

THEME I

ORIENT and OCCIDENT

ANCIENT TURKISH TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY TURKISH PAINTING.

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Professor Arseven in his introductory speech on this theme excellently defined the dominant preoccupation of contemporary Turkish painting : the study and analysis of the classical and traditional repertory with a view to effecting a synthesis of the occidental spirit and Oriental plastic.

But before developing my theme, it will perhaps be useful to sketch the evolution of Turkish painting since the last century, so as better to understand the initiatives of certain painters and their juniors.

With Levni, a graceful but decadent artist, the Turkish miniature died towards the second half of the 18th century, and after him there were only popular draughtsmen left to carry on in a debased way the technique of the old masters. After a long period of transition, easel-painting, characteristic of western technique, was introduced towards the middle of the 19th century. Turning their backs completely on oriental tradition, painters adopted the third dimension, chiar-oscuro, modelling, linear and aerial perspective. Landscape and still-life, much more than figure composition, were treated by our first painters with a scrupulous and often naive realism, but always guided by an immense love of nature.

After 1900 Impressionism made its appearance and reached its zenith towards 1914 eclipsing the realism which had hitherto been fashionable. A group of painters, disciples of such men as Chabas, Besnard, and Lucien Simon practised the sort of academic Impressionism which at that time prevailed in almost every country in the world.

The influence of modern masters began to make itself felt from about 1928-1933. The painters of our generation, who had been students of Hoffman in Munich, or of Lhote, Leger, Gromaire and Friesz in Paris, introduced cubism, constructivism, abstract art and even surrealism into Turkey. The advanced society known as "Group D", created in 1933 played a leading part in the struggle for modern art, a struggle which proved to be a bitter one and which is still going on.

To tell the truth we must admit that Turkish painting had not until the last few years struck its own characteristic note, and had been content to draw inspiration from European techniques, sometimes adapting them to fit local subjects. From the realism of the last century inspired by French landscape painters, through the academic impressionism of the Paris salons, up to the methods of Lhote and Picasso in our own day, our painters have been good and conscientious students, endowed with good taste and of an eclectic turn of mind.

But at the present moment - and here I come to the quick of my subject - there are signs of a most interesting movement in modern Turkish painting which, if it forges ahead, may well cross our frontiers and become appreciated abroad. But in the presence of so many capable judges I must not dwell too much on this point, nor be too hasty to make forecasts, especially as I myself play a part in the movement which I have the honour of presenting to you.

What does this movement consist of ? I am hard put to to define it explicitly, for it offers no special technique, method nor aesthetic. Neither is it a

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concerted movement organized and launched by a group of artists. On the contrary, there are as many techniques as there are artists, and the latter often disagree in their feelings about art.

But there is, all the same, in the common will of certain living Turkish painters, a unity, a homogeneity of action which is harmonising and fusing together the most contradictory visions.

Young Turkish painting now tends to free itself from international sameness by turning towards its own traditions and using them with measure and moderation. It is a question of rediscovering a lost atmosphere and spirit, of discovering the mysterious link which on the one hand will permit the continuity of the national genius, and on the other hand - and this is the crux of the matter - will reconcile the manifestations of this genius with the demands of the western approach.

Here it is, I think, that the difference of religion comes in, for the Islamic conception of art is totally opposed to that of Christianity. For Islam art was a subtle, ornamental, and one might almost say, gratuitous and abstract game. Christendom, on the contrary, used it to express the drama of man in all its depth and complexity. To express man by means of juggling with forms and colours is, for Islam, almost sacrilege. For christianity, on the other hand, forms and colours have been an essential means of expressing the divinity in human terms.

In returning to their plastic traditions, whose decorative genius is unsurpassed, Turkish painters are obliged to modify them, to approach them with great circumspection, and then reconcile them with the western spirit which inspired the series of cultural reforms carried out in Turkey by the Kemalist revolution. It is here that two worlds met, and will always meet. Asia is here at our doorstep.

Asia - Europe, Orient - Occident; at first sight you would think we should be crushed, squeezed to death between these two formidable presences, that it would be impossible to find a balance between these two opposing masses. I fully realise that it is much easier to play with words and sketch out a possible synthetic aesthetic than to carry it out in concrete fact. The magnitude of the problem automatically reduces the works to the dimensions of feeble attempts.

But today our country seems mature enough to be able at last to create in the field of culture the spirit of synthesis which is necessary if our art is to shine beyond our frontiers. This will not be done without trials and errors. But what I am sure of from the start is that bad taste is absent and that our artists have set out carefully and wisely on their task of reconstitution.

But still very few of our artists are engaged on this task today. It is a task involving analysis, research, choice and dogged intelligence. It is a thankless task and the road is beset with pitfalls. From Tourgout Zaim, on the one hand, an authentic folkloric painter who has systematically turned his back on all European influence, to the experiments of our young contemporaries on the other, we find a group of painters among whom the more interesting, from the point of view of our subject, are Djemal Tollou, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, and his wife Eren Eyüboğlu, Hakkı Anlı, Sabri Berkel and I must apologise for mentioning myself. Certain Turkish painters now in Paris such as Fahrünnisa Zeyd, Nejad, Selim Touran, and Avni Arbaché sometimes try to reconcile Oriental and Western tendencies.

Few artists no doubt, and few convincing works of art. But surely the start of an interesting movement which has a good chance of growing and thriving.