitting upright in an x-shaped seat on a dais. Behind her is a blue tiled Cairene wall-background; a censer and a number of Arabic books are scattered at the feet.<sup>19</sup>

Surprisingly, every detail was mentioned, but there seemed to be absolutely no consciousness of the possible implications of the setting and props: the robe, generally considered to be western by Turkish scholars, was labeled as Oriental; the Koran stand had become an x-shaped seat, the mihrab a "blue tiled Cairene wall," and the books were simply qualified as "Arabic." Apparently even less impressed, and probably inspired by the woman's rather stiff posture, *Punch* also took notice of the painting, calling it "the Genesis of Aunt Sally," with reference to the target doll in a pub throwing game.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *The Academy Notes* 1903, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Lemon et al. 1903, 322.

Was the British public too blasé to pay attention to the implications of this image? Were they just oblivious of the meanings we now ascribe to the many symbols it put forward? Or was the painting just not powerful enough to attract the attention of viewers in the midst of hundreds of other works of art? There may be some truth to all of the above, but we do know of at least one comment that did consider the painting to be “startling.” The problem, however, is that the astonishment was due to rather different reasons, and had to be contextualized within the larger framework of a comparison between western and eastern art. What triggered this comment was the “lifelessness” and “lack of emotion” displayed by the otherwise skilled “Monsieur Lybaert, of Ghent,” another artist at the exhibition.<sup>21</sup> That was when Osman Hamdi’s *Genesis* came in, almost as the antithesis of the Belgian artist’s work.

Compare with this the startling “Genèse” of the Turkish painter, Osman Hamdy Bey, of Constantinople—a surprising work to come from a Turk, and still more surprising as a picture accepted by the Academy. A woman of some depravity of air, clad in violent yellow, sits high against a powerful blue-tiled background, and around her is strewn a number of Persian books flung, half destroyed, upon the ground. But after a moment’s contemplation the shock suffered by the spectator appears to pass away, and we are enabled to appreciate the skill displayed in the qualities of tones within the violence of tint. How colourless must our Western tints appear to M. Hamdy’s Eastern sun-tryed eyes! Even Mr. MacBeth’s vigorous “Pirate’s Wife,” virile in colour and handling, yet instinctively refined and artistic in arrangement, may strike as tame the painter of the Orient; and the “Flower of Wifely Patience,” the graceful Grissel, or Mr. Joy, with its graceful lines and delicate flesh, must appear a vision of another and a sadly weakly world.<sup>22</sup>

The surprise did not come from the subject treated, and none of the religious references seemed to have been perceived by the critic. Instead, the shock was due to the woman’s “depravity” and, most of all, to the violence of the colors and contrasts, which were attributed to an Oriental taste, the rawness of which was thought to be particularly appealing to a western audience tired of the blandness of its own art. Three years later, when Osman Hamdi was proposed — together with

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<sup>21</sup> Théophile Lybaert (1848-1927) had exhibited a painting named *Life’s Frailty* (Graves 1905 5: 119.

<sup>22</sup> “The Royal Academy,” 1903.



Auguste Rodin — as a possible foreign member of the Academy, he was remembered as “Osmond (*sic*) Hamdy, the Turk, whose strange ‘La Genèse’ was on the line in Gallery III, at the 1903 Academy.”<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, there seems to be a certain consistency in the way Osman Hamdi’s paintings were received in the West. Generally speaking, there was always a more or less explicit emphasis on the fact that he was a “Turk,” *i.e.* a Muslim, and therefore someone whose inclination and talent should be considered with a blend of curiosity and admiration. When it came to the artistic nature of his work, however, most of the critics agreed on the importance of the combined effect of color, detail, and a form of knowledge that was assumed to be inherent to his identity as an Oriental. This is what comes out of the *Genesis* commentary, and will be followed by similar arguments in practically every one of the rare reviews he got for his later paintings. In 1906, his *Young Emir Reading* (fig. 2) was evidently seen as an Orientalist piece, considering that *The Times* declared that it was “almost as good as a good Jérôme (*sic*).”<sup>24</sup> Another critic gave a more detailed list of its merits:

Conspicuous in the fourth room is an oriental picture by an Oriental—the “Jeune Emir à l’étude,” by Osman Hamdy Bey—showing the subject reclining at full length on his stomach, supporting his shoulders by his elbows, and reading a substantial tome a few inches from his nose. The position of the figure is truly oriental in its entire lack of strenuousness and its suggestion, to western eyes, of mild discomfort. Artistically the chief attraction of the work is its extraordinarily finished craftsmanship. There is not a square inch on the canvas that has not received the most minute attention; the robe, the skin, the interior surroundings, are masterpieces of complete imitation. The actuality of the blue tiles at the back challenges that of Sir Alma Tadema’s marble. What is its artistic merit we are as unable to guess as we are to deny the months of care and labour it must have involved.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “Royal Academy Elections” 1906, 66.

<sup>24</sup> “The Royal Academy,” *The Times*, May 5, 1906.

<sup>25</sup> “The Royal Academy. I,” *The Speaker*, May 12, 1906, 138.

Another shorter commentary went in the same direction: “a curious and effective picture, remarkable for its precise reproduction of the blue tiles and other accessories of the divan.”<sup>26</sup> It was clear that the *Young Emir* had received a treatment very similar to the *Genesis*: little, if any, concern for what we consider to be the most striking element of the picture, the casual reading of the Koran, but a great degree of appreciation of the painstaking craftsmanship and its corollary, an assumed “cultural” accuracy that could compensate for the lack of true artistic merit. The longish review he received in 1909 for his last participation in the London Exhibition with two paintings, *The Theologian* (fig. 3) and *The Children’s Tomb*, summarizes to a large extent the way in which Osman Hamdi’s artistic production was received and perceived in the West:

Among the *genre* pictures, one re-discovery is to be made of great interest, the work of Osman Hamdy Bey, who exhibited one picture, “Jeune Emir à l’Etude,” in 1906. A Constantinopolitan, he wisely treats Oriental subjects in a manner reminding Englishmen of Lewis. He has the fine Oriental feeling for the harmony of vivid colour more properly Persian than Turkish, and he is capable of a dignified pathos not to be found in Lewis’s work. The graduated harmony in his lesser work, “Le Théologien,” from the brilliant turquoise wall-tiles, the clear yellow of the figure’s silken coat and the gold diapered white cotton of his shirt, through the mother-of-pearl ornaments of the Koran-stand, to the faded hues of the worn prayer-rug on which it stands, could only have been seen by an Oriental; while the material of the highly-glazed wall-tiles is exceedingly skillfully given according to European methods. He fails here in the flesh tints and modelling of the face, but succeeds much better in the figure of his other, finer picture, “Le Tombeau des Enfants.” In this it would be difficult to surpass the richness and harmony of his colouring. It is comparable to some of the finest periods of Persian illumination. The full, purplish-ultramarine of the wall-tiles, with their neutral tinted frieze, the brownish madder of the tablets depending from them, the little grey stone tombs, with their decorations in faint colour, the Persian leopard’s skin, the clear ochre of the rush-matting, the greyish ochre of the carved entry, with the note of red in the socket of the taper, and of sanguine in the roof of the entry, form a perfect harmony of brilliant contrasts. The material of the somewhat spoiled tiles, of the stonework, of the rush-matting, and of a covering to one of the tombs are admirably rendered. It is to be hoped that this beautiful and interesting example of hybrid art will not be allowed to leave this country.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dircks 1906, 164.

<sup>27</sup> “Burlington House. First Notice,” *The Academy*, May 1, 1909, 56.

The problem, then, is to try and make sense of the discrepancy between these contemporary views and most of the present-day interpretations of Osman Hamdi's work. This discrepancy can be taken at two different levels. First, in terms of the perception or not of a message "embedded" in the paintings: where art historians see several allegories and metaphors, (contemporary) western viewers (or at least critics) of the paintings saw only a quaint, curious, and unquestionably Oriental scene. Second, in terms of the nature of the artist's Orientalism: contrary to some recent views of resistance, rebellion, and subversion, western audiences did not seem to have felt in any way threatened or challenged by Osman Hamdi Bey's paintings. I believe that much of this difference can be attributed to the fact that present-day interpretations concentrate almost exclusively on the painter and his paintings, with little reflection on their reception and their audience. Indeed, I find it striking that most of the meanings and messages deciphered in his work are almost exclusively relevant to a "local" (Ottoman, Oriental, Turkish...) audience: museological metaphors, of the calls for preservation, of the secularist undertones, of the challenges to religious dogma, of the stress on books, of the glorification of women... This is what induces Wendy Shaw to conclude her study of Osman Hamdi's paintings by a discussion of the ways in which this subversive form of Orientalism was able to make it past Ottoman censorship and to avoid shocking Ottoman audiences.<sup>28</sup>

The problem, however, is that Osman Hamdi Bey practically never exhibited his work in his own country. The few instances where he did concerned a very limited number of paintings, none of which belonged to the group of "meaningful" scenes examined in the preceding pages. These paintings, on the contrary, were all — exclusively — presented to western audiences. The arguments behind the assumed messages become all the more difficult to sustain, as we have to assume either that Osman Hamdi's messages never really existed, or that he rather naively

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<sup>28</sup> Shaw 1999, 430-31.

expected them to work on a western audience. This last point in a way would lead us to Zeynep Çelik's conclusion about the efficacy of his struggle against Orientalism:

Despite several exhibitions of his work in Paris and at the world's fairs, Osman Hamdi's attempts to correct the epistemological status of Oriental representations remained overlooked in France and were not incorporated into art history's discourse on Orientalism until very recently.<sup>29</sup>

But what if there was no struggle? What if, on the contrary, Osman Hamdi's whole effort was geared towards pleasing a western audience by fulfilling most of their expectations? What if, after all, Osman Hamdi was really what western critics took him to be, a *peintre de genre* who had gradually found his calling in the depiction of Oriental scenes that shared a common grammar, rather than a common message? This common grammar could be summarized as bringing together one central figure in Oriental garb, a number of artifacts that help "document" the scene, and an architectural indoor space, always partial, that provided the right setting. The series consisted of no less than ten paintings exhibited thirteen times between 1902 and 1909. Perhaps the easiest, if somehow reductionist, way to reveal the remarkable consistency, and in some ways the repetitiveness, in Osman Hamdi's work during the last decade of his life, is to "deconstruct" each of these paintings and force their elements into a simple analytical table:

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<sup>29</sup> Çelik 1996, 204.

<b>Painting name and exhibition date(s)</b>	<b>Figure(s)</b>	<b>Costume</b>	<b>Props (in alphabetical order)</b>	<b>Setting</b>
<i>Theologian</i> Paris (1902), London (1909)	1 male	Oriental yellow religious	books, carpet, jug, Koran stand	Interior, tiles, niche, window
[ <i>Dervish at the</i> ] <i>Children's Tomb</i> Paris (1903), London (1909)	1 male	Oriental green religious	calligraphic inscriptions, candle, covers, lamp, slippers, stick	Interior, tiles, door, cenotaphs
<i>Genesis</i> London (1903)	1 female	hybrid yellow lay	books, calligraphic inscriptions, candle, ewer, Koran stand	Interior, tiles, prayer niche
<i>Miraculous Fountain</i> Paris (1904)	1 male	Oriental yellow lay	book, calligraphic inscriptions, incense burner, Koran box	Interior, tiles, niche, fountain
<i>Young Emir Reading</i> Paris (1905), London and Liverpool (1906)	1 male	Oriental yellow lay	books, calligraphic inscriptions, candle, carpet	Interior, tiles, niche
<i>Believer Counting his Rosary</i> Paris (1905)	1 male	Oriental yellow religious	slippers	Exterior, tiles, door
<i>Man with Tortoises</i> Paris (1906)	1 male	Oriental red religious	calligraphic inscriptions, kettledrum, reed flute, tongs, tortoises	Interior, tiles, window
<i>Cutting Edge of the Scimitar</i> Paris (1908), Berlin (1909)	2 males	Oriental red and blue lay	helmets, rifles, swords	Interior, marble capital

My impression, then, is rather that Osman Hamdi Bey knew exactly what he was doing, and that after a couple of decades of hesitations he had finally found a combination formula that ensured him almost foolproof success with a western audience, a perfect “*bonne pour l’Occident*” formula. There is really no point, then, in trying to “read” a message in every painting systematically. True, the way he treated his subjects was bound to be somewhat different from

that of western Orientalists. But should we really go as far as Zeynep Çelik does in attributing to him a conscious desire to promote a different image of the Orient?

In painting after painting, his men of religion, reading and discussing books, maintain their upright posture as an expression of their human dignity, against a background of meticulously articulated architectural details. Osman Hamdi's home scenes form a striking alternative to the myriad familiar and titillating views of harem and bath by French painters. Several of his works depict a couple in a tranquil domestic environment, the seated man being served coffee by the woman. While the hierarchical family structure is unquestioned, the man of the house is not the omnipotent, amoral sensual tyrant of European representations, enjoying his dominion over scores of women at his mercy and pleasure. Instead, a dialogue is offered that redefines the gender relationships of Orientalist paintings.<sup>30</sup>

Just as western, or for that matter French, Orientalism should not be reduced to its extreme expressions of sensuality and/or violence, it seems difficult to attribute to Osman Hamdi a systematic and conscious desire to promote the image of an enlightened Islam. True, his *Theologian* does look like a meditative Saint Jerome, and his other clerics do have an air of dignity about them; but does that make them really different from the other Oriental props and elements that give his paintings their character and exotic touch? In the case of women, too, while it is quite obvious that he has always carefully avoided any demeaning depiction of them, I am not exactly sure they really all build up towards a consistent "redefining of gender relationships in Orientalist paintings." Indeed many of his early paintings depict harem scenes, which, while never of a sensual or tyrannical nature, almost always implicitly point at polygamy and at some form of slavery by the number of women represented, and by the grooming and other menial tasks some of them perform. Moreover, I truly wonder if there is really an *essential* difference between the way western Orientalists "invented" Oriental scenes through a sort of photographic collage of unrelated characters and places, and the way in which Osman Hamdi Bey constructed some, in fact most, of his scenes: two music-playing odalisques in a mosque;

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

barely veiled women praying and reading in a mausoleum; a woman seated in a prayer niche; a dervish engaged in an incomprehensible activity involving tortoises on the upper floor of a mosque.

If one really wishes to understand Osman Hamdi's position with respect to certain political and ideological matters such as religion, women, or simply the whole matter of East versus West, perhaps his paintings are not the best source of information after all. Probably much more telling in this respect are his own words, as they appear in the rare but significant examples of his correspondence and other writings. Probably the most explicit of all is his long diatribe in a letter to his father, written from Baghdad in April 1870:

With the exception of my dear family and a few others, please, Dear Father, just look around you! What do you see in families? Nothing but corruption, depravation, fights, divorces. They are infested by slavery and lose their morality to odalisques. The wife does not submit to her husband's will, and the husband fails to respect his wife. He goes his way, as she goes hers. They have never held hands. They have never formed a family. The children are abandoned. The mother has never thought of them. Entrusted to a slave who thinks s/he is movable property, these poor children are left to vegetate, while the mother goes to the Sweet Waters to dirty and roll in the mud a name she carries but hates. And all of this happens just because a ridiculous convention in our degenerate customs requires that a man should close his eyes before taking a wife; a convention which requires that marriage should not result from the free will of a man and a woman, but rather from an agreement between their parents.

Please note, my Dear Father, that by demolishing in such a way our customs, which are no longer those of the Muslim, I am not praising European customs either. I have many objections to them, too, but nevertheless, I must say that I prefer them if only because they are generally depraved, corrupt and immoral only outside the marriage. The rich do not keep alongside their wives a stream of young slave girls, and if they do have illegitimate and illegal affairs, it is in the street with free women labeled as prostitutes, and therefore outside of the realm of law.

Please note that I am speaking only of the powerful, of the rich, and not of the people, of the artisans. Bourgeois families are all more or less irreproachable, especially in Germany.

Just go to the mosque on a Friday, and look at the artisan, at the bourgeois, the only source of wealth of a country. He is nothing but a wretch dressed in rags, a shadow that only inspires pity. No industry, no trade, nothing! Just a patient form of fatalism! Everything is God's making. He goes to a half-ruined hut he calls a shop and finds it robbed: it is God's making. He returns to a shanty he calls home and

finds it in flames: it is again God's making. And never the administration's fault!  
There you have the artisan; there you have the taxpayer; there you have the  
people.<sup>31</sup>

Are these the words of a man who sees the salvation of his country in Islamic reform, and would eventually use his art take up its defense in the face of Orientalist scorn, or was Osman Hamdi just paying lip service to a politically correct stand when writing to his father? My impression, after much work on his private papers and correspondence and on some indirect narrative sources,<sup>32</sup> is that although certainly a patriot at heart, Osman Hamdi possessed a strong base of “acquired” Orientalism of a western kind, which in time came to dominate his vision of the world surrounding him. I have claimed elsewhere that from the perspective of his archaeological career, allegiance to, and recognition by, the western scientific community was essential to his survival in a world from which he felt to a great degree estranged.<sup>33</sup> It was all the more true of his artistic production, which espoused most of the forms, subjects, and inclinations of western Orientalist painting. For a man who had spent eight years in Paris, was married twice to French women, spoke and wrote French more readily than Turkish with his family and colleagues, Orientalism had most probably become a way of life, one that was essentially geared towards shielding himself and his most intimate entourage from an environment with which he had very little in common. Under such circumstances, while it is more than likely that he did understand that western views of the Orient could often become extremely demeaning due to the combined effect of ignorance and clichés, such awareness did not really preclude him from sharing some of these views, albeit with a much more conscious and mindful attitude towards the culture he depicted in his paintings. In that sense, the efforts made towards ascribing to him a

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<sup>31</sup> Osman Hamdi to Edhem Pasha, Baghdad, April 27, 1870, author's collection. Previously published in French in Eldem 1991, 135-36; Eldem 2010, 99-100.

<sup>32</sup> Most particularly the (very Orientalist) stories he recounted to Rudolf Lindau, and which the latter published in 1896. For a commentary and a French translation, see Eldem 2010, 51-63, 103-196.

<sup>33</sup> Eldem 2004, 148-49.



desire to use his painting as a way of conveying modernist messages or of countering the dominant paradigm of western Orientalism seem to stem from an unnecessary and strained effort to adapt Thalasso's and Cezar's arguments to a post-Saidian context. To me, Osman Hamdi Bey is a painter with only one explicitly political painting: a portrait of his cousin Tevfik holding an issue of the *Aurore*, whose dedication presents both the artist and the sitter as Dreyfusards.<sup>34</sup> His Orientalist works are aesthetic constructions designed to attract the attention of a western public by combining clichés intelligently with the privilege of being an “insider within the outside.”<sup>35</sup> I do think that the reality of a super-westernized<sup>36</sup> artist forced into active submission is in many ways much more interesting than the myth of a passively resistant or rebellious proto-nationalist intellectual.

The real conclusion, however, has to do with what I consider to be the most important challenge from a historical perspective. While I have tried to show the fragility of readings and interpretations based on thin evidence and thick conviction, I have repeatedly insisted on the frailty of the documentary base we have been using to this day when working on Osman Hamdi Bey. The exercise of trying to reconstruct the onomastic genealogy of his paintings, or the seemingly simple issue of documenting and understanding their public reception are, I think, sufficient to suggest that we may well be at the very start of a proper analysis of the artist's work. Nevertheless, the fact that we are still lacking a proper documentary base to conduct this work should not be taken to mean that the interpretation of his paintings should no longer be on the agenda. On the contrary, it is more than likely that once the proper groundwork is done, the real task of historians will be to interpret and “read” his works, both individually and collectively, in order to understand its complexity. As much as I may have tended to downplay meaning in order

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<sup>34</sup> The dedication reads: “*À Tevfik, son cher cousin Dreyfusard, O. Hamdy, idem Dreyfusard*” (Cezar 1971, 271).

<sup>35</sup> Çelik 1996, 204.

<sup>36</sup> Mardin 1974.

to challenge what I considered to be hasty interpretations, the vagueness in which I have had to leave his *Genesis* standing — and I do hope its new/old name will catch on — should be sufficient proof that my point is not that we should drop interpretive analyses, but rather start them anew, with a fresh mind cleared from all sorts of a priori ideas about what Osman Hamdi Bey *should* be representing.

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