

Between tradition and modernity: the Kayserili Ahmed Pasha Mansion and its wall paintings

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Résumé: Le but de cette recherche est d'étudier les peintures murales de la demeure (konak) de Kayserili Paşa dans le quartier Süleymaniye à Istanbul et de placer les thèmes représentés dans le processus de modernisation de l'art ottoman en les analysant dans le contexte politique et culturel de l'époque. Les sujets des peintures sont constitués par un large éventail tel que des vues d'Istanbul, des incendies, des bateaux, des chemins de fer, des paysages fantaisistes, des mets et boissons. Un médaillon daté de 1893 se situe au plafond du 1er étage, les armoiries ottomanes et une signature (tuğra) d'Abdülhamid II attirent par ailleurs l'attention. En conclusion, ce qui est important dans les peintures de cette demeure c'est l'accent mis sur la dimension à la fois traditionnelle et moderne du monde ottoman.

Mots-clés: Ottoman, 19eme siècle, Abdulhamid II, konak, peinture murale, tradition, modernité.

Abstract: This paper analyzes the wall paintings in the Kayserili Ahmet Paşa Mansion in the Süleymaniye district of Istanbul in the historical and cultural framework of the period, the modernization process of the Ottoman state, society and arts. The subject matter varies from Istanbul panoramas, urban fires, ships, railways, and imaginary panoramas, to meals and culinary instruments. Other items of interest are the inscription dated 1893, the Ottoman coat of arms and the tughra of Sultan Abdulhamid II. These paintings are an excellent example of the artistic juxtaposition of new and modern objects of the West and traditional objects of Ottoman culture.

Key words: Ottoman, 19th century, Abdülhamid II, konak, murals, tradition, modernity.

Özet: Bu çalışmanın amacı İstanbul, Süleymaniye semtindeki Kayserili Ahmed Paşa Konağı'nın duvar resimlerini incelenmek, bunların konularını dönemin siyasal ve kültürel bağlamı içinde değerlendirerek Osmanlı devleti, toplumu ve sanatının modernleşme süreçleri içinde bir yere oturtmaktır. Resimlerin konuları İstanbul manzaraları, yangın, gemiler, tren yolu, hayali manzaralar, yiyecek ve içecek resimleri gibi geniş bir yelpazeye yayılır. Konakta yer alan 1893 tarihi bir kitabe, Osmanlı arması ve II. Abdülhamid'e ait bir tuğra da ayrıca ilgi çeker. Sonuç olarak, konaktaki resimlerde Osmanlı kültürünün hem geleneksel hem de yüzyıl boyunca gittikçe önem kazanan modern boyutunun bir arada vurgulandığı ortaya konmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Osmanlı, II. Abdülhamid, konak, duvar resmi, gelenek, modernite.

This presentation focuses on the mural paintings in the Kayserili Ahmed Pasha mansion, an Ottoman House dating from the last quarter of the 19th century (fig 1). Situated in the Molla Hüsrev neighborhood, on Kayserili Ahmed Paşa Street in the Süleymaniye district of Istanbul, this mansion was named after Kayserili Ahmed Pasha (d.1873), an important statesman who rose to the rank of the Minister of Marital Affairs and was instrumental in the dethroning of Abdülaziz (1861-1876) (Eyice, 1994: 511).

Instead of showing and describing all of the murals found in this mansion, my objective is to concentrate on a select few and discuss their symbolic significance in a historical context. I will compare these paintings with other examples from the period, paying particular attention to form and content rather than artistic technique. Furthermore, I will interpret the images contained in the murals in the cultural and political context of the period and situate them in the modernization process of the Ottoman Arts in the 19th century. The subject matter of the paintings can be classified as Istanbul panoramas, nature and hunting scenes, fires, warships, animals, musical instruments, and food and culinary items. In addition, the house contains, in the form of a painting, the tughra of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909), the Ottoman Coat of Arms of the period, a monogram with the letters R and A in Baroque frames and the date 1311/1893 in Arabic letters.

First, let me briefly discuss the history of the mansion and describe its architecture. According to the 29 December 1890 issue of the Sabah newspaper, the land on which the house used to stand was to be divided up and sold in lots (Gövsä, 1958:418). This suggests that the house must have sustained damage in a fire between the death of Ahmed Pasha in 1878 and 1890-91. Therefore, the inscription dated 1893 most likely marks the date when ornaments were painted after the reconstruction of the house. The three-storey building sits on a stone foundation. There is a belvedere on the top floor of the mansion's double projecting bays. Ionian and Corinthian architectural orders dominate the facade of the ground and the first floors. The Corinthian plasters between the windows and the pediments that crown the window frames reflect the Neo-Classical style. The ornaments and architectural elements used on the façade suggest an effort to make the building look as if it were made of stone (Bachmann, 2008: 139). The frontal gate on the right once provided access to the harem door that led to the second floor, whereas the one on the left descended to the ground floor *sofa* or central hall. The building has an inner *sofa* type layout. The rather ostentatious staircase that provides access to the first floor opens up to the inner *sofa*. The widths of both the staircase and the *sofa* indicate that this section is the harem. The *mabeyn* rooms adjoining the inner *sofa*, connect the harem and the *selamlık* quarters. The belvedere on the top floor has a T shaped plan comprised of a central *sofa* and rooms that lead to it from both sides¹ (Okçuoğlu, 2008: 286). The interior of the house features a lively grouping of ornamentation with paintings, murals and wooden ceiling decorations. In particular, the more than fifty murals that adorn the walls and the ceilings of all three floors of the mansion make the interior seem like an art gallery.

Analysis and interpretation of murals

One of the most interesting panels in the mansion is the banquet menu that covers the sides of the ground floor ceiling. The illustrations of glasses, plates, forks, knives, napkins and bowls suggest a banquet that was prepared with European-imported products. The panel features an array of dishes such as chicken (a prestigious offering in Ottoman banquets), bread, fruits such as grape, melon, watermelon, pear and fig, and a cake-like desert (fig. 2,3,4,5). Also pictured on the walls are hunted birds bound from their feet and hanging upside down. Examples of such birds as well as the plates and fruit baskets on the ceiling corners can also be seen at Yıldız and Dolmabahçe Palaces (Tekinalp, 2001: 1-29). These paintings are most likely based on the same model, or even executed by the same artist(s). Depictions of forks and knives can also be found in the cupola of the fountain in the courtyard of the Bayezid II Mosque in Amasya (Renda, 1977: 158, Arık, 1988: 83-85). These depictions approximately date from the third quarter of the 19th century, which makes them precede the paintings of the culinary items in the Kayserili Ahmet Pasha Mansion².

In the Post-Tanzimat era new cooking methods, kitchen equipment, and banquet rules imported from Europe were widely used in the Ottoman Palace and its elite circles. During that time, dinner party menus included French as well as Ottoman dishes, particularly when foreign guests were invited (Samancı, 2006: 186-187). There are also illustrations of fish plates, fruit bowls and lobsters on the corners of the ceiling of the same floor. It should be noted that the painting of a complete banquet menu, such as the one that surrounds the ceiling panels of the ground floor is a very rare occurrence in the Ottoman wall painting tradition. Within the image proper, the forks, knives and napkins in the painting are juxtaposed as symbolic items that indicate the shift in the culinary culture of the Empire from the traditional eating manners to the new and fashionable western ways.

Two paintings in the house clearly demonstrate that the owner is a high ranking Ottoman official. The 19th century Ottoman state was in search of a symbol that would embody its modernizing identity ever since the time of Mahmud II (1808-1839). The imperial tughra of the Sultan in power effectively represented the throne in official documents, inscriptions, medals and decorations. However, the changing conceptions of sovereignty required another symbol that would stand alongside the tughra (Eldem, 2004: 282). Designed by an Italian painter, the coat of arms (*Arma-i Osmani*) is known to be one of the earliest of such symbols (Deringil, 2007: 24). At first, the state symbol was a simple design that consisted of crescents and stars. But during Abdülhamid II's sultanate (1876-1909), the symbol of the Ottoman state was officially instituted and it started to appear consistently on official documents, buildings, graveyards, medals and orders. As a result the tughra of the Sultan remained a limited symbol of personal identity, a personal signature, whereas the Arma-i Osmani was accepted as the symbol of the Ottoman State (Eldem, 2004: 283). On the ceilings of the first floor of the Kayserili Ahmed Pasha Mansion the state symbol, the Arma-i Osmani (fig. 6), and the personal signature of the Sultan (here, Abdülhamid's tughra) (fig. 7) are used together. The Ottoman coat of arms depicts an armour and a turban that symbolize the Ottoman Sultans, above which is the monogram of the Sultan

currently on the throne, all surrounded by images of the imperial flag (sancak), books, arrows, old and new cannons, guns, and swords. These old and new objects were combined to symbolize the traditional and modern aspects of the Empire. The tughra, the visual confirmation of the Sultan's power, and the coat of arms were often inscribed on a wide spectrum of public monuments, such as fountains, tombstones official buildings, and documents (Deringil, 1998: 26). Theoretically, the use of the image of the Ottoman coat of arms was subject to the sultan's permission. However, until now there has been no documented evidence of their use inside a house, which is a private space. Like the medals, orders and decorations, the state emblem in the mansion suggests the high esteem and prestige this house held in the eyes of the Ottoman state.

As I mentioned above, the reception room features a monogram with the Latin letters R and A (fig. 8), and an inscription in Arabic numbers of the date 1311/1893 (fig. 9). This inscription seems to be a record of the date of restoration. The comingling of these conventions is interesting in so far as the juxtaposition of Latin and Arabic letters in architectural contexts is uncommon³. Although we do not know what the letters R and A stand for, we may reasonably guess that they are the initials of the painter.

Istanbul panoramas are a common theme in Ottoman murals. They generally depict scenes from the shores of the Bosphorus and Golden Horn, including images of seaside mansions and kiosks. Other examples feature map-like and schematic depictions of Galata, Üsküdar and the historical peninsula in the same frame. In addition to the architectural grandeur and natural beauty of the Imperial capital, very few of these panoramas depict the large fires that created economic and social havoc in the city, destroying in particular the wooden housing stock. In conjunction with the fear produced by the great blazes that hit Istanbul every 30 years or so, there also appeared in the 19th century a new pastime, namely that of watching the fires. In the "Istanbul" section of his book *Five Cities* Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar talks about the voyeuristic pleasures that people derived from this new and strange activity. According to Tanpınar, this new habit dates from the Post-Tanzimat period. He tells of the Paschas and Beys who would pack up blankets, lanterns, coffee and tea, and get on their carriages to travel to the areas near a blaze and watch the spectacle. European travelers and diplomats such as Moltke, Gautier and Dallaway apparently indulged in the same practice (Tanpınar, 1994: 200). Gautier says that he rarely ever saw a building older than sixty years in a city which at that time still had a predominantly wooden housing stock, at least in the areas outside of Pera (Gautier, 239). The fire theme that occupied the popular imagination so much in the 19th century also surfaced in some of the murals of the same period. The painting on the dome of the fountain in the courtyard of Kara Mustafa Pasha mosque in Merzifon depicts a fire as part of a larger city panorama. The fire theme can also be seen in the works of painters like Mıgırdıç Civanyan, Bedros Sırabyan or Şeker Ahmet Pasha, all artists of the late 19th century. In addition, there exist many epic poems about fires in different parts of Istanbul in the Ottoman popular literary tradition. The minstrel Burhan wrote the following verse about the 1865 Hocapaşa fire: «There have been many a great fire, though / Never has there been a fire this big / As Hocapaşa was yet to be put down/Gedikpaşa was already burnt out (Koz, 1994 :250-251).

There were 229 fires in Istanbul between 1853 and 1906. They had a major impact on the changing physical appearance of the city where fire-affected neighborhoods quickly became pilot areas to implement European inspired city planning measures (Çelik, 1996: 41). The fire of Aksaray in 1856 and the famous Hocaapaşa fire in 1865, otherwise known as “*harik-i kebir*” and reputed to be the largest fire in Istanbul were important in this respect. Following the Hocaapaşa fire city authorities recommended widening and straightening the streets and making masonry the dominant construction technique (Çelik, 1996: 47). In sum, these murals reflect the great effect these fires exercised on the architectural textures of the city and the psychology of its inhabitants. The depiction of a fire (fig. 10) in the Kayserili Ahmed Pasha mansion along with the usual city scenery suggests that fires, besides being urban disasters, had become something to be contemplated in the privacy of a home for the Istanbulites of the period.

One of the propaganda tools of the Abdülhamid era was the railway image. The construction of the Orient railway line that would connect Istanbul to Europe via Edirne had been started during the Abdülaziz era. Abdülhamid extended the scope of the project and ordered the construction of the Hicaz railway that would originate in Anatolia and connect Aleppo and the Syrian Coast to Mecca and Medina (Gülsoy-Ochsenwald, 1998: 441-445). In his political memoirs, he talks about the objective of this project and emphasizes its importance (Abdülhamid, 1999: 66). The construction of the docks and stations that would connect the maritime lines and railways to the city center had indeed changed the physical structure and image of Istanbul. Sirkeci Central Station was completed in 1889, while Haydarpasa Station was finished in 1909, and both altered the city silhouette (Tekeli, 2006: 370). Abdülhamid II announced the Hicaz railway project to the Muslim world in Ottoman, Indian and Egyptian newspapers. He emphasized the spiritual dimension of the project. This project would connect the Muslim World in an unprecedented way. The opening date of the railway was made to overlap with the anniversary of Abdülhamid’s throning ceremony. In this way, through careful manipulation of news reports, the Ottoman public came to identify the celebration of the opening of the railway with the persona of the Sultan (Deringil, 2007: 132). The “Hicaz Railway medal” which was produced to celebrate the opening of the Hicaz Lines, was yet another way to reinforce the Sultan’s name as the symbol of modernization and industrialization with the Hicaz Railways itself. Like the medals, the railways depicted in paintings reflected the changing Ottoman world (fig 11).

The illustrations of the music instruments on the ceiling of the mansion’s second floor can be considered as symbols of a synthesis of modernity and tradition, or of the old and the new. Here we see modern instruments such as a viola and a guitar on one of the panels of the ceiling (fig. 12), whereas on others there are traditional instruments such as an oud and a tambourine (fig. 13). This juxtaposition points to the emerging musical possibilities of the period, with its shifts in style and use of new instruments that combined to shape the performance of Ottoman music. In fact, in the second half of the 19th century, the Muzıka-ı Hümayun (The Imperial Band) began to divide Ottoman music into *fasl-ı atik* (traditional music) and *fasl-ı cedid* (modern music). In *fasl-ı cedid*, traditional Ottoman instruments were played alongside European ones, and from time to time the orchestra would, conducted by a chef, play exclusively European music. For example, Yesarizade Ferik Ahmed Pasha (d.1883), who headed the Muzıka-ı Hümayun in the Tanzimat

period, wanted to practice both types of music, composing dance tunes that were compatible with both Ottoman music and more western styles of music fashionable during this period, such as Polka and Mazurka (Spatar, 1994: 11-12).

The paintings on the walls of the second floor rooms feature framed sea panoramas. Some of these paintings show boats sailing in high seas; others show the armored warships that were included in the Ottoman navy during the reign of Abdülaziz. The existence of so many sea-themed paintings in the house was undoubtedly related to its owner's office: He was the Minister of Maritime Affairs, and enjoyed the highest rank in the Ottoman Navy, which was one of the most powerful naval forces of the world at the time. (Fig. 14, 15). Some of these armoured ships are of the same type as the İclaliye frigate or the Mukaddeme-i Hayır corvette that belonged to the Ottoman Navy in the third quarter of the 19th century (Güleryüz-Langensiepen, 2000:114-115). Large sums of money were being spent towards the modernization of the Ottoman Navy at the time (Gencer, 1991: 508-509). As these paintings display the Navy's newest and most modern instruments, they depict overt symbols of state power in a private household.

In conclusion, the paintings on the walls and the ceilings of the mansion illustrate the different aspects of the modernization process occurring within the Ottoman Palace and the elite circles during the reign of Abdülhamid II. The changes in patterns of production and consumption, shifts in the culture of food and musical instruments, and the evolving politics of state symbols are all represented on the walls and the ceilings of the mansion. Besides a symbolic confirmation of the Europeanization of life in the Empire, what is also of interest here is that at the very moment these new, European objects are invoked in painting form, there is a simultaneous reference to local or traditional musical and culinary culture. This juxtaposition, albeit a familiar one, raises a host of questions for a better understanding of the modernization process in the Ottoman Empire.

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Notes

¹ For the floor plans and the measured drawings of the mansion see Kramer, J. 1980. *Untersuchungen und Sanierungsplanung in Wohngebieten der Altstadt von Istanbul*. Darmstadt-Karlsruhe.

² A similar example of a wall painting featuring culinary items can be found in the Maslak Kasrı.

³ In my own research on wall paintings I have not yet found a similar example.

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Fig. 1. Kayserili Ahmed Pasha Mansion



Fig. 2. Panel with dishes and food.



Fig. 3. Panel with dishes and food.



Fig. 4. Panel with dishes and food.



Fig. 5. Panel with dishes and food.



Fig. 6. Abdülhamid II's coat of arms.



Fig. 7. Tughra of Adülhamid II.



Fig. 9. Calligraphy dating 1311/1893.



Fig. 8. Monogram with the letters R and A in Baroque frames.



Fig. 10. Depiction of a fire in Istanbul.



Fig. 11. Depiction of a railway



Fig. 12. Depiction of western musical instruments



Fig. 13. Depiction of Ottoman musical instruments.



Fig. 14. Depiction of a battleship at sea.



Fig. 15. Depiction of a battleship at sea.