

Otto Benesch

The Orient as a Source of Inspiration of the Graphic Arts of the Renaissance.

One of the tremendous events of European history growth of the Ottoman empire in the era of the Renaissance. Downfall of Greek empire and conquest of Const. 1453 opened to the Turks the gates to the European West. One Christian state after the other on the Balkan peninsula fell victim to the powerful conqueror. Thus the diplomatic relation to the new power one of foremost questions of all Western rulers. Political missions were exchanged through the channels. In the way of diplomatic deputations the colourful figures of the East entered the cities of the West, cradles of artistic developments and movements. The contact of the Westerners with turkish warriors on the battlefield, the reports of eyewitnesses on their deeds, the terror which their appearance spread among countries threatened by their progress added to the general excitement of the phantasy. No wonder that this was reflected by the figurative arts of the time. That the then foremost city of painters, Venice, was in close commercial and political relations with the East, that Italian colonies had settled already in the Greek Constantinople, contributed much to the fact that the colourful East took hold of the imagination of the Venetian painters, as they could see its representative every day in their own streets. This fact only would not have caused that large echo which the Mohammedan world and its exotic style and conduct of life found in the figurative arts of the occident. The popular phantasy was aroused everywhere by the strange and threatening foreigners, and their approaching found its reflexion in literature, popular song and popular imagery alike. If we look at representations of religious history in the panels of painters in Hungary, Austria, Poland and Southern Germany it about 1500, we see that figures of Turks turn up

everywhere. No wonder that the most economic way of artistic representation, that of the arts of printing, as woodcut, engraving, etching and consequently drawing, took hold of this new and exciting topic, and spread its knowledge in countless thousands of copies. Thus we see the figures of the East, picturesque, bold, spreading fear, in the works of many of the foremost draughtsmen of the West. It is not by mere accident that the figure of a gloomy Turkish warrior turns up in an etching of Dürer "The Gun", contemplating this instrument of war with marked interest. In 1526, the Christian kingdom of Hungary broke down under the impact of the Ottoman power guided by Suleiman I. In 1529 the Turkish army turned up before the walls of Vienna. The heroic resistance of the city stopped the progress of the Turkish army towards the West, once and for all, although the surrounding country was sacked and devastated. Also this great historical event found its precipitate in numerous representations of the arts of drawing and printing. Drawing by Barthel Beham of Nürnberg (Hist. Mus. Vienna), representing the siege of Vienna. Mainly representation of the life in the Turkish camp with many features of Turkish folklore. No representation of eyewitness as most other contemporary drawings and prints, but only based in reports and narratives. If we let pass review representations of the East in the works of art of that era, the overwhelming majority responds to a popular demand of the time and not to an artistic urge. Those pictures requested by the public, therefore delivered. It is not our task to deal with those many examples. Our interest is devoted to cases where occidental artists visited the Orient and coming in personal contact with its colourful world. The possibility of an essential artistic inspiration. The history of art shows numerous examples of this kind of artistic influence, from the middle-ages to Delacroix, Matisse and Klee. The works which originated by the immediate contact, were mostly drawings and water-colours, elaborated in paintings and prints following time of

artistic concentration and recollection.

† In 15th and 16th centuries rarely an artist visited the East on his own impulse for the sake of artistic experience, but mostly for religious and economic reasons. ⁸⁷² Pilgrims to the Holy Land, Palestine. 2. Accompanying warlike enterprises like the expedition of Charles Vth to Tunisia. 3. following the request of an Eastern ruler to have a Western artist at his disposal. The contact with occidental world inspired frequently the desire of the sultans to show same kind of amateurship and to act as maece-nases like occidental princes. Requested through ambassadors of occidental governments to send them artists.

Whereas in official portraits which occidental artists had to paint of Eastern potentates and their suite as for instance the well known portr. of Moh. II by Gentile Bellini, in drawings^x (and later in prints deriving from them) the personal response of the artists to the new world, which surrounded and inspired them, came more to the fore. The drawings were devoted to costume figures, views, sceneries and folklore. In them we even notice inspiration received from the Eastern style of life and art.

In 1479 the republic of Venice concluded a peace-treaty with him and a pompful and splendid turkish legation appeared in the city, certainly a welcome sight to the Venetian painters. On August 1st, a jewish delegate of the sultan, well versed in all languages, appeared with a letter of the Sultanto the signoria containing the request : " vuol la Signoria li mandi un buon pittore ". Gentile Bellini was chosen, started voyage Sept. 3rd. From end Sept.79 until Nov.80 in Const. in service of sultan. Highly satisfied, knighted him and dismissed him with splendid gifts. Courtly task : mainly portraits and as Turkish historians report, also erotic works of art. We learn that G. made for his own pleasure numerous drawings. Three of them have survived in original, a few more in copies. ^x Gent. apparently made use of them at home in paintings like "Sermon of St.Mark" in Alexandria, for

which certainly sketches made in Istanbul were used. In this way, able to give better congenial Eastern touch to this holy stories than his colleagues. Distributed later drawings among two of his pupils, thus, experience collected spread among other painters. Pintoricchio introduced quite a few of them into his frescoes of the Appartamento Borgia in the Vatican.

Turkish Woman, Brit. Mus. Seated on ground with small looking glass. Wears headgear as described by Giovanni Antonio Menavino who lived at the court of Suleiman I. Consists of highly pointed turtur and mendil fastened to it, a red cloth with golden border. The draughtsman noted those colours in writing because they seemed to him essential. Pen drawing of highest delicacy which follows up modelling of head, hands and draperies with equal care and subtlety-could call it "Ingresque". No cross hatchings, but shadings run into one and the same direction, a technique particular to the 15th century. Linear emphasis, marked in the entire silhouette as well as in single groupings, underlines, their harmonious development on the picture surface. The surface values prevail, in spite of the indication of shadows and of the moulding with the help of shadows. An approach to the artistic principles of oriental miniatures can be noted in this feature.

That the artist's approach in these drawings after nature was sympathetic to that of the Eastern painters, becomes obvious in watercolour drawing of Gardner Museum, Boston, which represents Turkish artist at work. Young draughtsman seen in pure profile, like medal, crouching on the ground, seated in the Eastern attitude, eagerly bent over his drawing, entirely absorbed in process of artistic creation. Shading is reduced to utmost economy, noticeable only in face, hands and arms - for the rest only the coloured surfaces speak, particularly the wonderful patterns of the rich garment in light blue and gold

on dark blue which forms an eloquent contrast to the granade red of the sleeves and the collar. No doubt : the artist intentionally approached here the character and aspect of a turkish or Persian miniature. That a native calligrapher later added the inscription and the little group of flowers, does not at all seem to be a foreign element in this work of entirely eastern character, done by an occidental artist. This watercolour drawing was also repeatedly copied by native artists at the court of Istanbul (saw one copy in collection of Comtesse de Behague). Formed part of an album of Eastern miniatures acquired by Dr. Martin from a Turkish family in Istanbul. Inscription reads : "Work of Ibn Muezzin who belonged to the famous artists among the francs". As Brockhaus explained, "Muezzin" is the outcome of a Greek transcription of the name Bellini.

After this famous and well known specimen of immediate inspiration of an artist of the early Renaissance through eastern art and style, we turn to pilgrims to Holy Land. Several decades later a canon of Utrecht cathedral, who was a great artist and for some time the Pope's curator of antiquities in the Vatican, undertook this the same journey : Jan van Scorel, in 1520/21. Carel van Mander wrote on his voyage the following : he drew besides in a book his souvenirs de voyage, views of Candia, Cyprus, landscapes, cities, castles and mountains, the whole very pleasant to see, and further at Jerusalem, he made the acquaintance of the Superior of Sion, who was held in high esteem by the Jews and the Turks. He visited in company with this personage all the surrounding country, drawing in pen and ink the landscapes...". View of Bethlehem, Brit. Mus., formed part of this sketchbook. Here we notice more than the merely descriptive and hagiographic interest of Reuwich, an enjoyment of the Eastern scenery, its cubics buildings congenial to the rocky soil out of which they grow, enjoyment of the unusual rhythms of this

landscape so foreign to the occidental artist - an enjoyment which anticipates Bruegels interpretation of the sights in Italy. The balance with which Scorel deploys this view reveals the artist of the high renaissance.

The monumental trend of the Italian High Renaissance entered about this time the Netherlands. There were no opportunities to paint large frescoes, but their place was taken in the North by stained glass and woven tapestries. Raphael's cartoons for the Vatican were sent in 1516 to Brussels in order to be woven by Pieter van Aelst^{and}. No craftsmen were found in Italy to do this work so skillfully. The arrival of the cartoons in the Netherlands caused the rise of a new stylistic movement which we recognize in religious and profane painting. Barent van Orley took up the raphaelesque style in his historical compositions and he was followed in this by the painter Pieter Coecke van Aelst, who contributed as much as he to the new monumental style in projects for woven tapestries. The art of weaving of rugs and carpets of high artistic value, at home in Orient, was known to the Occident. Wonderful examples of Eastern craftsmanship can be seen painted in devotional pictures of the 15th and 16th centuries. In 1533, Pieter Coecke went to Constantinople in order to become acquainted with this art and to offer on this occasion Western tapestries to Soleiman. He stayed there for one year; the Sultan who ordered his own portrait conferred distinction upon him; and he even learn the Turkish language. He created there a series of drawings representing scenes from the life of the Turkish people : travel, pilgrimage, wedding ceremonies, burial, solemn processions, and pageants, etc. The whole was conceived in the manner of a cycle of woven tapestries, as a continuous frieze, the single scenes separated by hermae in the shape of janissaries and turkish women. It seems to have been a project of which the artist might have hoped that the sultan may order its execution in weaving.

This however did not come to pass. So the artist used the design for a magnificent series of woodcuts published by his widow after his death in 1553. The climax of the frieze was the riding out of the Sultan with a solemn cortege of Turkish nobles on the background of the majestic skyline of Istanbul with its mosks and towers. Ancient ruins, byzantine remains and turkish türbes form a unison, as splendid as phantastic, a magnificent stage for the splendid performance. (This and the following examples are selected from the collections of the Albertina).

Two years after P. Coecke's stay in Istanbul, another flemish artist, J.C. Vermeyen, visited the orient accompanying the army of Charles Vth on its expedition against Tunisia. Assignment : to draw warlike deeds of Emperor. Official results : series of tapestries, whose watercolour cartoons preserved in Kh. Mus. Vienna; engraving "Siege of Tunisia". Unofficial : series of highly interesting etchings and two portraits in print of native King of Tunisia and his son. Etchings devoted to subjects out of daily life of Islamic natives "The oriental banquet". Natives forming circle around still life of platters and lighted candles, crouching on ground, in opening of tent. We are on threshold of Late Renaissance, the so called "Mannerism". Balance of High Renaissance, still noticeable in P. Coeckes work, replaced by unusual contortions, disproportions, and aspects of figures seen from above, which artist gained from experiencing nature, yet also used intentionally as element of style. Plastic values of bodies, of padded draperies emphasized - Michelangelo's grammar of forms had changed in meanwhile considerably the aspect of occidental art. Vermeyen no epigone, on the contrary bold avant-gardist. This type of composition + group of lighted figures in surrounding darkness, anticipates essential achievements of Caravaggio, a proof how much Caravaggism owed to Northern art. This impression, gained from real life, inspired the

artist also to a religious painting, representing the Holy Family seated by a fire (Vienna). Vermeyen furthermore made several charming etchings of oriental women, either as portraits or as genrelike representations, quietly devoting themselves to their home work.

We enter second half of 16 th cent., climax of "mannerism" as general European movement of style. Northern artists were eager to study ancient antiquities. Journey to Italy formed customary part of artistic career, yet antiquity was seen through the eyes of Michelangelo, Raphael and their followers. Among those Northern artists travelling to Italy, we find artist from Holsatia, at that time a Danish province : Melchior Lorichs. One of most fascinating figures of Late Renaissance, ingenious engraver and draughtsman. Restless and adventurous life. Travelled all over Europe. Not satisfied with antiquities of Rome. Imagined the vanished grandeur of old Greek art and decided to go to East in order to find the true sources of classical antiquity. Went to Vienna and joined Imperial ambassador Ghislen von Busbecq with whom he travelled to Constantinople. Arrived there 1556 and stayed more than 4 1/2 years, sharing fate of ambssador, even his temporary imprisonment. According to his own testament, he visited in those years also Asia and Egypt. This first case, that occidental artist travelled to the East for purely artistic reasons, a feature with is familiar to us which we meet only from later centuries. Lorichs was in Constantinople extremely busy with drawing. He drew portraits, buildings, sceneries, figures, Panorama of Istanbul, of Turkish life. After return to the North, he gathered them and cut them in wood, (dates run from 1570 to 83, year of his death). Published in form of book after his death (Albert. Oldest copy 1596).

Works of Lorichs representing osmanic subjects, are his most outstanding. Inspiring power exerted by the themes can

be felt everywhere. He sensed Greece and he experienced something of the Greek spirit in the Turkish style of life and art. Istanbul and Byzantion became a unity for him. He sensed the hellenistic and late classical heritage in the culture of the Islamic world. Harp player.

Furthermore, Lorichs was artist of Mannerism. Mannerism artistic movement which enhanced, raised, even exaggerated the forms and turned their expression into strange monumentality. It withdraws from nature where the expression demands it. It lends its subjects an very grandeur, which even was called "estrangement". These elements Lorichs experienced in the factual life of the Orient. The political power of the Eastern empire had already passed its acme about this time. The grand, the strange, the terrible, which this great nation exhaled, found its precipitate in costumes and forms of life, in decor and ornament, which replaced by ceremonies and imposing performances qualities which began to vanish in reality. This great dream empire is morrered in Lorichs prints. Like column, solemn figure of Muezzin rises besides steep pyramid. This foreshadows the immensely stretched figures of El Greco, the Greek, the solemn rising pyramides among his buildings.

View of the Mosque Sülemaniye reflects the tremendous impression which this moutain range of cupolas, domes, towers, minarets made upon the draughtsman, a whole of strange and phantastic city, enigmatic, bare of life, hermetically closed beneath the immensety of the firmament. Also here Lorichs seems to sense the Greek, the Byzantine tradition in the work of the great architect Sinan.

Lorichs strove for that grandeur of expression, for that spiritual intensity, which was admired in the works of Michelangelo and Dürer and which was called "Terribilita" by their contemporaries because it threatened to overwhelm the

onlooker. Lorichs emulated in his engraved portraits particularly the late portraits of Dürer. A sublime example of this somber, threatening grandeur of expression : portrait of old Suleiman the Great, done on February 15, 1559. Great states legislator, and poets represented in his late years; he seems tired of tremendous burden of empire created by him, yet full of a wisdom and a knowledge which make him stand in almost superhuman grandeur above the small matters of the world. The artist has intentionally exaggerated the length of the haggard face, enhanced it by immense turban which even transgresses the borderline of the engraving. Eyes glow out of this stony face with unslackened vigour. Thus the image of the hold Sultan rises majestically like that of his monument, the mosque Sülemaniye, veiled by secrecy.

Enhancement, stylization of nature was one of artistic principles of Mannerism. But here it was requested by an immensely powerful reality, experienced by the artist in true life. Suleiman's portrait is the very climax in Lorichs' art, a tribute to the strangeness and greatness, with which the Orient encountered the imaginative visitor from the Occident.

O.B.