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Osman Hamdi Bey – an Ottoman Orientalist or a Humanist Ottoman?

Abstract: The paintings of Osman Hamdi Bey (1842–1910) have been described as examples of "Ottoman Orientalism" because of their alleged similarity to paintings made at the same time in Europe depicting scenes from the Middle East, involving opulent palace settings, harem interiors, mosques, bazaars with exotic goods for display, street scenes with people in traditional Oriental garb, and so on. However, as will be argued here, Osman Hamdi is better described as an "Humanist Ottoman", certainly eager to preserve the memory of a rich Ottoman past, but also keen to celebrate human reason and the human quest for truth and beauty. Hence, his delight in portraying historical scenes should not be viewed as a commitment to traditionalist values. Indeed, in terms of normative ethics, Osman Hamdi can be seen as an anti-traditionalist, pointing to the need of subjecting religious faith to critical scrutiny. This is especially true of his *Genesis* (1901). Rather than dismissing Osman Hamdi's art because of its superficial similarity to the exoticism of some of his European contemporaries, we should recognize it as an original and valuable contribution in its own right.

Keywords: Osman Hamdi Bey, Ottoman Orientalism, humanism, Islam, religion

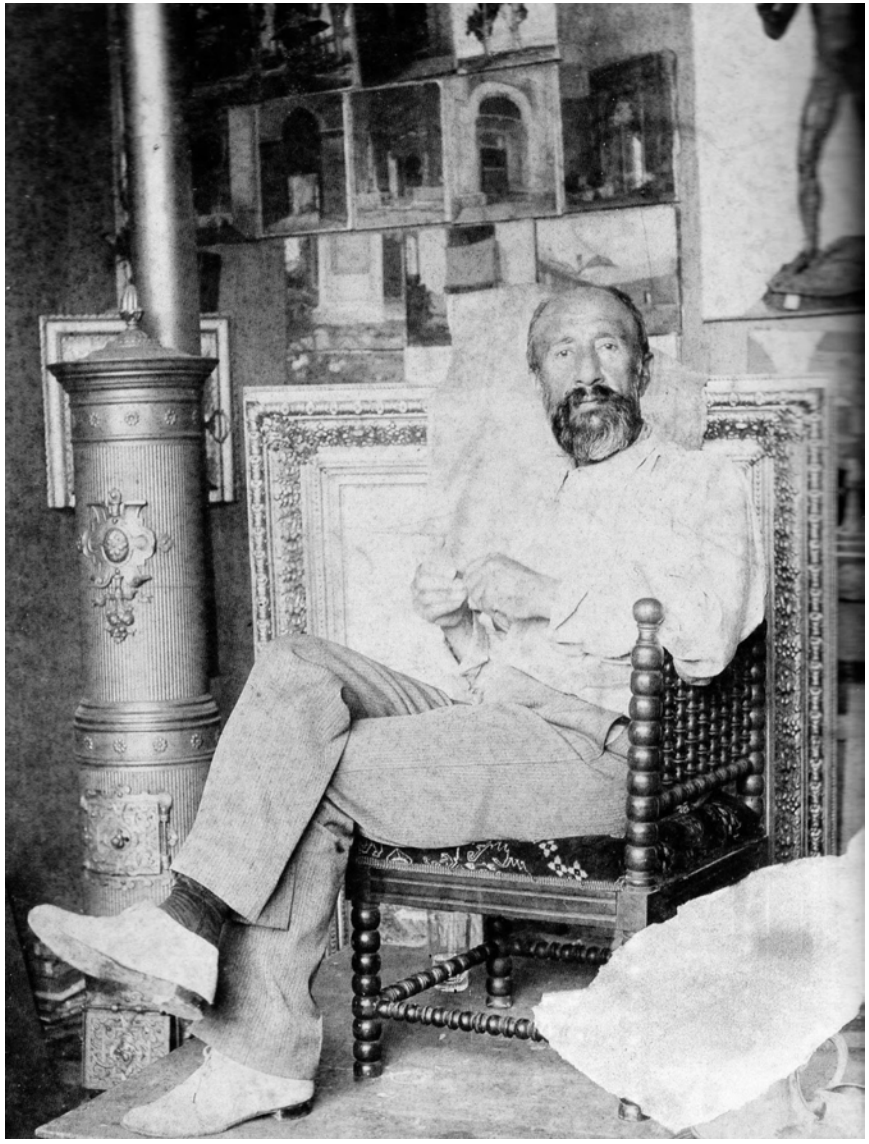

Fig. 1. Osman Hamdi Bey (1842–1910) in his studio, c. 1895. Unknown photographer. www.ottomanhistorypodcast.com (non-commercial fair use)

Osman Hamdi Bey
– an Ottoman Orientalist or a Humanist Ottoman?[1]

Per Bauhn

Orientalism and Ottoman Orientalism

According to Edward Said, orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient".[2] More concretely, Said believes that orientalism involves a way for Westerners (mainly the French and the British) to stereotype Easterners (mainly in the form of Muslim Arabs) in such a way as to legitimize Western dominance. Orientalism, according to Said, includes an image of the Orient as a place for sexual experiences. Said points to how Gustave Flaubert lets his novel characters daydream about an escape from the convention-bound tedium of bourgeois life to an Orient populated by "harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys, sherbets, ointments, and so on" and where "the association is clearly made between the Orient and the freedom of licentious sex". Bored Westerners projected their desire for adventure on societies and cultures of which they had little or no first-hand knowledge, allowing themselves to assume that "the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe".[3]

Overall, orientalist notions give rise to a "doctrine of the Orient", which is expressed in clichés and stereotypes about "the Oriental character, Oriental despotism, Oriental sensuality, and the like".[4] Given the impact of these stereo-

types in Europe during the 19th century, Said concludes that any European who during this time spoke about the Orient must be "a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric".[5] (Here, Said himself does not shy away from stereotyping and generalizing about people of whom he knows very little.)

Ottoman orientalism – a term coined by the historian Ussama Makdisi[6] – means that the dichotomy between West and East is applied *within* the Ottoman Empire by its elites in their encounter with the empire's periphery. On the one hand these 19th century elites, who tried to reform the crumbling empire, identified themselves with a Western concept of development, making them perceive the peoples of the provinces as uncivilized. However, on the other hand they also refused to accept a Western image of the Orient in general as backward, as they also identified themselves with the Orient as well as with Islam and did not seek to become Westerners. They distinguished between a primitive and pre-modern Oriental self, representative of the Empire's periphery, and an enlightened, modern and progressive Oriental represented by themselves.[7] Moreover, they saw it as their task to civilize the Sultan's undeveloped subjects (such as Arabs and Kurds) in order to make room for an overall Ottoman political community of equal citizens. They wanted to be social engineers, and there is no doubt that they saw themselves as having the right to define what was in the best interests of the peoples of the periphery.

Osman Hamdi Bey

Osman Hamdi Bey (1842–1910) was the son of Ibrahim Edhem Pascha (1818–93), who in turn was an adopted slave of Hüsrev Pascha (1769–1855), Grand Admiral of the Ottoman Navy. Ibrahim Edhem had been taken as a three-year-old from the Greek island of Chios, where the Ottoman army had massacred the civilian population, and was bought in Istanbul by Hüsrev Pascha, who had similarly taken in several other children to be brought up in his family. Ibrahim Edhem was sent to Paris for education with a scholarship from the Sultan. He was one of the best students at the prestigious mining engineering course at the École des Mines. Returning to Istanbul, he made a career in the Sultan's administration, as foreign minister, trade minister and later grand vizier (1877–78). He was also active as a member of the Turkish Academy of Sciences (founded in 1851), author of several articles in geology and mathematics, translator of historical literature, initiator of a work on Ottoman architecture, and responsible for an early attempt to introduce the metric system into the Ottoman Empire.[8]

In 1860, the young Osman Hamdi was sent by his father to Paris to learn French and study law, with the purpose of gaining useful knowledge and experience for the further modernization of the Ottoman Empire. The study motivation wavered however, as Osman Hamdi would rather spend time training as a painter. It is not known with certainty who he studied under, but two artists are usually mentioned: Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) and Gustave Boulanger (1824–88).

In 1868 he was called home by his father, who saw it as important that his son began to make himself useful in the administration. Osman Hamdi was sent to Iraq, then a province of the Ottoman Empire, as assistant to the governor there. From the time there (1869–70) we have a preserved correspondence in French between father and son. Returning to Istanbul, Osman Hamdi received assignments for the Ottoman Ministry for Foreign Affairs, including responsibility for the Ottoman Empire's participation in the World Exhibition in Vienna in 1873. In 1881, he was appointed director of what would later become the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul. Although Osman Hamdi himself participated in archaeological excavations, he came to devote himself above all to the museum's collections. He seems to have been aware that "his real mission lay more in the management of the institution than in a possibly disappointing career as an archaeologist".[9] As museum director, he made significant efforts to protect the antiquities of the Ottoman Empire from exploitation by foreign interests. Parallel to his work as museum director, Osman Hamdi continued to paint. He also contributed to the study of art and to the training of artists and art scholars by establishing (in 1882) an institute for the fine arts, which later became the Mimar Sinan University in Istanbul.

Tanzimat

Osman Hamdi Bey, like Ibrahim Edhem Pascha before him, is intimately associated with the period in the history of the Ottoman Empire known as the *Tanzimat* (reorganization) of 1839–76. Tanzimat was a response to external aggression as well as to ethno-nationalism within the empire. The Tanzimat activists looked to the West for inspiration and wanted to apply Western conditions of development to the Ottoman Empire. It was basically an elite project, in

which one sought to infuse new life and new energy into the crumbling empire from above. *Ottomanism* was launched as an overarching ideology, according to which all the Sultan's subjects should enjoy equal rights, regardless of religion and ethnicity. The Tanzimat reformers also wanted to do away with the millet system, according to which people were organized, taxed and prosecuted along the lines of religious group affiliation, aiming for a system in which Muslim and non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Sultan would enjoy equal legal rights. Taxation, education and conscription would now cover everyone, without special provisions for religious communities. The Tanzimat culminated in the establishment of a bicameral parliament in 1876, in which members of the second chamber were elected with suffrage for all men of some wealth. (The first chamber was appointed by the Sultan.) Parliament was dissolved two years later by Sultan Abdülhamid II, who then ruled the kingdom autocratically for the next thirty years.

Osman Hamdi Bey's progressivism

Osman Hamdi's mission in Iraq has been described as a form of "enlightened colonialism",[10] with the aim of projecting canals and railways, as well as exploring the Euphrates. In the encounter with the Ottoman Empire's outposts in Iraq, Osman Hamdi came to embrace an attitude reminiscent of that which Westerners used to apply to the Ottoman Empire at large: on the one hand the people were genuine, original and authentic, on the other they were hopelessly backward, corrupt and lawless.[11] For the Ottoman elite to which Osman Hamdi belonged, Istanbul stood for civilization, the Arab parts of the empire for the wild and untamed periphery, inhabited by people that one sometimes admires, often fears or despises, never identifies with, and always wants to control. The desire to promote progress and development was paired with a top-down perspective – not unlike that which we associate with the social engineers of the 20th century. This has led the historian Edhem Eldem, a late relative of Osman Hamdi Bey, to claim that "Osman Hamdi Bey was an Orientalist because he believed in a modernity that he also practiced".[12]

About the Arab nomads in Iraq, Osman Hamdi writes to his father in August 1869: "They are intelligent, honest, courageous and brave. But do you think the Arabs have taken one single step towards civilization or development? No!" But he lays the blame for this on former provincial governors who were more

interested in draining the local population of resources than in promoting industry, trade and good administration.

> So we are faced with a people who do not know, who have seen nothing but the language of power. Given this, I ask you whether a people brought up in this way can see and judge the government by its army or by its administration? By its army, because they know nothing but the language of power; for them the army is the government.[13]

Osman Hamdi also expresses views on the traditional family and on arranged marriages. In a letter to his father in April 1870, he urges his father to look around him:

> What do you see in the families? Corruption, immorality, disputes, divorces. Slavery haunts them, the harem slave girls demoralize them. The woman does not submit to her husband, the husband does not respect his wife. [...] The children are abandoned. [...] Entrusted to the slave, who believes himself to be just another good piece of furniture, these poor little ones grow up [...] And all this because a ridiculous convention in our degenerate customs wants the man to take a wife with his eyes closed. It wants marriage to be the result not of the free consent of the woman and the man, but rather of a contract between the parents.[14]

At the same time, Osman Hamdi is keen to emphasize that his criticism of traditional ways of life is not directed at Islam per se, but only at a distorted form of Islam, and that he does not mean that Western customs are in all things preferable to Ottoman ones:

> Note well, my dear father, that when I attack in this way our customs, which are no longer the customs of Muslims, I do not instead sing the praises of the European customs. I have much to say about them too, but nevertheless I must say that I prefer them in this one respect, that one is not usually depraved, corrupt, and immoral except outside of marriage. The rich man does not, beside his legal wife, have at his disposal a number of young slave girls, but if he wants to have illegitimate and illegal intercourse, he has it in the street and with free women, designated as prostitutes and consequently outside the law.[15]

Osman Hamdi claims that what he has just said applies to "the great, the rich, and not the people". As for the European bourgeoisie, its family morality is "almost impeccable, especially in Germany". This then leads to a consideration of the shortcomings of the Ottoman middle class:

> Go to the mosque on Friday and look at the artisan, the citizen – a country's only source of wealth. He is wretched, dressed in rags, just a shadow that arouses pity. No enterprise, no trade, nothing! Nothing, but a patient fatalism! Everything comes from God. He goes to a half-collapsed shed which is his shop, he finds it ransacked – this comes from God – he returns to a shack that is his home and finds it in flames – this comes always from God and never from the administration! Look there the craftsman, look there the taxpayer, look there the people.[16]

Most of Osman Hamdi Bey's professional life took place during the autocratic rule of Abdülhamid II. Osman Hamdi refrained from open opposition, but sympathized with the so-called Young Turk Revolt of 1908 which ended the autocracy and reinstated constitutional rule. He described himself as "the oldest of the Young Turks" and painted a portrait of Enver Pascha, one of the leaders of the new government.[17]

However, the progressivism of Osman Hamdi Bey could not be fully realized even within his own family. His second wife, Marie Palyart Hamdi (1863–1943), a French woman (as was his first wife), admittedly did not have to abandon her Christian faith in connection with her marriage. But it was unthinkable that she or her daughters would appear unveiled on the streets of Istanbul or that they would appear together with Osman Hamdi Bey in public contexts. To a female guest visiting the Hamdi family's home in 1896, she said: "I never cross the street behind my house to my hill garden except in *yashmak*".[18] In fairness, however, it should be pointed out that it was the conventions of Ottoman society rather than Osman Hamdi Bey personally that set limits to the freedom of these women. Incidentally, Osman Hamdi himself was for a long period denied permission to travel abroad by a sultan always suspicious of Western influences.

Osman Hamdi Bey's art and Orientalism

As for the orientalism of Osman Hamdi Bey's art, it has been pointed out that he is not to be compared with his teachers Boulanger and Gérôme, who depicted naked harem slave girls, thereby exoticizing the Orient while at the same time catering to the pornographic desires of their domestic audience. This form of orientalism appealed to the viewer's voyeuristic impulses, as the harem environment in reality would never have been accessible to an outside male spectator. Osman Hamdi's art is free from such voyeurism. According to art historian Wendy Shaw, it "does not offer access to or conquest of secret spaces" but instead takes us to "the private space of his own home" where the depicted woman "faces away from us".[19] It becomes more like we are invited to sneak up on the artist in his work, rather than sneaking up on naked women. Likewise, François Georgeon has pointed to the fact that while women play a central role in many of Osman Hamdi's paintings, they are never eroticized, nor are they depicted as submissive to men or to religion; indeed, according to Georgeon, for Osman Hamdi "women's equality is not only a legal question; it begins – and this is a profoundly original idea – with their equality before and in religion".[20]

The question of whether Osman Hamdi Bey should be seen as an orientalist or not touches on another question, namely whether there is any definite message at all in his paintings. Historian Edhem Eldem is skeptical about this. In the case of one of Osman Hamdi's most famous paintings, *The Tortoise Trainer* (fig. 2), it has been interpreted as an image of Osman Hamdi himself (he often appears in his own paintings, disguised in historical costumes), reflecting his frustration with the reluctance of the Ottoman authorities to support him in his ambition to promote historical research and education. Eldem points out that when the painting was first exhibited it was simply titled *Man with Tortoises*, without any reference to "training" of any kind. Only after Osman Hamdi's death did it get the name *The Tortoise Trainer* and with this title come associations with other forms of training – education, enlightenment, the acquisition of knowledge, and so on. Eldem believes that "there is clearly nothing in either the painting or its name that allows us to claim that Osman Hamdi Bey meant this as an allegory or a metaphor on education and training". According to Eldem, Osman Hamdi probably had "no other intent than to reproduce a composition that he found appealing and adaptable to an Ottoman environment".[21] Hence, Eldem has no problem seeing Osman Hamdi Bey as an orientalist:

> Although certainly a patriot at heart, he possessed a very strong base of 'acquired' Orientalism of a Western kind, which in time came to dominate his vision of the world that surrounded him. [...] This was all the more true of his artistic production, which espoused most of the forms, subjects, and inclinations of Western Orientalist painting. For a man who had spent eight years in Paris, was married twice to French women, and spoke and wrote French more readily

> than Turkish with his family and colleagues, Orientalism had most probably become both a side effect and an expression of his way of life. [...] Disappointing as it may sound, I believe that his main motivation [...] was to cater to the expectations of a Western audience by offering an aesthetically pleasing, technically convincing, and culturally consistent vision of an Islamic Orient.[22]

Eldem's rather dismissive view of Osman Hamdi's artistic motivation goes even so far as to suggest that Osman Hamdi is just an opportunist, creating art that would attract the attention of Western art buyers: "[H]is painting should not be viewed as a form of reaction, rebellion, or subversion, but rather as a sales strategy".[23] However, Eldem's account is neither fair, nor exhaustive. Certainly one can describe Osman Hamdi Bey's artistic style as orientalist in a purely aesthetic sense and explain this by the fact that he was trained by artists who cultivated this genre. But to reduce his artistic output to a matter of giving a Western audience what it wants seems to be not only unfair but also testifies to a rather shallow and superficial understanding of his art. It is also to be guilty of a logical fallacy, namely to confuse effect with intention. The fact that Osman Hamdi Bey's art was well received in the West does not mean that his (only) intention with his art was to create something that Westerners could absorb. After all, he could have had the same (or even more) success with nude studies of the kind Western orientalist painters put on the market, but he did not try any such road to fame and fortune.

It may be more interesting to place him and Aesthetic orientalism in general in a wider perspective, which does not necessarily have to be reduced to Said's conspiratorial assumption of a will to produce racist stereotypes about the Orient. Ahmet Ersoy, for example, has pointed out how, in connection with the desire for a new beginning associated with the Tanzimat era, Ottoman artists also indulged in "collective daydreams about a distant and resplendent Ottoman/Islamic past".[24] These collective daydreams, in turn, had their basis in "a fundamental awareness of change, an irreversible sense of break and, especially in the scholarly and artistic field, a Romantic sensitivity towards irremediable loss".[25] Art historian Wendy Shaw has made a similar remark, pointing to the connection between Osman Hamdi Bey's art and his archaeological interests.

Fig. 2. Osman Hamdi, Man with Tortoises*, 1906. Oil on canvas. 221.5x120 cm. Pera Museum, Istanbul. Wikimedia Commons (CC0 1.0).*

His art has a predilection for historical, retrospective themes, and "he works in a space not merely anachronistic but also somewhat museum-like".[26]

Ersoy's and Shaw's remarks can be applied not only to Osman Hamdi Bey's art but also to Western European history painting, including its orientalist forms, at the same time. Not only the Ottoman Empire experienced a period of change and rupture. Industrialism, urbanism, commercialism, and a domineering cult of utility and efficiency contributed to create a longing for some undefined past, whether it was medieval chivalric romance, Roman and Greek antiquity – or the Ottoman Orient, which could be associated with a wealth and splendour that contrasted with the dreary reality that the modern era seemed to bring.

One can accuse the history painters of naivety and even moral irresponsibility when they aestheticized slave markets and harem environments, but one would be mistaken to reduce their work to expressions of condescension or racism. At least in many cases, their work is rather about celebrating a beauty and aesthetic richness that they projected on a culturally and historically distant past – a kind of artistic dream about a way of life different from what the excessive materialism that they perceived in their own time and society. In doing so they were not so very different from those later modernists who instead would look to the future, celebrating machines, technology, and a ruthless progress, rebelling against what they perceived as the false and pretentious sentimentalism, conventionalism, and traditionalism of their own time and society. The visual arts have never been merely about documenting the present, but have also always provided windows and ways of escape into the past or the future.

The 19th century, with its great and rapid upheavals – the industrial revolution, the breakdown of traditional ways of life, the manifest presence of factories, the cult of an unsentimental efficiency and an unfettered quest for profit, the accompanying brutal use of workers, the existence of slums and of an urban proletariat – awakened both artists' and art audiences' longing for something beautiful, harmonious, and contemplative. Looking back to various imagined pasts was a way of expressing the discomfort many felt in a world dominated by industrial efficiency – a world in which, according to Karl Marx, "[a]ll that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind".[27] While Marx accepted the upheavals of the 19th century as a historical

necessity and as a step on the road to socialism, not everyone was willing to embrace his deterministic views. To those who were appalled by the ugliness of certain prominent aspects of the modern condition, creating and searching for beauty became an act of resistance. Historicizing art was a moral as well as an aesthetic reaction to the industrial revolution. At the same time, that restless and dynamic capitalism from which many artists wanted to distance themselves had also made it possible for a number of well-to-do private individuals to pay for historicizing art.

Nostalgic art of this kind can of course be criticized for failing to address the often harsh reality behind the environments it aestheticizes. However, before one surrenders to objections concerning lack of realism, one would do well to stop and consider one's criteria for good art. After all, art is not (or at least not only) about providing an empirically valid and objectively true account of reality. Hence, it would be a mistake to evaluate individual art works only according to criteria of truthful representation:

> The first prejudice teachers of art appreciation usually try to combat is the belief that artistic excellence is identical with photograhic accuracy. [...] Aesthetics, in other words, has surrendered its claim to be concerned with the problem of convincing representation, the problem of illusion in art.[28]

An art work should not be understood as a scientific report or a piece of newspaper journalism. Nor is it a defining property of good art that it should conform to a politically or morally correct understanding of the world. Art works representing reality are always perspectivist, not only in the trivial sense that they depict a person or a landscape from a particular angle at a particular time, but also in the more interesting sense that they express the artist's (or the art buyer's) aesthetic preferences. But aesthetic preferences are not necessarily identical to moral evaluations. A person can at one and the same time embrace aesthetic traditionalism and political progressivism, or combine a radical avantgardism in art with a conservative view on moral and social issues. Here we can remind ourselves of the case of William Morris, the Victorian founder of the Arts and Crafts movement. Morris was a socialist who loved medieval art work, combining "the tradition of socialism as a critique of political economy with the tradition of Romantic anti-industrialism".[29]

The person who sees beauty in a medieval scene is not necessarily in favour

of reintroducing a feudal society. To object to an artist's work that it does not capture the full social reality of the scenes it depicts is hence just as misguided as objecting to a cubist painting that "things do not look like that". Nor should we uncritically accept Said's accusation that the primary motivation of artists who depict harem interiors is to portray the Orient as a backward slave society. Instead they might just as well have wanted to express their rejection of that utilitarian instrumentalism typical of the 19th century industrialist or engineer described by Oscar Wilde as someone "who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing".[30]

Genesis

Osman Hamdi Bey undeniably expresses a retrospective and nostalgic perspective in much of his art. He depicts environments that by his time had largely already disappeared. But that is not the whole truth about his art. As we have seen, Edhem Eldem is reluctant to ascribe to his old relative any other motive than to satisfy a Western audience looking for romanticized orientalist motives. But there is one painting that Eldem has difficulty bringing under this reductionist perspective, namely *Genesis* (1901), fig. 3. This is probably Osman Hamdi's most enigmatic painting and certainly one of his most symbol-laden ones. Many questions surround it. Even its name has been a source of confusion. The painting is often called *Mihrab* after the prayer "niche", marked with dark glazed tiles, in the background of the picture. However, that name was given to it as late as 1971 by the art historian Mustafa Cezar in a biography of Osman Hamdi Bey. Cezar seems to have believed that the painting was previously unnamed as he writes that "we have chosen to name [it] *Mihrab*", adding that "perhaps our readers will find a more appropriate name for it".[31] However, as Edhem Eldem has pointed out, when the painting was first exhibited, in Berlin 1901, and then again in Paris and London in 1903, it appeared with the French title *La genèse*,[32] that is, *Genesis*, suggesting the double meaning of "origin" and "creation", with the latter word also carrying a religious connotation (as, for instance, in the case of the biblical *Book of Genesis*, in which it is described how God created life on Earth).

Unfortunately, Edhem Eldem himself adds to the confusion surrounding the title of the painting by giving it a new Turkish name – *Yaradılış* – meaning "creation" in the religious sense of the word.[33] Thereby he takes side on an issue

Fig. 3. Osman Hamdi, Genesis, *1901. Oil on canvas. 210 x 108 cm. With permission from Pivadacom.*

that Osman Hamdi himself (probably intentionally) left open to interpretation. "Genesis" could, of course, refer to artistic creation and not only to divine agency; it could also, more generally, refer to *origin*, as in the origin of life, the origin of humanity, the origin of wisdom – all of which could be associated with Osman Hamdi's painting.

In the painting, a woman, in the first months of her pregnancy, is seated on a Quran stand, with a prayer niche (*mihrab*) behind her and with open Qurans and Zoroastrian books in front of and under her feet. This image is about something different than giving a pleasing image of the Orient. And here Osman Hamdi Bey wants something more than just depicting a historical setting. Interestingly enough, whatever message he intended his painting to convey seems to have escaped the viewers when it was first exhibited in Europe. In London, the exhibition catalogue noted only that it depicted a woman "in lemon-yellow Oriental robe, sitting upright in an x-shaped seat on a dais. Behind her is a blue-tiled Cairene wall background; a censer and a number of Arabic books are scattered at the feet".[34]

Unfortunately, Edhem Eldem who makes these observations, does not himself seem to be inclined to contribute to any interesting understanding of *Genesis*. Discussing the female model of the painting, Eldem rejects anecdotal evidence from Osman Hamdi's grandson that the woman in the painting is the pregnant daughter of an Armenian servant in Osman Hamdi's household. Instead he suggests that the model could be Osman Hamdi's daughter Leyla who gave birth to a child in 1902 – only to realize that "[o]ne major problem"[35] with this interpretation is that the painting was finished and exhibited for the first time one year before the birth of this child and that Leyla hence could not have been pregnant at the time the painting was made.

Eldem also suggests that the source of inspiration for *Genesis* is a small statue called *Tanagra*, made by the French painter and sculptor Jean-Léon Gérôme in 1890 (fig. 4). This statue is of a seated naked woman, but with no allusions to any religious symbols or texts. Gérôme, who throughout his life was deeply interested in the Classical World, wanted to commemorate the archaeological excavations that had been going on near the Greek town of Tanagra in the 1870s and which had unearthed a number of small terracotta figurines from

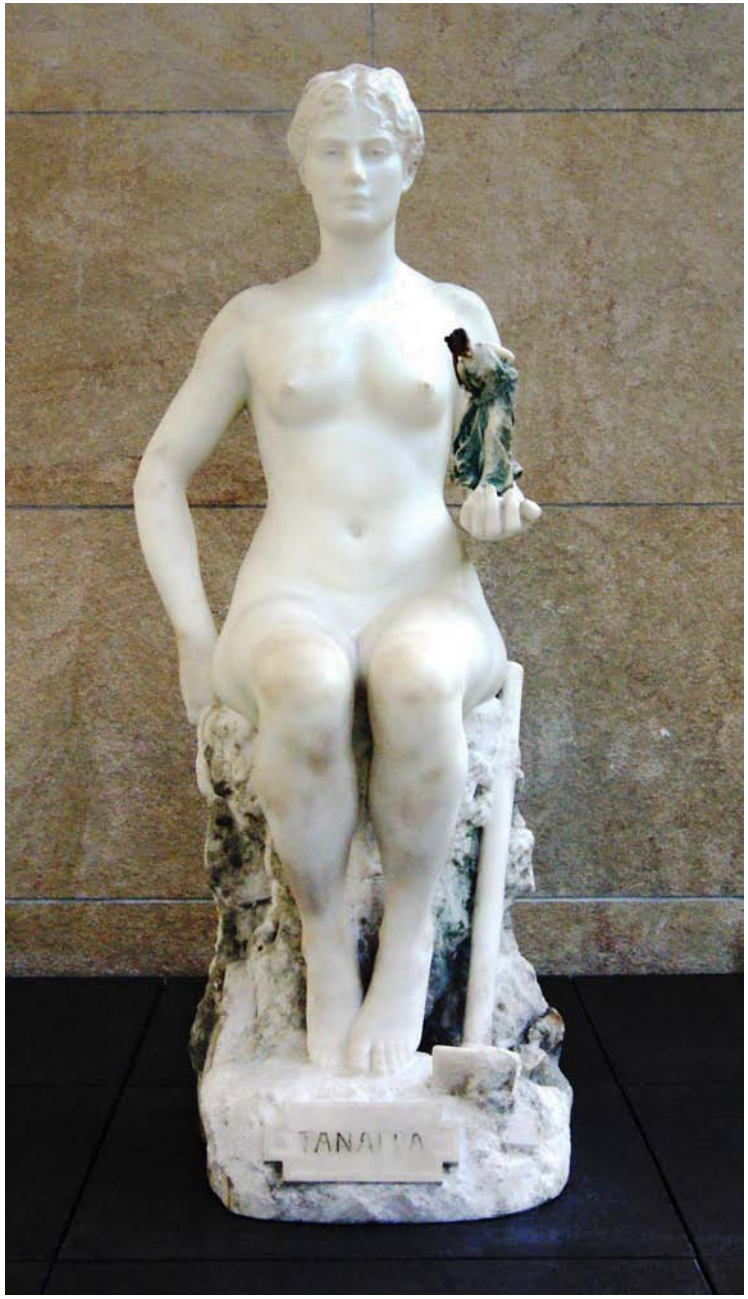

Fig. 4. Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), Tanagra*, 1890. Marble. Height 154.7 cm. Musée d'Orsay. Wikimedia Commons, foto Lomita (CC BY-SA 4.0).*

the fourth century BC, many of which represented seated as well as standing women. The *Tanagra* sculpture shows a woman seated atop an excavation mound, with an archaeologist's pickax next to her and some partly excavated small figurines visible at her feet. This is a celebration of archaeology and of ancient Greece – and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the religious and existentialist themes of Osman Hamdi's painting. The only thing that *Genesis* and *Tanagra* have in common is that they both depict a seated woman. In every other respect they are different, and there is nothing to suggest that *Genesis* is inspired by *Tanagra*.

Instead *Genesis* could be seen as an expression of a radical humanistic perspective. It is humanity and the conditions of the human existence, not religion, that is at the centre here. The woman in the painting is represented as the origin (genesis) of life, and human life itself rather than religion is presented as the proper object of veneration. Her golden dress accentuates her supreme status. Moreover, the woman is seated where the Quran would have been placed. The Quran stand would normally support the holy book of Islam, an object of respect and reverence, believed by Muslims to contain the words of the Prophet Muhammad. But instead a pregnant woman in a golden dress with a serious looking face occupies this place. Instead of the holiness of the Quran we are met with the holiness of human life itself. The woman's feet rest on various holy scriptures of different religions. The books are in a disarray, as if they have been thrown to the floor in anger or frustration, one of them having its cover partly torn off and its pages falling out. Moreover, they are placed in an inferior position in relation to the woman – they are under her feet or at least on the floor, at the same level as her feet. Most of the books are open as if they have recently been read; hence, they are not thought of as useless, but neither are they treated with great respect. This is humanity sitting in judgement over religion, assessing the value of religion and religious texts from the point of view of human life and human reason. It is a celebration of the human being and her quest for beauty, wisdom, and meaning, presenting that human being as the origin of all values, including the values of religion.

The most reasonable understanding of Osman Hamdi's message here is that humanity and human life is the end, and religion is at most a means to enlightenment. Religion is a tool for man, man is not a tool for religion; religious texts are supposed to serve mankind, not the other way round. The observation made by Edhem Eldem that the holy scriptures in the painting are not only Islamic but also Zoroastrian suggests that Osman Hamdi wanted to make a general point about the value of religion, not just a comment specifically relating to Islam. Hence, while Osman Hamdi does not reject religion as a possible source of wisdom, his painting suggests that whatever value religion has should be assessed from the point of view of its contributions to a full and good human life.

Religion viewed as a means to human ends brings the message of Osman Hamdi's *Genesis* close to Immanuel Kant's famous formulation of the categorical imperative of morality: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end".[36] The respect traditionally reserved for religion is now conferred to humanity. The woman turns her back on Mecca and places herself between the realm of religion and us. This suggests a view of holiness as being accessible only through humanity, or that the origin (*genesis*) of holiness itself is to be found in humanity. If we want to worship God, we should begin by addressing our own very humanity. We cannot reach Mecca without first being in touch with human life, human reason, and human freedom.

The woman in the painting is pale, with a rather stern face, sitting with a straight back and with her hands firmly clasping the sides of the Quran stand. This can also be seen as an image of humanity in awe of its responsibility for its own future. Again we may associate to Kant, but now to his famous dictum *sapere aude!* – dare to be wise! Kant presents this as the motto of Enlightenment, that is, "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity".[37] He also makes a specific point of defending freedom of critical inquiry in religious matters: "[I]t is absolutely impermissible to agree, even for a single lifetime, to a permanent religious constitution which no-one might publicly question".[38] The idea that knowledge and wisdom require courage – including the courage involved in assessing the value of religious claims – is well reflected in the determined position of the woman in the *Genesis* painting.

Osman Hamdi Bey as a humanist

Osman Hamdi made several paintings in which men, boys, and girls are reading religious texts, and his focus is always on the act of reading itself, not on

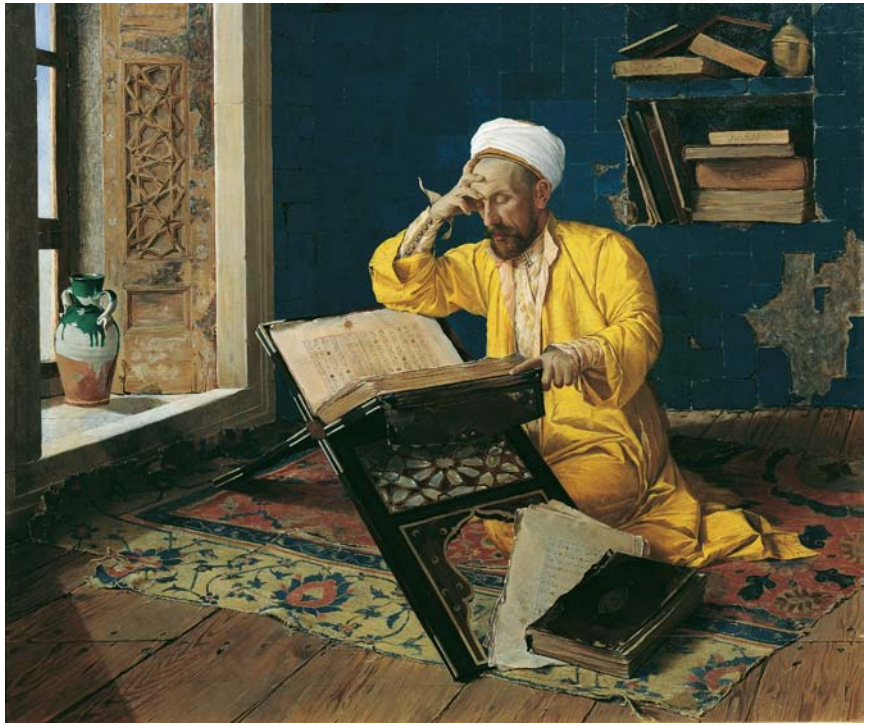

Fig. 5. Osman Hamdi, An Islamic Theologian with the Quran, *1902. Oil on canvas. 145 x 171 cm. Belvedere Museum, Vienna, Austria. Wikimedia Commons (CC0 1.0).*

the passive listening to someone else's preaching. He celebrates *agents* rather than recipients, those who themselves *search* for wisdom rather than those who passively accept the teaching of others, those who *study* religion rather than those who just submit to religious authorities. Hence, the reading of holy texts in Osman Hamdi's paintings expresses human curiosity and an intellectualist attitude rather than a mere fulfilment of a religious duty. For instance, in the painting *An Islamic Theologian with the Quran* (1902) we can see a man in a golden robe seated on the floor with an open Quran in a stand in front of him (fig. 5). He supports his head with his right hand, the elbow resting on a corner of the book. His face is pensive rather than submissive. This is a man who comes to his Quran with questions rather than with convictions, reflecting on what the book tells him rather than simply accepting it on faith. Or take a look

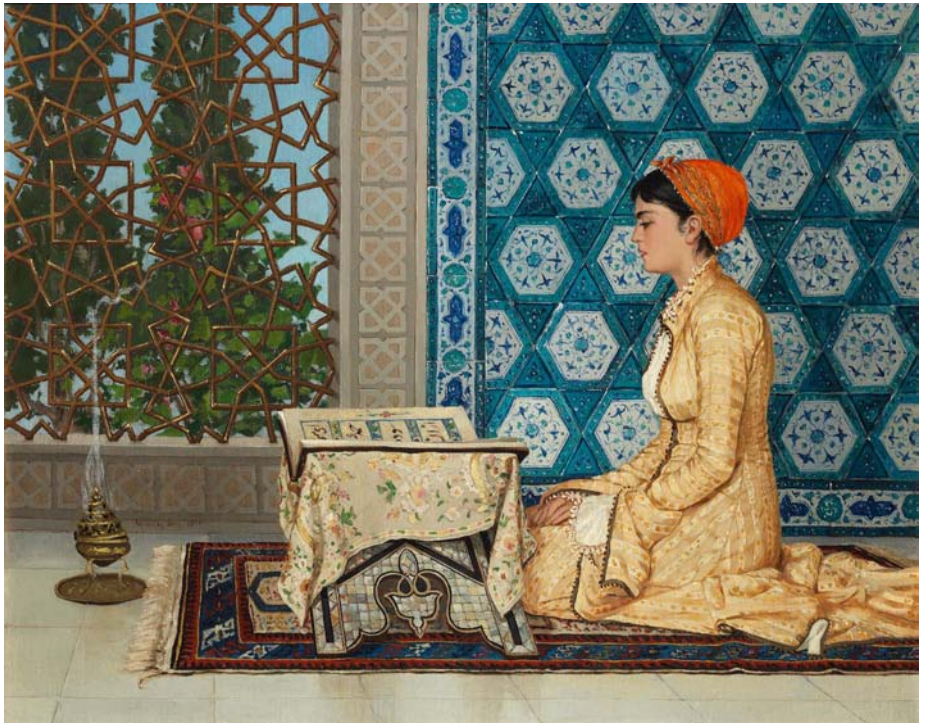

Fig. 6. Osman Hamdi, Girl reading the Quran*, 1880. Oil on canvas. 41.1 x 51 cm. With permission from Pivadacom. Sold at the Bonham auction house in 2019, to the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.*

at *Girl Reading the Quran* (1880), fig. 6. Here, once again, Osman Hamdi has depicted a young girl in a golden dress, seated on an Oriental rug with an opened Quran on a stand in front of her, next to a blue tiled wall and a window opening up to a garden. The girl sits with her legs drawn up under her and with her back in a straight position. Her eyes are directed towards the open Quran, but they are the eyes of a critical and thoughtful reader, not of a religious enthusiast. She is *studying* the Quran, not *submitting* to it. She is a girl who, in Kant's words, dares to be wise, seeking wisdom for herself and on her own. This is not an image of religious indoctrination or female submissiveness, but rather a manifestation of agency and critical thinking.

Osman Hamdi challenges certain religious taboos and conventions in his art, but he also wants to include what he finds beautiful in religious architecture and

Fig. 7. Osman Hamdi, Two musician girls*, 1880. Oil on canvas. 58 x 39 cm. Pera Museum, Istanbul. Wikimedia Commons (CCo 1.0).*

ornamentation. He celebrates the things that bring beauty and spiritual growth to human life, but he does so in a way that is very much his own. Take a look, for instance, at his painting *Two Musician Girls* (1880), fig. 7. The two girls in this painting are beautifully dressed, one in a white dress with golden embroideries, the other in a green dress with broad golden stripes. The girl in white is standing, fingering a *tambura*, a traditional Ottoman string instrument, the girl in green is seated on the floor at the feet of her friend, holding a *def*, a kind of tambourine, in her left hand. The girls have corresponding hair bands – the standing girl wears a green band, matching the dress of the seated girl, and the latter wears a golden hair band, matching the embroidery of the standing girl. The standing girl has a serious and concentrated look on her face as she plays her instrument, while the seated girl has her eyes fixed on her friend.

When the painting was first exhibited at the Elifba Club in the Tepebaşı Garden, Istanbul, in 1880 it was praised as "sweet, calm, and pleasing to the eye".[39] But there is more to consider here than just the beauty of the picture. The two girls are placed against a background of blue ornamented tiles and a white marble baluster or screen fencing off an upstairs floor. The stairs leading up to this floor are covered with colourful oriental rugs. Now this setting is worth noticing as it depicts elements from the interior of the famous Green Mosque (*Yeşil Cami*) of Bursa (fig. 8).[40] When the picture is described in a 2019 Pera Museum booklet about Osman Hamdi, it is pointed out that it represents women who are "aware of their individual identities and talents" and that "architectural elements from the Green Mosque in Bursa can be seen, and the artistic identity of the women is accompanied by decorative elements that are uniquely Ottoman".[41]

Now, the information that Osman Hamdi used the Green Mosque of Bursa as a setting for his two musician girls is worth noticing not only for the accuracy in which he depicts architectural elements of the mosque but also for the very fact that he used a *mosque* as a setting. From a religious point of view it would be highly unorthodox, to say the least, to have two young woman playing music in a mosque. The standard musical practice in an Ottoman mosque would include (male) imams and muezzins using their voices to recite the Quran, call for prayers and sing hymns,[42] but not two girls playing instruments. By associating the two girl musicians to a room of holiness, Osman Hamdi might have intended them and their devotion to their art to be recognized as representative

of humanity in its most refined and uplifting form and as deserving of our admiration. Connecting the exercise of art to holiness could be Osman Hamdi's way of celebrating culture in a sense close to the original Latin meaning of the word, that is, as a *cultivation* of human values such as truth and beauty. These values would also be obviously meaningful to a man who, as an archaeologist and a painter, had devoted his life to the quest for historical truth and artistic beauty.

Osman Hamdi's art is not anti-religious but rather humanistic; for him the primary aim is not a matter of challenging religion and religious beliefs as such but rather to celebrate humanity, human agency, human culture and human values. His art glorifies the human desire to know and to bring beauty to the world. It does not rule out religion and religious texts as a possible source of human enlightenment, but it points to the necessity of a *critical* understanding of these texts. The religious texts should be read, studied, questioned, and reflected upon – not just submitted to in an act of blind and unquestioning faith. Implicitly he celebrates a confident humanistic perspective, according to which we should view religion and religious texts as possible instruments to our existential well-being rather than as dogmas to be uncritically accepted and followed. That is, we should think of religion as a possible means to a rich and cultured human life rather than thinking of humanity as just an instrument in the service of some religious faith. Now this position, even if it does not amount to an outright rejection of religion, certainly conflicts with orthodox understandings of religion in general and of Islam in particular. As the contemporary Turkish artist Ipek Aksüğür Duben has noted about Osman Hamdi Bey, "he opposed traditional Islamic philosophy with logic, scientificity, objectivity, the importance of human beings and the beauty of matter".[43]

Osman Hamdi Bey does not seem to have been troubled by the alleged ban on depicting human beings usually associated with Sunni Islam. He would probably have defended himself against religious criticism by pointing out that the ban does not have to be interpreted as a ban on all kinds of depictions. This was also an argument made by Osman Hamdi Bey's friends in his own time. The art critic Adolphe Thalasso (1858–1919), for example, writes in the introduction to his book on Ottoman art that the prohibition mentioned in the hadiths should not be understood as directed against "painting as *art*, but against painting as a means of spreading idolatry".[44]

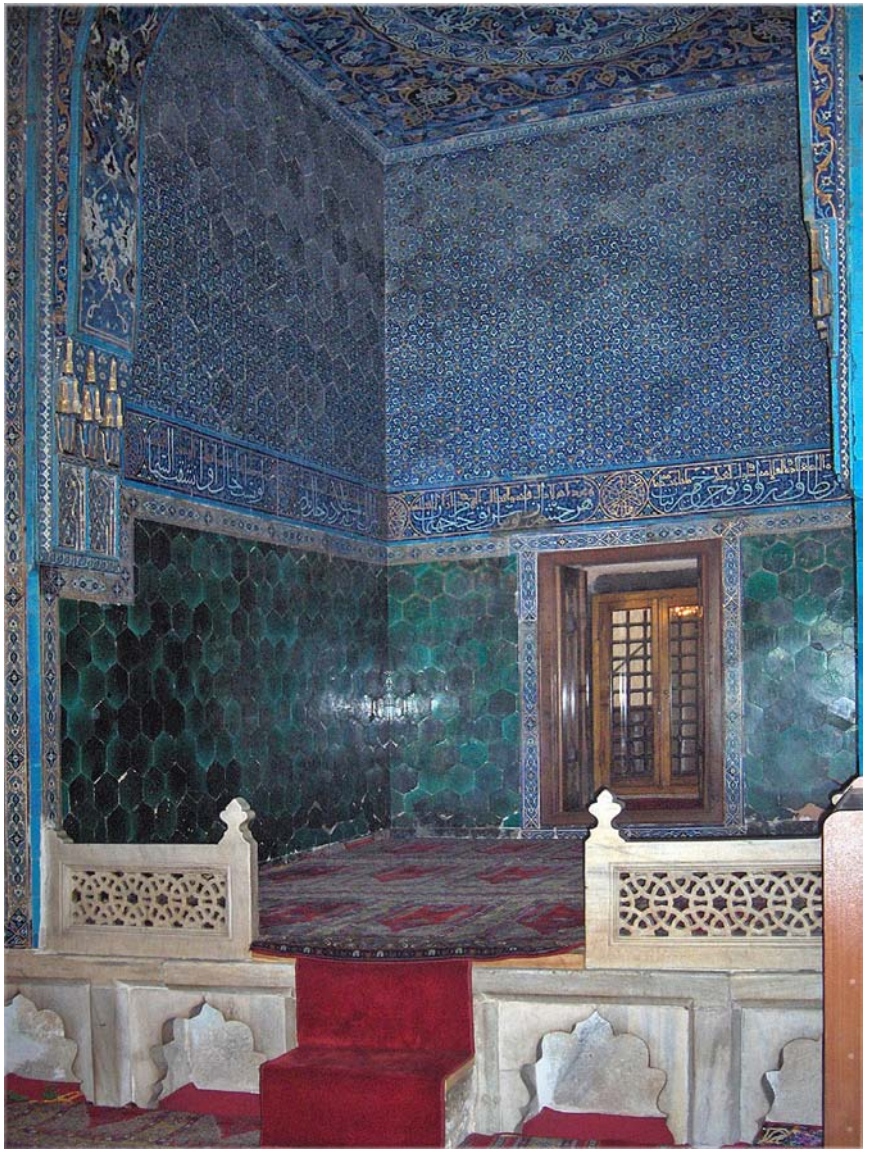

Fig. 8. The Green Mosque of Bursa, interior. Wikimedia Commons, foto Georges Jansoone JoJan, 2007 (CCo 1.0).

Osman Hamdi Bey himself, however, kept a low profile when it came to the relationship between visual arts and Islam. His exhibitions mostly took place abroad and he was reluctant to allow outsiders to visit the studio in his home because, as one visitor noted, "he was afraid of the monster of fanaticism".[45]

In this context we should also note as a fact of interest that Thalasso's book is dedicated to "His Imperial Highness Abdülmecid, son of Sultan Abdülaziz", with the further explanation: "To the shining prince of the blood who brilliantly holds the palette and who, as the first of Osman's descendants, has cultivated the art of colours". This Abdülmecid II (1868–1944) was a prominent portrait painter as well as the chairman of the Ottoman Painters' Association. He was in line to become sultan when the sultanate was abolished in 1922. However, he managed to become the last Ottoman caliph (1922–24) before this office was abolished by Mustafa Kemal, the founder of the Turkish Republic. The man who was the highest official cleric of Islam was thus himself a visual artist, and seems to have had no problem in combining these two roles.

Incidentally, Thalasso also refers to Osman Hamdi as an orientalist artist, but by this he simply intends an artist who paints motifs from the Orient and the term has no negative connotations. For Thalasso, there is an important quality difference between true and fake orientalists, between those who are careful about the details of their pictures and those who cheat with the props. In this regard, he believes that Osman Hamdi is a true orientalist artist, who gives evidence of an almost scientific accuracy and credibility in his compositions.[46]

This very view of Osman Hamdi's art came to be challenged in the early years of the Turkish Republic, when nationalist and Kemalist art critics claimed that his paintings had "presented subjects whose veracity is highly questionable" and that they "represent an Orient for the market", or even suggested that his art was "soiled and corrupt".[47] What these critics found objectionable was that Osman Hamdi's style was so obviously influenced by Western art trends and that it hence was lacking in "Turkishness". Eventually, however, the wind turned again and his art was highlighted as a meritorious assertion of Turkish values of beauty.

When it comes to summarizing Osman Hamdi Bey as an artist, we have good reason to stick to the image of him as a humanist, rather than seeing him as an orientalist – at least if we use "orientalist" in Said's sense of the term. Osman Hamdi's artistic purpose seems to have been the celebration of humanity

and human reason, including that very special human capacity of creating and appreciating beauty. His use of aestheticized historical motifs can be thought of as a recognition of humanity's ongoing project to improve itself, through study, work, and the creation of beautiful objects. Hence, Osman Hamdi can be seen as sharing Matthew Arnold's idea of culture as a "pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits".[48] This *humanist* concept of culture (as contrasted with an *anthropological* concept of culture, according to which a culture is an ethnic group with certain customs and traditions[49]) does not come with the implication that all expressions of human culture are equally good. But it points to the value of going beyond the given to look for the true and the beautiful wherever we can find these values realized. Osman Hamdi Bey was such a pursuer of truth and beauty, and it is as such that he should be seen, not as a skilled but unoriginal imitator of Western art.

Notes

1 I want to acknowledge my deep gratitude to my wife, Fatma Fulya Tepe, Associate Professor of Sociology at İstanbul Aydın University, who provided me with invaluable help and encouragement during my work on this article.
2 Said 2003, 3.
3 Said 2003, 190; *sherbet* (sorbet) is a frozen fruit puree.
4 Said 2003, 203.
5 Said 2003, 204.
6 Makdisi, 2002.
7 Makdisi 2002, 770.
8 Eldem 2010a, 20–24.
9 Eldem 2004, 130.
10 Eldem 2010a, 38.
11 Eldem 2010a, 44; Georgeon 2010, 148.
12 Eldem 2010a, 67.
13 Eldem 2010a, 84; my translation of the French original.
14 Eldem 2010a, 99; my translation of the French original.
15 Eldem 2010a, 99–100; my translation of the French original.
16 Eldem 2010a, 100; my translation of the French original.
17 Eldem 2004, 124
18 Eldem 2014, 65; a *yashmak* is a double veil, which covers the head and face under the nose – a kind of niqab.
19 Shaw 2003, 104.
20 Georgeon 2010, 158.
21 Eldem 2012, 350.
22 Eldem 2012, 374.
23 Eldem 2018, 37.
24 Ersoy 2010, 131.
25 Ersoy 2010, 132.
26 Shaw 2003, 103.
27 Marx 1988, 58.
28 Gombrich 2002, 4.
29 MacCarthy 1994, xviii–xix.
30 Wilde 2003, 452.
31 Cezar 1971, 324; my translation of the Turkish original.
32 Eldem 2012, 359.
33 Eldem 2010b, 489–494.
34 Eldem 2012, 359.
35 Eldem 2012, 359.
36 Kant 1964, 96.
37 Kant 1991, 54.
38 Kant 1991, 58.
39 Kıbrıs 2019, 54.
40 Germaner & Inankur 2002, 307; Eldem 2018, 31.
41 Kıbrıs 2019, 61.
42 Şahin 2019.
43 Aksüğür Duben 1992, 60; my translation of the Turkish original.
44 Thalasso 1911, 6; my translation of the French original.
45 Eldem 2014, 191.
46 Thalasso 1911, 21–22.
47 Eldem 2011, 242–243; my translation of the French original.
48 Arnold 2009, 5.
49 Gewirth 1994, 23.

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