ESSAYS: OSMAN HAMDI BEY
NEW INTERPRETATIONS

THE ART OF OSMAN HAMDI BEY

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The nineteenth-century Ottoman painter Osman Hamdi is often discussed in the context of Orientalism and colonialism. Hamdi is viewed by some as offering a revisionist indigenous response to the depiction of Europe’s most significant “other,”¹ and by others as an Ottoman Orientalist.² His copiously documented and illustrious careers as artist, museologist, and archaeologist, and his intellectual concerns and layered identity certainly complicate the binary between “Oriental” and “Orientalist.” While I will briefly visit this question below, my main aim in this paper is to offer other lenses through which to examine those paintings by Osman Hamdi that have an Oriental or ethnographic subject matter. Of his large and diverse corpus of paintings, these have received the most attention. The late nineteenth-century pan-European interest in the applied arts, the search for the origins of decorative styles (as in the famous studies of Alois Riegl and Josef Strzygowski), and the growing fascination with archaeology also formed the context in which Hamdi worked. That he was aware of these dominant cultural and intellectual trends and responded to them is evident from his work for the 1873 Vienna World’s

¹ Çelik 1996.
² Eldem 2004.
Fair. Understanding Hamdi’s contributions to the fair also sheds light on his ethnographic paintings.

Let us turn to Hamdi’s life to chart some of these ideas. In 1860 he went to Paris to study law, but as is well known, focused on painting instead. Letters he wrote to his father from Paris trace Hamdi’s development from a sad, homesick teenager to a young man who was reluctant to return to Istanbul because he wanted to continue his painting studies in Europe. The letters in question, which Edhem Eldem generously shared with me back in 1995, are all written in French. It is striking that even such private correspondence between father and son should be in a language other than Ottoman Turkish. French was also Hamdi’s preferred language for annotating family photos. Even the one painting he annotates, dedicated to his cousin, is inscribed in French.

The Paris letters also make clear that Hamdi preferred to wear fashionable Parisian clothes and abandoned the fez in favor of a hat or casquette, despite the frequent reminders from his tutors that he was first and foremost an Ottoman, and that his father preferred for him to wear “la coiffure nationale.” A drawing of a self-portrait shows how Hamdi conceived of himself in those years. It depicts him in a Western gentleman’s suit, with a crisp white shirt and tie, casually leaning against an ornate desk. His partially buttoned jacket, his hands in his pockets, and his crossed ankles create an air of nonchalance. A photograph of Hamdi and the other occupants of his boarding house in Paris taken during the same years, on the other hand, depicts him wearing a fez. The choice to wear the fez in the semi-official photographic portrait points to Hamdi’s awareness of the different personae costumes could accord him. This sentiment is strengthened by his host M. Dupré’s description of a conversation with Hamdi in a letter from 1861. When M.

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4 Cezar 1995, 213.  
5 Ibid. 214.
Dupré approached Hamdi about his adoption of European attire, Hamdi defended himself by saying that he never visited the ambassador or any other Ottomans without putting on his “national costume,” and that he only dressed “comme les Français” to go to his courses. The young man was already aware of the symbolism of costume as a marker of identity and the distinct styles of dress that he could don to take on different personae.

By the time Hamdi left Paris in late 1868, he had exhibited his work in the Paris World Exhibition of 1867 and the Salon of 1868, with one painting placed in the Salle D’Honneur. Inspired by his successes, he was determined to come back to Paris to further his art. The connection he had with the city is evident from his obituary, written by one of his colleagues: Hamdi was the most Parisian of Ottomans, and the most Ottoman of Parisians.6

Within months of his return from Paris, Osman Hamdi was appointed to a position in Baghdad. In this provincial city at the edge of the Ottoman Empire he had the opportunity to observe first hand the empire’s struggle with its diverse subjects. Here he served alongside Midhat Pasha, the renowned Ottoman reformist who was governor of the province and would become the architect of the first Ottoman constitution in 1876. Hamdi idolized Midhat Pasha, and agreed with his political views, displaying a patriotic belief in a civilizing mission and an agenda of reform.7

Hamdi’s letters to his father from Baghdad demonstrate no amount of identification with the locals and instead display very low opinions of the settled populations and a romantic view of the semi-nomadic Bedouin:

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6 Ersoy 2003; Eldem 2004a.
7 Deringil 2003; Eldem 1991; Eldem 2010.
It is not necessary to concern ourselves with the inhabitants of the big cities ... these people, although they appear to bear a modicum of the civilization of the nineteenth century, are in fact far below the desert dwelling bedouin, who, although they lead a primitive and patriarchal life, [are far better than the former,] who lead a life of infamy and corruption, to the point that in the whole of Bagdad and particularly among servants of the government you would not find a single honest man!8

Hamdi’s sketches of the types he found in Iraq9 demonstrate a clear interest in the ethnographic details of the costumes and the facial features of the locals. These are observations of the “other,” akin perhaps to the sketches of French artists when they traveled to places like Morocco or Egypt.

The distance Hamdi felt between himself and the Arab population of the Baghdad province might be understood as a particularly Ottoman type of Orientalism.10 Ussama Makdisi defines Ottoman Orientalism as “a complex of Ottoman attitudes produced by a nineteenth-century age of Ottoman reform that implicitly and explicitly acknowledged the West to be the home of progress and the East, writ large, to be a present theater of backwardness.” Additionally, “through efforts to study, discipline, and improve imperial subjects, Ottoman reform created a notion of the pre-modern within the empire in a manner akin to the way European colonial administrators represented their colonial subjects.”11 The notion of Ottoman Orientalism and its temporal implications are reflected in Hamdi’s letters as well as his paintings and dovetail with his work for Vienna as well.

The young man who wrote letters to his father in French, who liked his life in Paris well enough not to want to return home, and who embraced a “civilizing mission” towards the provincials of the empire continued to live his life in close intellectual proximity to friends and

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9 Cezar 1995, 764.
10 Eldem 2004; Eldem 2010, 66-68.
11 Makdisi 2002, 769-70.
colleagues in Europe. His next significant appointment was a commission to organize the Ottoman contribution to the 1873 Vienna World’s Fair. The main hall of the Ottoman pavilion at the fair was devoted to the costume gallery, which was central to the Ottomans’ efforts at self-portrayal and imperial propaganda at the fair. The hall displayed mannequins sporting traditional costumes of various ethnic groups from the empire, as well as historical costumes of the Ottoman army. In the words of the organizers themselves, the show was meant to provoke

> a serious interest on the part of the industrialists, traders, artists, and scholars of other nations... [and hence make a positive impact on diagnosing] the real causes of the decline of craft guilds as well as on discovering the remedies that would bring back the prosperity of past ages, the splendor of ancient crafts and industries.\(^\text{12}\)

The Ottoman agenda reflects very closely the Viennese authorities’ aims and interests. The fair in general had the character of an extended applied arts museum intended to edify the visitors.\(^\text{13}\)

To that end, in addition to the display of costumes and handicrafts, the Ottoman commission, headed by Osman Hamdi’s father, Ibrahim Edhem Pasha, prepared two important books to accompany the exhibition. One was a treatise on the history and theory of Ottoman architecture, and the other was a survey of Ottoman costumes. Osman Hamdi was closely involved in the production of both. The *Elbise-i Osmaniyye*, subtitled in French as “Les Costumes Populaires de la Turquie,” is an album comprising seventy-four photographic plates, each showing a few figures in regional costumes. The accompanying text describes the cities or sites in the different regions and the costumes worn by the various ethnic groups. Although it has recently been shown that the text of the costume album is borrowed wholesale from an earlier text,\(^\text{14}\) that Hamdi’s name appears on the book suggests that he endorsed its contents. The

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\(^{12}\) Ersoy 2003, 189.

\(^{13}\) Ersoy 2000, 27-48.

\(^{14}\) Eldem 2010, 63-66.
photographs, moreover, were taken at Edhem Pasha’s home, implying that Hamdi was even more closely involved with the project.

In the exhibition, the book was displayed in the main hall of the Ottoman section, along with a selection of the costumes themselves. As is evident from its title, the book was intended to present the Ottoman common man from a detached, ethnographic perspective. The provincial Ottoman subjects were pictured with their regional costumes and not yet industrialized lifestyles, representing the multiple regions and ethnicities of the empire as a united whole. Yet the picture was far from comprehensive: there was no room in these depictions for the Westernized elites of the urban centers. The costume album helps to bring to light Hamdi’s and his collaborator, Marie de Launay’s, concern with the traditional handicrafts and the people producing them. In doing so, it betrays their romantic view that these “traditional” lives preserved something authentic from the Ottoman past. The producers of the book were quite removed from what they portrayed—the present reality of the provinces was displayed as the empire’s past. The present of the empire, of course, would have been the industrialized, westernized urban areas in which Hamdi and other members of the Ottoman elite also dwelled.\footnote{Ersoy 2003; Ersoy forthcoming.}

With this project, they were partaking of a pan-European interest in the applied arts and presenting Ottoman jewelry, textiles, and costumes as preserving the “splendor of ancient crafts and industries.”

A striking photograph of Osman Hamdi in Oriental garb (cat. no. 2), taken in Vienna in 1873,\footnote{Cezar 1995, 219.} strengthens the connections between the exhibition and Hamdi’s paintings. Viewed on its own, the photograph can perhaps be dismissed as a playful gesture of the Ottoman commissioner of the exhibition. But Hamdi donned such costumes at later moments in his life and had himself
photographed so that he could use his likeness in his paintings. He also used other models, such as his son Edhem.\textsuperscript{17} His interest in handicrafts might lead us to think he would eschew technology, but he was heavily dependent on technology to paint. A striking example is the painting often titled \textit{Discussion at the Mosque Entrance} (http://www.msgsu.edu.tr/msu/pages/357.aspx), derived from a photograph of Osman Hamdi dressed like an Arab dervish, which he overlaid with a grid for ease of transfer to canvas (http://www.sanalmuze.org/image/osh03.htm). The costumes represented in Hamdi’s ethnographic paintings, which are frequently based on such photographs, belong to the provincial subjects of the Ottoman Empire, the same types of costumes featured in Vienna. By showcasing these ethnic costumes and traditional handicrafts in his paintings, Hamdi represents the non-Turkish ethnic groups of the empire as “pre-modern.” Doing so generates a contradiction, however: even as Hamdi seems to adopt an Orientalist attitude in these works, he inserts his own portrait into them.

The painting known as \textit{The Arms Seller}, (fig. 1) originally titled \textit{Le Tranchant du Cimetere},\textsuperscript{18} demonstrates Hamdi’s attitude towards costume and its significant role in his paintings. The two figures, identifiable as Osman Hamdi and his son Edhem, are in a decrepit basement-like area. The building is clearly not in very good shape, with paint and stucco peeling off and bricks exposed. Yet somehow there is the beautiful marble bench made up of ancient capitals, on which the first figure sits. The objects on display—arms and armor, and also books—belong to a variety of periods. The narrative of the picture is not so easy to grasp.

The frozen figures are reminiscent of a costume drama—why is the fez on the seated figure’s head wrapped with a colorful fabric? Why is the standing figure wearing such an odd

\textsuperscript{17} Illustrations provided in Cezar 1995, 351, 355, 357, 751, 739.

\textsuperscript{18} See Eldem’s contribution in this volume.
piece of drapery over his shoulders? And who are the men in the back? (Their images, by the way, are all derived from photos of Hamdi.) All these questions make one wonder if this scene is not constructed to tell a narrative, but rather, for visual effect. Perhaps father and son are dressed up, playacting as “Arabs” or some other provincial, perhaps nomadic group? The photograph of Hamdi painting the work (fig. 2) is a reminder of the difference between the artist in real life and as he portrays himself. The costume changes also bring to mind Hamdi’s careful navigation of the subtleties of national attire as a student in France.

Photographs and paintings of Hamdi and his family (http://www.sanalmuze.org/arastirarakogrenmek/osmanhamdi.htm) remind us that the artist is very deliberately dressing up for his ethnographic paintings, emulating the costumes he had collected with such diligence for the Vienna exhibition. A telling example is a portrait of Osman Hamdi’s cousin Tevfik, who had been in Paris at the same time as Hamdi (fig. 4). The close bond between the two cousins and their shared knowledge of French affairs is evident from the inscription in the upper left corner: “A Tevfik, son chér cousin Dreyfussard, O. Hamdy, Dreyfussard. Eskihissar, 1899.” And indeed, the newspaper that Tevfik is reading is also in French, dated to 1899, and is the same paper in which Zola had published “J’Accuse” a year before.19 Family portraits such as this are different both in terms of the Ottoman context they portray, which is that of Hamdi’s daily world, and in terms of style. In the ethnographic works, Hamdi paints in the hyper-realist style of his French mentors Gérôme and Boulanger, painstakingly depicting the details of the architecture, objects, and costumes that appear to be his real subject matter (fig. 4). His portraits, however, are executed with looser, more impressionistic brush strokes.

19 Eldem (2004) also calls attention to this painting and reminds us that this is the only one in which Hamdi explicitly expressed a political view.
The interest in the details of architecture and objects, or if you will, the decorative arts, that Hamdi’s paintings display is also evident in an architectural treatise he prepared for Vienna, titled “The Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture.” In its delineation of Ottoman architectural history, the book places undue emphasis on monuments from the fifteenth century that showcase the decorative arts. This focus comes at the expense of the “high classical” period of the sixteenth century, for example, whose monuments are characterized by purity of line and monumentality of structure.20

This focus on the fifteenth century was in keeping with the interests of the Vienna exhibition, which looked for ways to preserve the beauty of handicrafts in the era of industrialization. It was also linked with recent Ottoman attempts to revitalize traditional crafts, such as the establishment of the Ottoman School of Applied Arts (with the help of Hamdi’s father Edhem Pasha) in 1868. By reorganizing the disintegrating guilds, the Ottoman state hoped to revive traditional manufacturing techniques and to guard against the domination of Western goods in Ottoman markets.21 Other important figures of the Tanzimat era also engaged in efforts to revive and bolster the industrial arts.22

Hamdi’s ethnographic paintings, which insistently feature fifteenth-century monuments, betray similar concerns. The mosque of Murad II (1426-28) is a favorite (cat. no. 61), as is the Green Mausoleum (1419-21),23, and the Green Mosque.24 One sixteenth-century mosque favored by Hamdi is that of Rüstem Pasha, renowned for the ceramic tiles that uncharacteristically cover its interior. Hamdi’s focus on the fifteenth century was due not only to the ornate architecture of that period, but also to the late nineteenth-century Ottoman interest in

20 For a detailed study, see Ersoy 2000.
21 Ersoy 2000, 79.
22 Ersoy 2003,197-98.
23 Cezar 1995, 676, 678.
24 Cezar 1995, 727.
the national or dynastic origins of the Ottoman Empire and the desire to create a new awareness about this period to support reformist missions. It was hoped that the Tanzimat reforms would result in a pluralistic society that would mirror this eclectic moment in Ottoman history. The origins of such a society could fruitfully be found in the aesthetic properties of the fifteenth-century monuments, which synthesized a variety of architectural traditions. This concern also dovetails with the contemporary pan-European questioning of the origins of styles.

The objects that appear in Hamdi’s works also date to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and are mostly Mamluk or Ottoman in origin. They are related to the architecture he portrays. The attention lavished on the objects in the paintings might also have been inspired by Hamdi’s new position as director of the Imperial Museum of Antiquities. After all, such objects formed a significant part of the collections he was now supervising. The repetition of the same objects in a number of paintings suggests that he was drawing upon a set group of artifacts, whether held by the Museum or in his own collection.

The repetition of backgrounds, objects, and figures in Osman Hamdi’s paintings also underlines their constructed nature. With objects and locales picked to reflect the formative period of Ottoman architecture and with “ethnic” costumes from the provinces, Hamdi constructed a “past” universe in his paintings. They are, in the final analysis, history paintings, of a sort, referring to an idealized past. It is that past to which the Vienna exhibition committee referred in the following manifesto-like declaration: to “bring back the prosperity of past ages, the splendor of ancient crafts and industries.” That splendor is on display in Hamdi’s paintings.

These paintings also need to be considered in the context of Hamdi’s career as an archaeologist. In his almost thirty years as director of the Imperial Museum in Istanbul, Osman

26 See for example Cezar 1995, 739, 727.
27 Also suggested by Ersoy (2003 and forthcoming).
Hamdi played a distinct role in changing the direction of archaeology—not only for the Ottomans, but for all those excavating in the lands of the empire. In his role as director, Hamdi was responsible for the implementation of the laws of antiquities and for giving permission so that digs could take place. He expanded the collections of the museum to a level respectable with that of European collections, supervised the construction of an entirely new building to house the collections, and even added wings to the building as the collections grew. Hamdi engaged in a publicity campaign, mostly through the publication of his finds, but also by hiring scholars to help him catalogue and organize the materials.28

The documentation of archaeological findings through rubbings, detailed verbal descriptions, and photography is actually akin in spirit to Hamdi’s style of painting. As a pursuit, archaeology certainly involved a romantic reconstruction of the past, as is evident in a number of essays in this volume. Thus, Hamdi’s involvement in this area must also be borne in mind when trying to understand his ethnographic paintings, both in terms of their visual style and the attitudes they display towards the past. His frequent contacts with archaeologists and museologists from Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and London also means that Hamdi would have been aware of what these scholars were reading and writing—indeed he was supplying many of them with photographs for their publications. This intellectual community meant that he not only followed political developments in Europe, but art historical thinking as well.

The world Osman Hamdi depicted in his ethnographic paintings is no closer to the world he lived in than Gérôme’s Oriental paintings. By appealing to a constructed past, the paintings lent strength to contemporary reformist pursuits that were close to Hamdi’s heart. They also anchored him in the present, as a modern man, who like his contemporaries elsewhere in Europe was responding to industrialization and valorizing the arts and crafts. At the same time, the

28 Eldem 2004a.
paintings reflect the compassionate yet aloof gaze of this “most Parisian of Ottomans” at the clothes, artifacts and buildings that represented the multiple ethnicities and classes that made up his empire. Hamdi’s career is a strong reminder of the porosity of borders between Easterner and Westerner, subject and painter, French and Ottoman. His playful paintings call for a real shift in the Orientalist discourse, one that accommodates the cosmopolitans who could go between the two poles of Oriental or Westerner and who were not limited to a single point of view or a single national costume.

Bibliography


Illustrations

Figure 1