The newly introduced art of painting, which carries great importance among civilized nations in terms of its procurement of many public funds, is an open and clear public/universal (umumi) language that brings forth the strength of imagination that allows all peoples to understand it. It is a type of writing.

In 1913, in the first book about Ottoman art published in Turkish, the Ottoman painter Hüseyin Zekai Pasha used this sentence to present painting as part of a universal discourse of representation bridging the past and the future. Even though art in the Western modality had begun to enter the empire in the late eighteenth century, it remained, over a century later, very new, unavailable, and controversial for much of the public. Now much has changed—but how much? While there is a lot of art in Turkey—including ancient, traditional, folk, modern, and contemporary—the institutionalization of it has developed in such a way as to continue the foreignness of art as a concept. While many aspects of the visual and built worlds have been incorporated into national identity through tropes of heritage, use of the meta-narratives of art as a mechanism to bring cohesion to the visual world and a means through which to interpret aesthetic experience has been largely restricted to arts associated with the West. While the foreignness of this language is most apparent in relation to arts in the Western modality and their inscription through public institutions, the taxonomy both within and among museums of Turkey has to a large extent foreclosed the domain that art has carved out for itself in the Western frame of reference.

This is not an issue of what art is, but of what art does. Situated in the perspectival tradition of viewing, art in the Western tradition positions the subject as if looking through the object towards something beyond. In the modern era, this became not simply a practice of representation, a window onto the world in the Albertian sense, but a window onto thought as well. Developing within this tradition, the European discourse of art (including art history) depends on this mode of looking, in which art is a vehicle for thought and is dependent on a subject for the proliferation of its meanings. In addition, Western art history developed in concert with nationalism and, along with it, a mapping of the relationships between nations and cultures on the world stage. Certainly not all art-historical practices took on a Hegelian structure, but the dominance of the German tradition made a Hegelian historiographic scheme—in which the spirit of civilization, moving forward in time from East to West, contributes to the development of history, a process that ends with the capacity for self-reflexivity—a common feature of the art-historical narrative, visible in universal survey museums in both Europe and the United States, as well as in survey textbooks. The modern understanding of art has developed between these two structures—the one a mode of communication and the other an indication of a broad national spirit brought to view through the vehicle of art. Seen in this light, art in each national narrative is not simply a means of viewing the present but also of understanding that present in an ongoing relationship with a past, to which it is linked through an unbroken sequence or grand narrative of artistic progress. This has had profound implications for the organization of museums, since the European model of the museum developed concurrently with the discipline of art history. In contrast, in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey, museums developed not in alignment with a discipline focusing on the visual but rather in direct association with narratives of territoriality, ethnicity, and nationhood. Like the painting that Hüseyin Zekai Pasha describes, it could be said that such museums, and the art within them, present less an experience of the perceptual through which ideology can be accessed—less a form of art—than a form of writing. If myth, as discussed by Roland Barthes, is a means of transforming culture into nature, then the museums of the Ottoman Empire and many of
their counterparts in modern states of the Middle East reflect a transcription of culture based on a very different understanding of the supposedly natural relationship between objects and identity.

MUSEUMS IN THE WESTERN TRADITION

In contrast to the overarching perspective on civilization presented by many European and American museums, the institution of the museum as it has developed in the Ottoman Empire, Turkey, and elsewhere in the Middle East often has segregated collections, each determined by period and or content, in entirely separate institutions. In doing so, these institutions have often displayed objects as collective icons of highly circumscribed readings of history and identity, readings that provide little opportunity to construct new means of engaging various eras and cultural practices. Where narrative structures within museum-display strategies are weak, the only meaning assigned to objects becomes their categorization, reducing the possibility of multiple readings. As suggested by Hüseyin Zekai Pasha, even painting has often been understood less as a visual language than as a means of writing history, both as a record of the past and as a mode of identification with the West. Rather than being subsumed within an overarching discourse of art, various types of objects—archaeological, religious, ethnographic, etc.—retain quite disparate realms of association. Art is not simply foreign in itself; it is made foreign by the very taxonomy of and within museums of the region. This taxonomy removes a vast array of objects from consideration as works of art. Instead, museums and the objects within them become icons of reified understandings of meaning that preclude their inclusion within a more comprehensive art-historical discourse, in which eras such as the archaic, pre-classical, classical, late classical, and modern can be considered mutually related and reflexive parts of a contemporary set of identities. These identities, while not necessarily based in a single grand narrative or holistic chronological frame, nonetheless need to be understood in their complex interrelations, which can even include their mutual dissociation and lack of mutual recognition.

The nineteenth century was an era of change, not only for Ottoman museums but also for their models and counterparts in the West, where the French and American revolutions as well as the post-Napoleonic regrouping of Europe had led to broader programs of collection, exhibition, and public access. The organization of European collections had originally been relatively esoteric, subject to the independent worldview of each collector. By the eighteenth century, however, there had emerged a competing philosophical aesthetic that provided generally accepted taxonomies of objects, their organization informed by connoisseurship, in which like objects could be compared through proximity. In the nineteenth century, through the vehicle of history, a modernized perception of aesthetics developed a scheme of the place of each nation, as represented through its objects, within an overarching framework of civilization. These two schemata—the first of aesthetic quality and uniqueness, the second of culture—helped set in place the model of art history still familiar today. The acquisitions of the new and refurbished museums of the nineteenth century were also deeply changed by growing access to the territories of the Ottoman Empire, which allowed them to develop collections of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hellenic, and Roman antiquities; these, as much as the arts of Europe, came to be perceived as part and parcel of a shared European heritage. The discourse of art history allowed for works excavated and imported from the East to be divested of their territorial identities and reinscribed with Western cultural associations, while works from more modern eras could be marked as foreign.

Each major European metropolis underwent profound changes over the course of the nineteenth century. The Grande Galerie of the Louvre Palace had been transformed into a museum for the display of paintings during the eighteenth century and first opened to the public in 1793, after the French Revolution, but it was not until the plunder of Italy under Napoleon, which allowed France to obtain classical antiquities, that Dominique Vivant Denon instituted a more chronological exhibition scheme at the Musée Napoléon at the Louvre. With the opening in 1826 of a department of Egyptian antiquities under the directorship of Jean-François Champollion and the creation of a department of Assyrian antiquities, made possible by a shipment of works by the French consul to Mosul Paul-Émile Botta in 1847, a wider chronological and geographical profile became part of the French national art museum. For the first time, a single institution could display a wide variety of objects brought together through a meta-narrative of art rooted in cultural connections and aesthetic properties.