

COMPARISON OF TURKISH AND AMERICAN PAINTING IN THE LIGHT OF AVANT-GARDE AND POST-MODERNISM

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If we look at the plastic arts, and the art of painting in the context of historical and social change we are reminded that 19th Century is an era of hope and expectations whereas 20th Century is a series of disillusion. For the Ottoman empire 19th Century is an era of steady decline, on the other hand, paradoxically, there exists within the same system expectations of constant progress and reforms. Within these reforms, part of which was military, sending talented artist to Europe to learn the art of «painting» was fairly conspicuous.

America during the colonial period and 17th C. and as a young nation, begins to develop its painting as a provincial version of the European painting tradition. Painters like Copley and West of the 18th Century are more masterly painters of a young nation establishing itself independently in the history of the world. The era for the Ottomans is the inexcitable beginning of westernization and military reforms. And through these reforms it is necessary to learn the sciences of contemporary military education. Geometry, perspective, rational drawing of nature and maps; water color and a new euclidean understanding of pictorial space render it possible to grasp the basic principles of European painting: Ferik İbrahim Paşa (1815-1889) is one of the very first officials who had to go abroad to learn these principles, and teach them in the newly reformed military academies and start painting on the side. This is the period of learning the basic crafts of the European tradition.

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Comparing the painting tradition of the two nations in the light of some major concepts I prefer to start with Osman Hamdi Bey (1841-1910) who takes us to the middle of the 19th Century and greets us with Leon Gérôme in whose studio. O. Hamdi Bey did his major learning; the same is true for several American artists. This meeting point establishes the first indirect relationship of Turkish and American painting.

At the time, Gérôme as an artist-teacher is an extension of the romantic tradition and an enthusiastic Orientalist. In his studio, the way of life, the traditions, the general folklore and attires of the people of the east and middle east is carefully studied and taught along with a disciplined tradition of the art of painting at the time, this milieu of orientalists is considered to be fairly cosmopolitan with artists from different countries. To mention a few of the Americans: The first one is Frederich Arthur Bridgman (1847-1928) from Alabama with his painting «An Interesting Game» in which great care is taken to render the light that carefully envelops the space around the figures, which are carefully dressed in their local costumes. Another one from the Gérôme ateliers is Erwin Lord Weeks (1849-1903) with his painting, «The Great Mogul and His Court Returning From the Great Mosque at Delhi» which became quite famous at the time. A third artist from the same kitchen is Thomas Alexander Harrison (1853-1930) seen with his painting «the Wave» after having painted several historical pictures he is influenced by his friend J.M. Whistler and starts painting nocturnal coastal scenes. Finally a more famous artist Thomas Eakins who turns out to be more of a realist is seen with his painting «the Gross Clinic».

All of these artists who have studied with Gérôme had reached a certain fame, received awards in Paris in a very cosmopolitan atmosphere amongst his colleagues Osman Hamdi Bey had a peculiar and advantageous place. He did not have to go very far to find sources and inspiration for his painting. He carefully recorded his immediate surroundings and the folklore of his own country.

In the meantime Paris continues to be a source of learning the painterly values and techniques for both Turkish and American painters.