



ESSAYS: OSMAN HAMDI BEY
NEW DISCOVERIES: THE PAINTINGS AT THE PENN MUSEUM

AT THE MOSQUE DOOR

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From Istanbul to Philadelphia: the Journey of *At the Mosque Door*

For almost a century, Osman Hamdi's *At the Mosque Door* had only been known to art historians through a black-and-white photograph of the painting taken immediately after its completion. The original was forgotten until 2007, when it was recognized in the archives of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia. This exciting event has incited a thorough investigation of the circumstances surrounding the Penn Museum's acquisition of the painting. Through original correspondence and photographs, it is now possible to reconstruct the events that ultimately brought Osman Hamdi's *At the Mosque Door* to Philadelphia.

Osman Hamdi created two paintings—*At the Mosque Door* and *Women in a Türbe (Mausoleum)*—with the intention to show them at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. He did not dispatch these paintings directly to the United States, however, but rather first sent them to France for an exhibition at the Palais de l'Industrie in 1892.¹ While the

¹ Hamdi never varnished his painting, suggesting that he had painted it specifically for exhibition in Paris and Chicago and sent it off shortly after its completion. Thanks to Carole Abercaugh, the conservator who restored "At the Mosque Door" in 2009-10 for making this point.

paintings were on display in Paris, the French antiquities authorities seized this opportunity to enter into the good graces of Hamdi, who directly controlled the export of any archaeological material excavated in Ottoman lands. As an expression of gratitude for his ceding to the Louvre important finds from a Sumerian site in Iraq, the Director of National Museums authorized the purchase of *Women in a Türbe*.² Upon this arrangement, *At the Mosque Door* continued its journey to Chicago alone.

As demonstrated in an early photograph from Chicago (fig. 1), *At the Mosque Door* was not housed in the main exhibition space of the Ottoman pavilion, but rather decorated the adjoining quarters of the imperial commission, which included offices and a large reception room.³ Alongside “gaily-colored silks, embroideries, tapestry, and divans of oriental fashion,” the painting served as a backdrop for the opening ceremony on June 26, 1893, which was considered “one of the most pleasant receptions ever held in Jackson Park.”⁴ The Biblical scholar John P. Peters, who became acquainted with Osman Hamdi while leading Penn’s first season at Nippur, wrote him in Constantinople to give a full report of the proceedings at the Chicago fair. Peters expressed surprise at the arrival of only one of Hamdi’s paintings when he was expecting two, and blames the Ottoman commissioners for not securing room for the paintings in the Fine Arts building. He also assured Osman Hamdi that he had adamantly protested the proposal to exhibit the painting instead with the Turkish rugs in the Department of Manufactures, which he believed would be a degradation of the painting and Hamdi’s reputation. A compromise appears to have been reached when Ahmed Fahri Bey, imperial commissioner to the fair, decided to reserve *At the Mosque Door* for the Ottoman pavilion in Jackson Park, but in reception rooms

² This painting was sent to the Musée des Colonies and was never exhibited; it has not been securely identified. Eldem 2004, 142-43.

³ Bancroft 1893, 905.

⁴ Ibid. 909-10.

that were not available for public viewing. Peters concluded his letter by consoling Osman Hamdi that those who did have the opportunity to see the painting called it “admirable” and that the fair’s judges decided to award it a medal.⁵

The University of Pennsylvania did not purchase *At the Mosque Door* until the spring of 1895, and what became of the painting immediately after the close of the Chicago fair in October 1893 remains uncertain. Minutes taken during a Board of Managers’ meeting of the Department of Archaeology and Paleontology at Penn from February 1895 indicate that the painting had been loaned to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts by the university prior to its move.⁶ It therefore seems likely that *At the Mosque Door* was already in Philadelphia by 1894.⁷ With similar motivations as those of their French counterparts two years earlier, members of the Penn board and the Babylonian Exploration Fund, who sponsored the university’s archaeological expedition to the site of Nippur, argued that it would be in the best interest of the project to honor Osman Hamdi, thereby ensuring his continued cooperation. Under the direction of William Pepper, provost of the university, the board resolved to purchase *At the Mosque Door* for 6,000 francs in recognition of Hamdi’s “service to the Babylonian department (see also cat. no. 53 and 55 for the draft of the letter to Hamdi, and his response).”⁸ The board also arranged for the university to award Osman Hamdi an Honorary Doctorate of Sciences, as well as membership to the prestigious archaeological society of the museum (cat. no 54).⁹ These gestures were

⁵ Peters to Hamdi Bey, 23 November, 1893, Collection of Edhem Eldem.

⁶ PAFA has no records of Osman Hamdi’s *At the Mosque Door* being on display, but this is not surprising as the loan did not result in the purchase of the painting. See University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives, Biography Collection, Osman Hamdi, Board of Managers of the Department of Archaeology and Paleontology Minutes, 12 February, 1895, p. 102-103.

⁷ There is a document that suggests that the Ottoman officials at the Chicago exposition sent several objects to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts for display as the fair drew to a close, but only future inspection of this document will reveal if Osman Hamdi’s “At the Mosque Door” was among these objects. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivi, Irade, Meclis-I Vala, Dosya 76, Gömlek 108, 1 Rebiüssani 1311 (11 October 1893).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives, Peters to Provost Pepper, 1 March, 1895.

apparently quite effective. In 1897 Hermann Hilprecht, the museum's representative in Constantinople, excitedly wrote to Provost Pepper to report that Osman Hamdi had decided to reward Hilprecht with a choice collection of the ever-precious cuneiform tablets from the imperial museums. According to Hilprecht's letter, Osman Hamdi appreciated these more civilized tactics, saying, "You could get these objects from me by force [but] you have decided to use persuasion. Persuasion works always better with me than force, which I resist."¹⁰ The purchase of *At the Mosque Door* by the Babylonian Exploration Fund for the collection of the Penn Museum was at the very heart of these diplomatic exchanges.

Because Osman Hamdi's *At the Mosque Door* was purchased only as a means of gratifying its creator, this previously peripatetic painting quickly fell into obscurity once it entered the museum's collection, particularly since the Penn Museum was not an art museum, but was created to house archaeological material. The last known record of the painting before its disappearance is a photograph from December 1899 that accompanied a newspaper article about the opening of the museum to the public (fig. 2). In the photograph, the painting hangs in Widener Hall, the original auditorium of the museum.¹¹ At an undetermined time, the painting was removed from its frame, rolled up, and consigned into storage. On the occasion of this exhibition, *At the Mosque Door* is now fully restored and finally displayed with the tablets from Nippur that it had originally served to procure.

Unveiling the Ottoman Woman

The Columbian Exposition in Chicago provided the Ottomans an opportunity to publicize the recent modernization of their empire. After the Tanzimat era of transformation (1839-1876),

¹⁰ University of Pennsylvania Museum Archives, Hilprecht to Provost Pepper, 19 November, 1897.

¹¹ *Philadelphia Press*, Dec. 21, 1899.

the government continued to initiate a variety of reforms simultaneously intended to improve Ottoman society and to correct the pernicious image of “the Orient” as constructed by Europeans and Americans.¹² The officials charged with creating the Ottoman pavilion at the fair crafted a display that not only illustrated the empire’s ethnic diversity, rich material culture, and traditional rituals, but also evidence of its status as a modern state.¹³ On the occasion of the fair, Sultan Abdülhamid II ordered that a collection of fifty-one photography albums comprised of 1,819 individual photographs be sent to the United States.¹⁴ A significant portion of the photographs in the albums illustrated the expansion of education reform, with great emphasis on the education of women. The movement towards broad educational access for women started with the passage of the 1856 Reform Declaration, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender in the Empire’s state-run school system.¹⁵ The creators of these albums hoped these photographs would supplant the contemporary view of the Ottoman woman in the Western imagination: secluded, sexualized, and oppressed.

As an official of the Ottoman Empire, Osman Hamdi Bey was greatly invested in the portrayal of his people and his culture. Although he worked in the style of his teachers throughout his artist career, he avoided the salacious, degrading, and violent themes often represented by Jean-Léon Gérôme and Gustave Boulanger. *At the Mosque Door*, considered a painting devoted to “glorifiant la femme Turque” is a noticeable departure from the typical French Orientalist visualization of women¹⁶ Specifically, the painting resists the misguided image of the secluded “Oriental” woman by demonstrating that women in contemporary

¹² Inalcik and Quataert 1994, 759-934.

¹³ See Çelik 2000.

¹⁴ Ibid. 84-92. The albums were ultimately intended for the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, where they are currently located, see <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/ahii/>.

¹⁵ Çelik 2000, 89.

¹⁶ Thalasso 1911, 26.

Ottoman society are permitted to leave the harem and have productive lives independent of the home.¹⁷ By choosing a mosque, the quintessential locus of Islam, as the site of women's outdoor leisure, Osman Hamdi associates religion with their freedom and happiness, instead of their seclusion or oppression.

Hamdi's artistic references also contribute to the modernizing portrayal of his female figures. The painting echoes early works by Monet that portray upper class women at leisure, wearing elegant and fashionable clothing in picturesque settings outside the home. While this painting exhibits some of the key characteristics of academic Orientalism, it also shows that he is clearly in touch with the Parisian painting movements that have grown more popular and influential by the last decades of the nineteenth century. By referring to a theme from this European artistic tradition, Hamdi Bey situates the women within the sphere of modernity.

The choices Hamdi Bey made regarding the women's clothing indicate that he was adjusting his normal portrayal of women to suit the context in which the painting would be exhibited. Among the adult women standing outside the mosque, only three cover their faces with veils. When this work was painted, it would still have been customary for women—after puberty, prior to menopause—to cover their faces when sharing public spaces with men. This practice, however, was typically limited to Muslim middle- and upper-class women, so it is not unusual that the gypsy girl is not veiled. The presence of unveiled women is also unique within Osman Hamdi's oeuvre because in other paintings featuring women outside mosques, even those dated after *At the Mosque Door*, he depicts every female figure with a veiled face. In addition, although the women in the painting wear the traditional three-piece *ferace*, Hamdi has indicated that they follow European fashion with the bright colors and rich, luminous fabrics of their

¹⁷ See Davis 1986, 131-56.

garments and their accompanying parasols.¹⁸ As the nature of women's (and men's) clothing in the Ottoman Empire had been tied to state control throughout the nineteenth century, it was an aspect of daily life fraught with the tensions of modernity and tradition. Nora Seni points out:

The length and form of skirts, the material and the thickness of the veil—this debate on the emancipation of women has served for nearly two centuries as the forum at which societal choices have found expression. In the process of Westernizing Turkey, reformists and conservatives expressed themselves exclusively by way of this privileged pretext. It has been used as an emblem or symbol to indicate a position for or against modernization, and signify a societal choice that goes way beyond the issue of the condition of women.¹⁹

In 1891, the year Osman Hamdi painted *At the Mosque Door*, segments of the educated elite were questioning the wholesale incorporation of western values into Ottoman culture.

Osman Hamdi shared some of these reservations. Ussama Makdisi writes:

[Osman Hamdi] believed that Ottoman modernization could succeed only if it preserved some sense of Ottoman difference from the West. In other words, anticipating what would become a standard Third World nationalist claim that modern Western science could and should be married to an essential indigenous tradition, Hamdi Bey sought to reconcile Western science and national culture rather than totally to emulate the West.²⁰

Although there are both men and women present in the painting, the two sexes do not interact.

The effect of this psychological separation among the women and the men is the demarcation of separate gendered spheres within the shared space of the painting. The space of the mosque is separated from its threshold here occupied by the women—perhaps an allusion to the absence of women in mosques, except in the imperial foundations or during Ramadan.²¹

While the women are depicted in current fashionable clothing, Osman Hamdi persists in depicting himself and the other male figures in outdated, traditional costumes. The turban and caftan had long been banned as a result of an 1829 reform under Sultan Mehmed II, and in their

¹⁸ See Micklewright 2000.

¹⁹ Seni 1994, 27

²⁰ Makdisi 2002, 785.

²¹ Davis 1986, 245.

place the fez and suit became the outfit of choice for men in Osman Hamdi's position.²² The presence of the calligraphy merchant, a purveyor of a traditional Ottoman craft, also suggests a desire to cite cultural authenticity in the face of modernization. At the same time, by evoking contemporary European artistic and clothing styles, Hamdi associates Ottoman women with cosmopolitanism and modernity. His unveiling of several women is a bold counterpoint to European Orientalist works of art that use the veil as a symbol of objectification and exoticism. In the context of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, this aspect of the painting would have further concretized the messages expressed in the Abdülhamid Albums. Summarizing the agenda of the Ottoman pavilion, Ibrahim Hakki Bey, Commissioner-General of the exhibition staff, wrote:

It will be seen...that the 'sick man' is not so very near his grave after all, and the 'unspeakable Turk' is not so much a disgrace to the civilized world as must have been thought when that phrase was first launched."²³

Setting the Stage

Osman Hamdi loosely based his setting on the entrance façade of the 1426 mosque of the Muradiye, the pious foundation complex of the Sultan Murad II, which is located atop one of the wooded hills of Bursa, the Ottoman capital before the conquest of Istanbul in 1453.²⁴ Viewers of the painting may find it curious that Osman Hamdi opted to highlight an example of early Ottoman architecture, rather than the later Ottoman works in Istanbul to which he had more ready access. While Hamdi did at times use Istanbul monuments for the backgrounds of his paintings, a significant number of his works feature fifteenth-century architecture from Bursa. Osman Hamdi's partiality to early Ottoman architecture can best be explained by contemporary

²² Quataert 1997, 403.

²³ Hakki Bey 1892.

²⁴ Goodwin 1971, 70.

trends in Ottoman architectural history as well as by the latest building practices in Istanbul, which favored the faience-clad jewel boxes of fifteenth-century Bursa over the austere stone behemoths of sixteenth-century Istanbul.

Nineteenth-century fascination with early Ottoman architecture began after February 1855, when Bursa was devastated by a major earthquake that seriously damaged many historic buildings. In 1863 the local Ottoman governor, Ahmed Vefik Paşa, hired the French architect Léon Parvillée to restore the fifteenth-century buildings, especially the Green Mosque (Yeşil Cami), built 1419-1421, and the Muradiye. Parvillée and his team rescued the structures from imminent collapse and heavily restored their interior and exterior decorations.²⁵ The young architect also used this opportunity for careful study of the buildings and for deriving the geometric principles behind their forms. Parvillée first put these newly discovered rules into practice during the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, when he was hired as head architect for the buildings representing the Ottoman Empire. In 1874 Parvillée elaborated on his ideas in an album entitled *Architecture et Décoration Turques au XV^e Siècle*, in which he analyzed the harmonious proportions of the Green Mosque, which he believed Ottoman architects had achieved through the judicious use of the equilateral triangle. The treatise follows the theories of Parvillée's mentor, the architectural theoretician Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, who postulated that all great architecture is based on a system of triangles.²⁶ Viollet-le-Duc himself wrote the forward of Parvillée's album, arguing that the revival of architectural styles so popular in the middle of the nineteenth century should be a tasteful selection of architectural decoration, creating a new and enhanced style.²⁷

²⁵ Saint Laurent 1986.

²⁶ Ibid. 257.

²⁷ Parvillée 1874, 15iii.

In addition, the Ottomans sent to the 1873 Vienna Exposition produced an album entitled *Usul-u Mimar-ı Osmani* (“Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture”). The editor and main author of this text, Victor Marie de Launay, identified the principles of Ottoman architecture for the purpose of utilizing them in contemporary building practice.²⁸ The contributors of the *Usul-u Mimar-i Osmani* were concerned that the wholesale importation of European styles had led Ottoman architecture to become “degenerate.” Marie de Launay complained that such blind imitation created “a confusion that is ridiculous and inadequate to the requirements of Ottoman buildings.”²⁹ The purpose of the *Usul-u Mimar-i Osmani*, therefore, was not only to represent the history of Ottoman architecture, but also to encourage a national style based on a renaissance of Ottoman architecture. As the number of plates allotted to buildings from Bursa far outnumbers those for later Ottoman monuments, this renaissance was meant to originate from the first centuries of the Ottoman Empire.

From a young age, Osman Hamdi was at the center of the discourse that generated works such as those of Parvillée and the *Usul-u Mimar-ı Osmani*. While studying in Paris, he had submitted three paintings for exhibition at the 1867 Exposition Universelle, where he certainly would have visited Parvillée’s pavilions.³⁰ In the 1873 Exposition in Vienna, Osman Hamdi was a delegate of the Exhibition Committee and participated in the production of an album cataloguing different ethnic costumes from different regions of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, he had himself photographed in one of the costumes (cat. no. 2). He was certainly aware of the costume album’s partner publication on architecture, the *Usul-u Mimar-ı Osmani*.³¹

²⁸ Marie de Launay was a Frenchman who held a secretarial position in the Ministry of Trade and Public Works. See Ersoy 2007, 117.

²⁹ *Usul-u Mimar-i Osmani* 1873, 7.

³⁰ Salaheddin Bey 1867, 142.

³¹ Shaw 1996, 99.

Osman Hamdi subsequently played a significant role in the development of a new architectural style in Istanbul. After Tanzimat reforms dissolved the Organization of Royal Architects (*Hassan Mimarları Teşkilatı*), domestic training of Ottoman architects was interrupted for four decades. It was resumed with Osman Hamdi's opening of the Academy of Fine Arts (*Sanayi-ı Nefise Mektebi*) in 1882. This academy offered instruction in architecture based on the French academic model of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, in contrast with the previous system of master-apprentice training. Students were encouraged to embrace their native Ottoman architecture as an essential element of their artistic vocabulary.³² Vedat Tek, a key Ottoman architect of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, returned to teach at the Academy of Fine Arts, having received training abroad. In his lectures, he taught students the principles of what would be termed the First National Style, whose vocabulary was largely drawn from early, not classical, Ottoman architecture.³³

Osman Hamdi's decision to represent the Muradiye in *At the Mosque Door* was, then, concurrent with architectural theory and practice. The mosque façade in *At the Mosque Door* can reasonably be identified as that of the Muradiye because it shares several elements with the actual façade in Bursa. The portal framed by a stilted arch and a tiled spandrel is exactly the same in form. The balcony window, as well as the inscription panel and tile-work in the inner bay of the portal, are also identical. There are, however, notable differences between the actual doorway and the one in the painting. First, the mosque door in the painting is raised on a platform reached by four stairs. The actual mosque entrance has no stairs and is on the ground level. Second, the balustrade to the left of the entrance as well as the tiled inscriptions flanking the doorway seen in the painting are also absent from the actual entrance. Third, the façade of the

³² Çelik 2000, 153.

³³ Tekeli 2005, 12.

actual Muradiye is covered by a domed porch with five bays, with the mosque door located in the central bay.³⁴ The façade of the mosque in the painting has a wooden awning. The last and most important point to note is scale. Osman Hamdi Bey has stretched the portal vertically to give it a more muscular, energetic presence than is found at the actual site. Thus, while the architectural façade in the painting shares many distinguishing features with the real Muradiye, Osman Hamdi has exaggerated and elaborated it to the extent that it is more appropriate to consider the door as an idealized type rather than a record of an actual monument.

Hamdi's manipulation of the architectural setting is further clarified by comparing *At the Mosque Door* to the two paintings in which Osman Hamdi Bey also painted the façade of the Muradiye, *Sultan Leaving the Mosque* and *Women at the Mosque Door* (figs. 3-4). Just as there are significant differences between the real entranceway to the Muradiye and that in *At the Mosque Door*, variation can also be found among the portals depicted in these three paintings, which feature almost identical backgrounds. The main differences lie, again, in the more minute architectural details. For example, the grillwork of the balcony in *Sultan Leaving the Mosque* differs from that found in the other two Muradiye paintings. Also, the stone inscription band flanking the balcony window is present in all three paintings by Osman Hamdi, but not at the real Muradiye. Last, all three paintings differ in terms of the design and placement of tile-work that surrounds the doorway; *Women at the Mosque Door* contains tile decoration edging the entire length of the portal, *At the Mosque Door* simply features a horizontal band of epigraphy on both sides of the portal, and *Sultan Leaving the Mosque* has no inscriptions. Scale also plays an important role in differentiating the paintings; the doorways in both *Women at the Mosque Door*

³⁴ Gabriel 1958, 107.

and *Sultan Leaving the Mosque* are compressed to a more realistic scale, while, as mentioned before, the façade in the *At the Mosque Door* has been stretched upwards.

Architectural elements in the Muradiye paintings that are absent from the actual Muradiye are for the most part not pure fabrication; rather, Osman Hamdi availed himself of material from other historical monuments familiar to him. For example, the carved inscription framing the upper balcony in *At the Mosque Door* was directly taken from the Çoban Mustafa Cami in Gebze (b.1523).³⁵ As this mosque is located only a few kilometers from Osman Hamdi's summer home in Eskişehir, a small village on the Marmara Sea, he knew the monument quite well.³⁶ The inscription that Osman Hamdi would utilize for *At the Mosque Door* is located on the façade of the Gebze mosque. The text of the inscription itself is Qur'anic, taken from the last verses of the twenty-first sura (Al-Anbiya, "The Prophets"). The band of epigraphy is divided into six separate panels, with three panels on either side of the portal. One would expect Osman Hamdi to have simply copied the two panels immediately framing the mosque doorway in Gebze, so that the Qur'anic text would continue uninterrupted. Instead, close observation of both Osman Hamdi Bey's painting and the inscription at Gebze reveals that in *At the Mosque Door* he utilizes non-sequential panels. The inscription on the right of the Muradiye entrance is the first half of verse 109, while the inscription on the left panel does not finish the verse, but rather skips ahead to the beginning of verse 111. Such a disruption in the religious text encased in perpetuity would be inconceivable in an Ottoman mosque. For his painting, however, Osman Hamdi was less invested in technical precision and more interested in the aesthetic qualities offered by the Arabic script. Osman Hamdi's personal sketchbooks are rich with random snippets of text as he

³⁵ Demirsar 1989, 87.

³⁶ In fact, it was featured in the background of a painting by Osman Hamdi created in 1881. See Cezar 1975, 680.

tried to record and unlock the visual beauty of the epigraphy.³⁷ Featuring a mosque portal embellished with tiled inscriptions in *At the Mosque Door* provided Osman Hamdi ample opportunity to exploit his fascination with calligraphy.

While Osman Hamdi certainly took the Muradiye in Bursa as his starting point for the background of *At the Mosque Door*, he took great liberties in manipulating and rearranging the separate architectural elements that compose the façade, just as he freely placed his figures on the mosque's steps in order to create an "authentic" scene of Ottoman life. In a similar spirit to the architecture of the First National Movement, Osman Hamdi constructed his settings as a pastiche of architectural components, divorced of their original site or context, and re-appropriated them to act as universal signifiers of the quintessential Ottoman mosque.

Conclusion

Previous scholarship on Osman Hamdi Bey has suggested that he perceived his work as a critical reaction to the negative portrayal of Ottoman culture in French Orientalist painting.³⁸ *At the Mosque Door* is better understood, however, as a product of and response to the paradigms of modernization in the nineteenth century. Created specifically for exhibition at the World's Columbian Exhibition, the painting was indeed an active participant in the official agenda of the Ottoman pavilion: counteracting foreign misconceptions about Ottoman society. Nevertheless, the artist took a nuanced approach in the corrective representation of his culture. While preserving traditional Ottoman signifiers, Hamdi Bey composed a painting that captured the recent cultural and ideological changes permeating his society.

³⁷ As observed in the artist's sketchbooks from Çelikel 2003.

³⁸ See Shaw 1994 and Çelik 2002.

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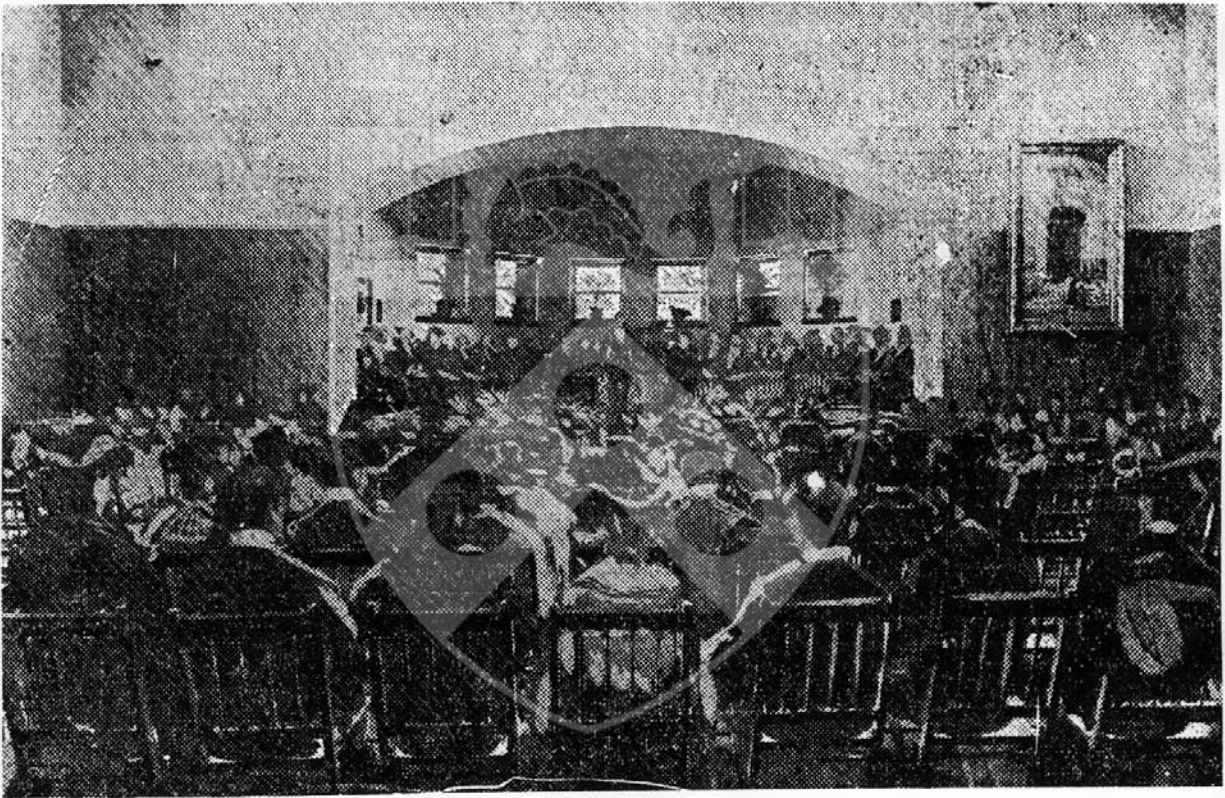
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Illustrations



figure 1



CEREMONIES INCIDENT TO
THE PRESENTATION OF THE
FREE MUSEUM AND PEPPER
STATUE IN THE WIDENER
LECTURE HALL

figure 2



figure 3

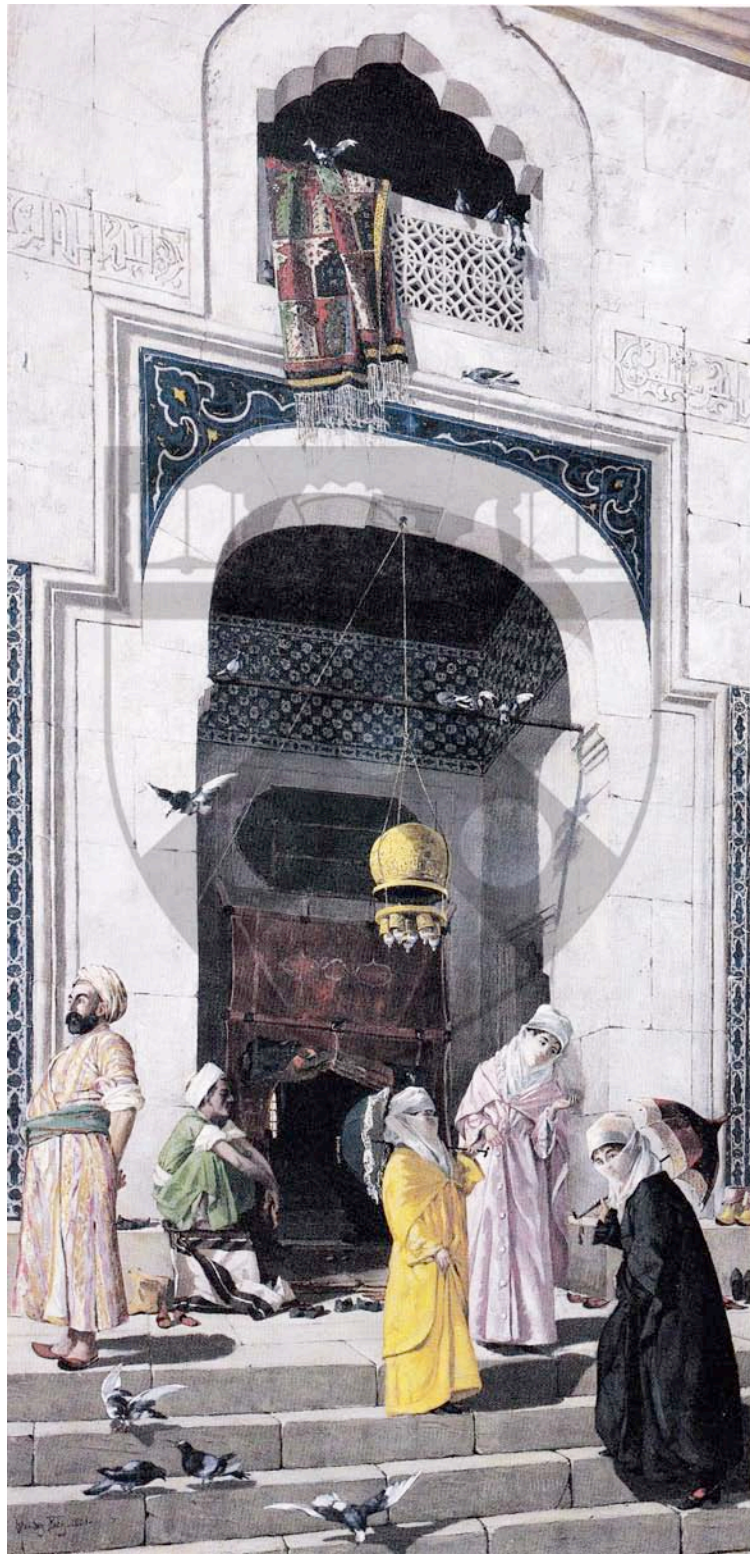


figure 4