

A SUM OF ITS PARTS: Architecture in the Paintings of Osman Hamdi Bey



(Left) *At the Mosque Door*, Osman Hamdi Bey, 1891, 82 x 43".
Museum of the University of Pennsylvania

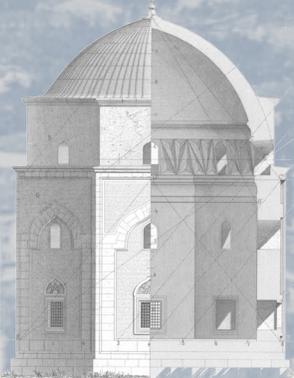
(Above) Entrance to the Mosque of the Muradiyye, Bursa, 1426-28

At the Mosque Door

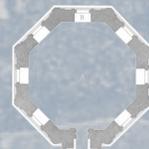
The recent discovery of a painting by Osman Hamdi Bey at the Penn Museum allows us to consider the use of architecture in his work. In *At the Mosque Door* (far left) Hamdi Bey has placed the figures in front of a mosque entrance. Distinctive architectural elements such as the stilted arch and tiled spandrel identify this building as the Muradiyye, a fifteenth-century royal funerary complex in Bursa. Hamdi Bey often created his backgrounds working directly from photographs. Yet even a cursory comparison of *At the Mosque Door* with the actual Muradiyye (left) demonstrates that this is not the case here. Hamdi Bey has elevated the entrance by a set of stairs as well as added a stone balustrade and bands of inscription flanking the portal and the balcony. He has also stretched the façade vertically to give it a more muscular, energetic presence than is found at the actual site. Some may interpret Hamdi Bey's mixing of architectural elements as Orientalist eclecticism à la Gérôme, but this enhancement and exaggeration of the Muradiyye might also be an effort to satisfy both the physical requirements of a tall canvas as well as the ideological goal of presenting a refined early Ottoman architecture. Whether Orientalist or not, the presence of the architecture in the painting makes a lively backdrop for the figures.

A New Interest in Early Ottoman Architecture

In his paintings Osman Hamdi Bey favored monuments from fifteenth-century Bursa, particularly the Yeşil Camii (c.1421) and the Muradiyye (c.1426). Hamdi Bey's interest in early Ottoman architecture reflected a larger phenomenon that began with the reconstruction of several early monuments in Bursa after a devastating earthquake. In 1863 the governor of Bursa hired Léon Parvillée, a student of Viollet-le-Duc, to restore the fifteenth-century buildings. Parallel to Viollet-le-Duc's research in Gothic architecture, Parvillée became interested in discovering the fundamental geometric principles behind this early Ottoman architecture. In 1867 Parvillée utilized these rules in practice as the head designer of the Ottoman pavilion at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. He later elaborated his ideas in an album entitled *Architecture et Décoration Turques au XV^e Siècle*, published in 1874 (right). Osman Hamdi Bey's new fascination with Bursa architecture most likely stems from his participation at the 1873 Vienna Exposition and the volume of architecture produced for it (*Usul-i Mimar-ı Osmani*). One of the stated goals of this album was to inspire a new national art derived from Ottoman architecture. An example of this "First National Style" is the Büyükkada ferry station, whose tiled spandrels and stilted arches closely resemble the Muradiyye façade (bottom right).



(Above) Cross-Section and Ground Plan of the Yeşil Türbe, Tomb of Sultan Mehmed I (d. 1421), Bursa, from *Architecture et Décoration Turques au XV^e Siècle* by Léon Parvillée, 1874



(Below) Ferry Station at Büyükkada, Istanbul, built circa 1910



Painting as Diplomacy

Recent archival research has indicated that *At the Mosque Door* was originally intended to be exhibited at the 1894 World's Columbian Exposition. In this context, Osman Hamdi Bey's painting is much more than an Orientalist genre scene. The use of an enhanced early Ottoman architecture, argued by his contemporaries to be based on pure geometrical principles, could be part of a larger mission to present the Ottoman Empire in a dramatically modern way.