

# Osman Hamdi Bey's *At the Mosque Door*

## The Era of Reform

During the Tanzimat era (1839-1876) Ottoman statesmen initiated a variety of reforms intended to modernize the Empire. Reformers instituted a new dress code for men, constructed educational facilities, created a centralized bureaucracy, increased military strength and organization, and expanded the rights of women. By 1893, these changes had made a marked impact on Ottoman society. That year, the Columbian Exposition in Chicago provided an opportunity to publicize the reforms and dispel some of the enduring myths about Ottoman society, specifically those regarding the status of women. Osman Hamdi Bey's contribution to the Columbian Exposition, the painting *At the Mosque Door* (1891), represents an effort to subvert the stereotype of the Ottoman woman as secluded, sexualized, and oppressed.



Claude Monet, *Women in the Garden*, 1867

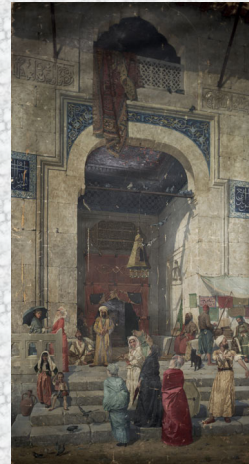


Osman Hamdi Bey, *Women on the Mosque Steps*, 1881

## Preserving Traditional Values

Despite its progressive manner of portraying women, the painting reveals a major concern among Ottoman leaders, including Hamdi Bey, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the careful balance between the incorporation of Western influences and the desire to retain traditional values. The lack of social interaction between the men and women in the painting creates the demarcation of distinctly gendered public spaces within the composition. Another spatial separation exists between the exterior of the mosque and the unseen interior, guarded by one of four images of Hamdi Bey. The setting of the painting outside a mosque, with its characteristic painted tiles and attending calligrapher, suggests a desire to maintain cultural authenticity in the face of modernization. Furthermore, the men wear outmoded costumes rather than the suit and fez required by the Tanzimat. By juxtaposing these men with the fashionably-attired women, Hamdi Bey's painting is a symbolic representation of Ottoman civilization at the crossroads of tradition and modernity.

Heather Hughes • University of Pennsylvania • March 2010



Osman Hamdi Bey, *At the Mosque Door*, 1891, oil on canvas

## Unveiling the Ottoman Woman

Painted in the style of Hamdi Bey's Orientalist teacher Jean-Léon Gérôme, *At the Mosque Door* presents the modern Ottoman woman: liberated from the harem and socializing in public. This theme echoes paintings by Monet that portray upper-class women at leisure, wearing fashionable clothing in picturesque settings outside the home. Despite wearing the recently-invented Ottoman *feracé* cloak, Hamdi Bey's women are aware of current Parisian fashion trends, as indicated by their bright, luminous fabrics and their accompanying parasols. In a departure from his other versions of this subject, Hamdi Bey differentiates among the women by religion and class, as only some of the adult women presented here are wearing veils over their faces. Wearing the veil was customary practice for middle- and upper-class Muslim women sharing public spaces with men. Hamdi Bey draws attention to the unveiled women by prominently featuring one of them at the center of the composition, directly engaging the viewer. On the occasion of the Columbian Exposition, Hamdi Bey adjusted his normal portrayal of this subject to suit the Western audience.



Osman Hamdi Bey, *At the Mosque Door* (details), 1891

