Book Reviews

Review of the permanent exhibition While a Country is Changing: Turkish Painting from the Ottoman Reformation to the Republic, Sakıp Sabancı Museum

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Over the last decade, the number of museums and galleries exhibiting academic painting from the late Ottoman and early Republican periods has increased considerably, as has that of publications on this topic.¹ Today, those interested in art of this era and in this medium will find publicly accessible collections, among others, in the Ankara Devlet Resim ve Heykel Müzesi,² the Cumhurbaşkanlığı Atatürk Müze Köşk,³ the painting collection of the TBMM Milli Saraylar,⁴ Mimar Sinan University’s Painting and Sculpture Museum,⁵ Istanbul Modern,⁶ the Pera Museum,⁷ several bank collections,⁸ and now also in the Sakıp Sabancı Museum (SSM).⁹ It is in the latter that a new permanent exhibition entitled While a Country is Changing: Turkish Painting from the Ottoman Reformation to the Republic opened in December 2011.

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¹ For the most recent monograph on the topic, see Shaw, Wendy, Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).


⁸ For instance, Akbank, Garanti Bankasi, İş Bankası, Şekerbank, Türkiye Kalkınma Bankası, Türk Dış Ticaret Bankası, and Yapı Kredi Bankası.

⁹ See http://muze.sabanciuniv.edu [accessed 8 May 2012].
Semra Germaner and Ahu Antmen have curated this exhibition, which includes 90 paintings by 26 different artists, all drawn from the SSM’s permanent collection. According to museum director Nazan Ölçer, the mission behind the collection as well as the exhibition is to present “the story and development of Turkish painting in a new spatial arrangement from the Reformation to the Republic. The paintings form a solid ground in order to comprehend the sense of art and different points of views in Turkish Painting…” This mission is further elaborated in the introductory wall text: the works one encounters thereafter are part of not only a personal collection inspired by interest in a specific period of Turkish painting, but [also] a cultural legacy that provides insight into the early flowering of Western style painting in Turkey. In this respect the collection may be regarded as the continuation of the Sakıp Sabancı Museum Calligraphy Collection, reflecting the transformation of visual representation in Turkish art, changing concepts of art and the artist, and the process of modernization between the late Ottoman and early Turkish Republic periods.

Therefore, the works displayed are meant to provide an overview of nineteenth-century Ottoman and early Republican artistic production in terms of change rather than continuities, complementary to but at the same time set against the background of calligraphic works that one can view in a different part of the SSM.

Before proceeding to describe the exhibition itself, a few words on the title are in order: the choice to translate “Tanzimat” as “Ottoman Reformation” is not one that we would have made. While not entirely unheard of, the term is rarely ever used by historians and appears rather awkward in this context, as it conjures up the emergence of Protestant Christianity in sixteenth-century Europe rather than the reform efforts in the Ottoman empire beginning in 1839. Is it even necessary to render “Tanzimat” in English, or can one assume that English-speaking visitors to the SSM will at least be marginally familiar with this period and the term and therefore reserve any further elaboration for the texts accompanying the exhibition?

The exhibition is located in the main building, in a suite of three rooms on the bottom floor, where visitors descending the stairs will come face to face with the introductory wall text from which we have already quoted above. The narrative then begins opposite this introductory text with four paintings.

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10 Semra Germaner is Professor of Art History at Mimar Sinan University; Ahu Antmen is Associate Professor in the Department of Art Management at Yeditepe University.

11 http://muze.sabanciuniv.edu/page/while-a-country-is-changing-2 [accessed 28 April 2012].