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THE EAST PERCEIVED THROUGH WESTERN PERSPECTIVE: FAUSTO ZONARO AND ISTANBUL

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Abstract

For many centuries, Istanbul, as a city of culture, has been a source of inspiration for artists from many different countries. Italian artists were especially influenced by the Eastern world and reflected this influence in their work in almost every era. When we talk about "Western Orientalists on Ottoman lands", we doubtlessly first think of Italian Orientalists such as Gentile Bellini, Fausto Zonaro, Leonardo de Mango, Amadeo Preziosi, Salvatore Valeri, Luigi Acquarone, Raimondo D'Aronco, whose paths crossed through the Ottoman Empire, and who built bridges between these foreign cultures by depicting these exotic lands in their works. During the reign of Sultan Abdulhamit the Second, Fausto Zonaro (1854 – 1929) assumed the title of "Palace Artist" after the Italian artist Luigi Acquarone. Zonaro, as well as being recognized for his realistic depictions, became well known for introducing the newly emerging Western art movements in the Ottoman art circles during its initial stages and became influential by nurturing a new generation of young Ottoman artists by providing training. The way Zonaro perceived Istanbul and the local culture through an Italian perspective, and his difference from

other Orientalist artists are crucial in making him a pioneering figure in the history of Turkish painting.

Keywords: Fausto Zonaro, Ottoman Empire, Palace artist, Sultan Abdulhamit II

1. Fausto Zonaro's Istanbul

Fausto Zonaro, who was born in Padua, Italy, attended first Verona Accademia Cignaroli and then Rome Fine Arts Academy as his artistic talents were recognized at an early age. His first exhibition received more positive feedback than expected, after which he went to Paris to become famous and make his fortune, following the advice of the reputable artists of the time. While there, he met with impressionist artists. He used naturalist techniques, especially in his historic paintings and portraits; however, in his scenery paintings, he followed the examples of French impressionists as well as using naturalist techniques (Tansuğ, 1986). In search of a place where he could find inspiration and continue his artistic development, he often traveled to Venice, Turin, Rome, Milan, and Naples. However, he failed to come across any images in European cities that would inspire him artistically or satisfy his creative aspirations. He was in search of distinct images and colors. There were many expert painters in Europe at the time; however, according to Zonaro, the subjects produced by these artists were quite similar and it was very difficult to stand out. It was during this time that Zonaro read Italian writer Edmondo de Amicis' "*Constantinopoli*"; the city of Istanbul, as described in this book, seemed to offer the distinct qualities he had been in looking for. It is a well-known fact that the interest of Italian artists in the mysterious Eastern world and especially in Istanbul continued for centuries:

Some Italian painters played an important role in the artistic life of Istanbul in the middle of the 19th century. (...) Italy had practically no colonies of its own before the conquest of Libia (1910), but had always had a keen interest in the Near East. Venetians considered themselves as heirs to various Byzantine traditions and territories. Naples and other states as well had been involved in long-standing contacts with the Eastern Mediterranean, as some of the famous XIVth-century Italian writer Boccaccio's stories illustrate. The category of artists who would be most sensible to these influences proves to be painters and writers. Not a few of their works are still present in the Dolmabahçe Palace, the place where they had been made for (Özkan, 2021, p. 677-678).

Zonaro was fascinated by Istanbul's many domes, minarets, fountains, lodges, boatmen, sherbet sellers, and other unique characteristics. The paintings produced depicting

numerous different corners of Istanbul, where Zonaro found the unique oriental qualities he had been searching for, are among the best works of his life. After one of his Naples period paintings, “Il Banditore”, appeared on the cover of Leipzig-based *Illustrierte Zeitung* magazine in 1882, Zonaro became one of the eminent figures of Istanbul social circles. He gave painting lessons to the prominent personages of Istanbul society. During this time, he also met Osman Hamdi Bey¹, one of the most notable Ottoman artists. Wishing his paintings to be seen by Sultan Abdulhamit II, Zonaro produced many works. He reached the turning point of his career in Istanbul with his painting titled, “Ertuğrul Süvari Alayı” (“Ertuğrul Cavalry”).



Figure 1: Fausto Zonaro, *The Ertuğrul Regiment Crossing the Galata Bridge, 1901*
(Source: Turkish National Palaces Collection, Istanbul)

Zonaro, who witnessed the cavalcade of Ertuğrul Cavalry over the Galata Bridge, Istanbul, in 1896, was very impressed by their majesty and continued to go to the bridge every Friday to observe them and sketch. He created sketches along with many detailed portrait studies and uniform designs. Later on, he transformed his sketches into an oil painting and sent it to the Palace. Sultan Abdulhamit II, who had a keen interest in art, noticed the artist’s great attention to detail, color choices, and the strength of his observational skills, and appointed Zonaro as the “Palace Artist”. Following this appointment, Zonaro started to produce many works for the Ottoman Empire. His house became a popular spot in Istanbul society for diplomacy and art. Many international guests such as Enver Pasha, Winston Churchill, Camille Flammarion,

¹ Osman Hamdi Bey (1842 – 1910), who is considered to be the founder of Turkish museums, was a prominent painter, museum expert, and archaeologist. He is the founder of the Academy of Fine Arts and the Istanbul Archaeology Museum.

Alexander Nelidov, and Adolphe Thalasso, people from different walks of life, and leaders of different religions and sects often visited his house to observe him working and have discussions.

Sultan Abdulhamit II invited Zonaro to Yildiz Palace and asked him to paint subjects such as the Conquest of Istanbul, the entrance of Janissaries to the city, Preveza victory, and the Battle of Domokos. The Sultan provided information about these subjects to him personally and gave feedback on his drawings. Zonaro made sketches based on the information he received and added details as well. The painting depicting the Ottoman–Greco war, the Battle of Domokos, received very positive feedback. The artist, following the Sultan's request, completed a painting illustrating the siege of Istanbul by Fatih the Conqueror in 1905. During this period, it was common among the artists of the period to include themselves or people they knew in their paintings. Along with this tradition, Zonaro painted himself as the Janissary to the left of Fatih the Conqueror as he entered Istanbul on his white horse in his full regally.



Figure 2: Fausto Zonaro, *Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror entering Istanbul*, early 20th Century
(Source: Turkish National Palaces Collection, Istanbul)

As a palace artist, besides painting the daily life of the palace and Istanbul, "Zonaro was also in the commission responsible for the establishment of the Museum of Old Weapons. He prepared an album titled *"L'Armée Impériale Ottoman"* containing twenty- seven watercolor paintings of Ottoman soldiers in various ranks in their military uniforms" (Gümüş, 2023, p. 16-17).

During his time in Istanbul, Zonaro learned to speak the Ottoman language. He visited different parts of Istanbul such as the Bosphorus, Goksu, The Grand Bazaar, and marketplaces and teahouses, and painted places of leisure. Sailing boats, cypress trees, shadirvans, the whirling dervishes of the Mevlevi Order and their ceremonies, fishermen, and hookah smokers were snapshots not to be missed by him. He sometimes sketched the entertainments at the Bosphorus and sometimes painted the people he came across in marketplaces. These works created by the artist received attention not only in Istanbul but also in Europe. European art lovers, especially the French, followed the works of "The Grand Artist of the Sultan" closely.

In 1908, following the declaration of the Constitution and the civil unrest, Sultan Abdulhamit II was sent into exile in Thessaloniki. Zonaro had always kept his distance from political issues in the Ottoman Empire. However, the new administration established after the exile of the Sultan would also determine his artistic career within the borders of the empire. For this reason, to reassure himself in the uncertain political and social environment that was developing at that time, Zonaro decided to paint in accordance with the new political understanding:

Zonaro in 1908, after painting the small work entitled "Yeni Türkiye" (New Türkiye), also created an oil painting entitled "Hürriyet, La Liberta" (Freedom), which was unfortunately destroyed in a fire. "Hürriyet, La Liberta" is clearly an allegorical painting. In this painting, a woman holding a bunch of flowers in her right hand leads a group of Ottoman people on the slopes of Istanbul, heading towards the Bosphorus, symbolizing the collective spirit created by the 1908 Revolution across the country. In this work, Zonaro was influenced by the discourse of "Liberté-Egalité-Fraternité", which was frequently used in the French Revolution of 1789 and which was associated with the Revolution (Ateşli, 2023, p. 1382).

However, as a result of the political upheaval, the Palace Architect, Conductor, and opera members lost their positions. In November 1909, Fausto Zonaro's tenure as the Palace Artist also came to an end. Following this, the artist was forced to sell about 300 paintings in his

workshop below their actual value. After trying to remain in Istanbul for a while longer, he was forced to return to Rome with some of his paintings. In Rome, he continued to paint scenes from Bosphorus and life in Istanbul based on his existing sketches. Nevertheless, although Zonaro tried to maintain his artistic existence amidst political events, he had to pay the price of the unfavorable political atmosphere even in his own country:

In Rome, Zonaro continued to paint Istanbul scenes, but no exhibition would accept them. As relations between the Ottoman Empire and Italy became increasingly tense with the approach of the war in Libia, public resentment would have been aroused by paintings of Turkish subjects by an Italian artist. The Associazione Nazionalistica Italiana (Italian Nationalist Association), based in Rome and led by Enrico Corradini, blamed Giolitti for not taking a sufficiently harsh stand against Italians who had left their work behind in enemy countries. Zonaro was just such an Italian and was so disturbed by this unjust and humiliating attitude that he determined to leave Rome and settle in Sanremo (Makzume, 2021, p. 71).

After he died in Sanremo, approximately 300 of his paintings were displayed in Florence in 1977. 200 of these paintings were about Istanbul.

When Fausto Zonaro first came to Istanbul, he knew little about Islamic traditions and way of life. He was once arrested for trying to draw pictures of the people crossing the Galata Bridge because it was against the Islamic teachings and considered haram (i.e., “sinful”) to draw any likeness of human beings. Even though he was not allowed to do so, he also secretly went to the Eyup Cemetery, Istanbul to paint pictures. In those days, it was only possible to obtain information and document the life in Ottoman Empire through Ottoman miniatures. The Orientalist artists, especially Zonaro, managed to document life beyond these miniatures.

Zonaro was not allowed to paint a picture of Abdulhamit II either. This was not based solely on religious concerns. The Sultan’s fear of assassination was also another reason behind this prohibition. Additionally, he was also uncomfortable with having his paintings done or photos taken because of his status as the Caliph. The images of Abdulhamit II that appeared on banners carried during processions and his paintings did not reflect his true likeness. There was not a realistic portrait of him shared with the public. There were undoubtedly many different reasons for such a decision in the Ottoman Palace:

(...)The Classical Ottoman political system, upon which at least in theory the Sultan had absolute sovereignty, was based on a sharp distinction between those who governed and who were governed. The Sultan's power was reinforced by the fact that he rarely appeared physically in public- that is, the distance between them was maintained as much as possible,

because getting close to the people was considered a sign of the destruction of the state. Even in ceremonies with a certain degree of publicness, the Sultan's visibility was limited. We also know that the Sultan listened to the Divan-ı Hümayun (Imperial Council) meetings from behind a caged window without being physically seen by its members. On the other hand, getting close to the subjects meant not only a spatial closeness but also being seen as an individual who physically resembled them. Gaining public visibility as an individual having human qualities meant that the Sultan, to whom were attributed divine qualities such as being omnipotent and omnipresent, had lost his "mystery". This "mystery" reinforced the understanding of politics as a privileged area, one not accessible to everyone (Özekmekçi, 2021, p. 22).

However, it was important to support new initiatives for the survival of the monarchy. In this context, Zonaro had written a letter to persuade Abdulhamit II by insisting that the public had a right to get to know their Sultan in his likeness. The Sultan accepted Zonaro's proposal after a while and had three portraits of himself done. Zonaro completed these paintings, which can be considered historic documents just as Abdulhamit II was exiled. He lost his status as the Palace Artist soon after and there are no records of these paintings in the Palace archives:

The first painting may have been destroyed when the Sultan was deposed, or removed from the palace together with other portraits, which Zonaro had painted of his children when Sultan Mehmed Reşat was enthroned. The other two portraits were taken back to Italy by the artist together with his other paintings. It appears from Elisa's account book that one of these portraits was sold by Zonaro to Count Vincenzo Marsaglia in Sanremo. The third portrait hung for a long time in his house in Sanremo, but its whereabouts today are unknown (Makzume, 2021, p. 68).

Zonaro, as a Western artist living towards the end of the 19th century, used soft and elegant lines to capture everything he observed in Istanbul. For example, the veil worn by women in his painting is very delicate. In actual fact, the veils in that period were very thick. No doubt, the artist had little opportunity to observe the Turkish women because of religious and cultural restrictions. Consequently, the Turkish women in these paintings often carried European physical features. It is possible that during the harsh regime of Abdulhamit II, Zonaro tried to soften everything in an attempt to make them more pleasant.



Figure 3: Fausto Zonaro, *Turkish Lady on the Bosphorus*, early 20th Century
(Source: Suna&İnan Kırac Foundation Collection, Istanbul)



Figure 4: Fausto Zonaro, *Amusement at Göksu*, early 20th Century
(Source: Suna&İnan Kırac Foundation Collection, Istanbul)



Figure 5: Fausto Zonaro, *Prince Abdürrahim, son of Sultan Abdülhamid II*, early 20th Century
(Source: Pera Museum, Istanbul)

2. Orientalism in Zonaro's Works

It is possible to claim that Europe's interest in the East goes all the way back to the Crusades. With the conquest of Istanbul by the Ottomans in 1453, the east came closer to the west and this interest increased even more. The term "Orientalism" emerged from the Eastern images and themes used in art, which was a result of Western research into the Near and Far East in the 19th century, giving rise to Orientalist art. The first artists to come to the east, depicting life there were the English and French. Later on, Italy – like many other European countries – became part of this movement. Gentile Bellini was possibly the first artist who came to the Ottoman Empire and went to the East: This period that started with Bellini continued well into the 19th century:

In the 19th century, the acceleration of relations with Western painters reveals that the Ottoman palace and aristocracy also fulfilled their sociocultural responsibilities. On the other hand, the decline in the absolutism of the palace and the Sultan after the reign of Mahmud II, the emergence of a new aristocratic class outside the dynasty with a cosmopolitan structure, and the formation of a non-Muslim bourgeoisie class holding the economy in their hands led to the disappearance of some institutions. However, towards the end of the 19th century, as evidenced by the activities of some Orientalists and Bazaar painters in Istanbul, this situation also contributed to the formation of a free market of artists in Istanbul (Başkan, 2014, p. 203).

Rather than their styles, the Orientalist artists' common themes depicting men and women in their separate unique worlds have always been popular in the West. Additionally, the fantastic and exotic portrayals detailed the carpets, clothing, local everyday objects, the Harem courtyard, and slave markets as well as the characteristic locations in old Istanbul. The paintings produced during this period are particularly significant in documenting and recording life in the East through the eyes of Western artists.

The Western Orientalists in the Ottoman Empire, especially the Italian artists, strengthened the ties between these two cultures not only through their art but also through their diplomatic activities. Italian artists such as Salvatore Valeri, Leonardo de Mango, and Pietro Bello gave lessons at Sana-i Nefise School, which played an important role in the development of Turkish arts. Italian Orientalist Luigi Acquarone continued to work as the Palace Artist until his death. D'Aronco, who came to Istanbul for architectural work produced significant works that combined the two cultures. The works of these Italian artists in the Ottoman Empire - as well as having great artistic values - are significant cultural records. As Renda (1985) states, "*today,*

in the paintings of the "Ottoman Painters" in the Topkapı Palace Museum Library, the costume albums of Western painters and the foreign painting workshops in Istanbul undoubtedly have an important role" (p. 46). In this context, it should be emphasized that there was a significant cultural interaction between the Ottoman Empire and the Western world in the field of art.

The Italian Orientalist artists mostly worked on specific subjects and depicted similar topics, nonetheless. Zonaro, on the other hand, aimed to go through his daily life like a Turk and succeeded in becoming part of the local community. According to some researchers, it is also possible to consider him as the last representative of the “Turquerie²” fashion (Öndeş, 2003). Without a doubt, being the last representative of this fashion is not the sole reason why Zonaro stands apart from other Orientalist artists. Zonaro's most important characteristic that distinguished him from other Orientalist painters was his personality. The artist established friendships with the local people, learned their language, and replaced his hat with the local headdress fez. In this way, he managed to get away from the common, ordinary subjects and illustrated the local life in Istanbul in a more realistic light. As a result of this, his paintings are valued as significant historical records in terms of their subject matters. Fausto Zonaro, who gained fame as the “Turkish Painter” in Europe, created many notable works owing to his strong relationships in Istanbul with the Sultan as the Palace Artist, within the local art circles, and with many people from different walks of life - from the diplomats of the time to the ordinary people in the street - as well as owing to his extraordinary observation skills, sensitivity, and artistic talents. The Turkish figures in his portraits were the results of his impeccable insight and rigorous observations. While many of his fellow contemporary artists tried to capture the East in their hasty sceneries, Zonaro wanted to present a detailed depiction of the local social realities. As emphasized by many researchers, unlike other Western artists living in the exotic city of Constantinople who opted for easier methods, Zonaro did not depict the East only through bright colors. On the contrary, in his paintings, the locals continue with their daily lives in magical, bright Istanbul sceneries:

On 18 July 1906, the French language daily “Stamboul” published in Istanbul a news item under the headline, “Sultan Abdulhamid II’s court painter Monsieur Fausto Zonaro has sent many paintings to the Milan Exhibition”. In this article, based on reports that appeared in

² Turquerie, Turkey, or the Turkish style denotes the European interest in the Orient, particularly the culture of the Ottoman Empire, and its influence on art and culture. Since the 16th century, this trend exerted great influence on different areas of art such as painting, music, architecture, and even everyday life. It was a style used by European aristocrats to integrate Turkish or Oriental elements into their clothes, drinks, and furniture.

Italian newspapers, it wrote: “Among the paintings which have attracted the attention of the public and won everyone’s praise are Open Air Barbers, part of His Excellency Münir Paşa’s collection, the triptych Turkish Bath, The Golden Horn, showing a spectacular vista of Istanbul in the background, On the Galata Bridge, and others. These canvases vividly portray the exuberance and warmth of oriental scenes, with the marvelous sky reflected in the blue of the sea, and customs and manners are shown with outstanding perception (Makzume, 2021, p. 63).



Figure 6: Fausto Zonaro, *Amusement on the Caique*, early 20th Century
(Source: Pera Museum, İstanbul)



Figure 7: Fausto Zonaro, *The Dervish Ceremony*, 1910



Figure 8: Fausto Zonaro, *Bairam*, 1900
(Source: Arkas Holding Collection, İzmir)

Zonaro had started his search for a unique light, color, and style before his arrival in Istanbul and continued until his death. He refused to be restricted by a single technique. He also managed to create a style unique to him, without turning his back to the contemporary influences of his time. During his initial stages in the West, he captured romantic topics in his paintings by using classical styles (Marini, 1983). After familiarizing himself with impressionism, he used these techniques in his work, capturing Istanbul's sceneries in a previously unobserved sincerity and naturalness (Mascherpa, 1970).

3. Conclusion

During the reign of Sultan Abdülhamit II, painting exhibitions held at the palace and in various art centers in Istanbul led to the development of the art of painting in this period. The efforts of Turkish painters, most of whom were of military origin until the reign of Sultan Abdulhamit II, as well as Levantine and foreign painters, led to the formation of an Istanbul-centered art atmosphere that developed with the support of the leading figures of the palace in the 19th century (Yüksel, 2018, p. 301). In the last quarter of the 19th century, exhibitions began to be held in Istanbul. The number of painters painting in the Western sense increased and the first artistic activities were organized by the Ottoman Painters' Society.

To put things clearly, Ottoman artists were not only of Turkish origin but frequently of various ethnic backgrounds, and as a matter of fact, many of them had taken lessons from European artists (Renda, 1988, p. 88). The artistic fusion created with their collaboration would lead to styles where local influences would be seen in European art and, on the other

hand, Western approaches and elements as the celebration of female beauty (virtually absent in previous Oriental art) as well as irony would enter in Ottoman painting (Özkan, 2021, p. 689).

Fausto Zonaro became one of the leading artists of this period as a "Palace Artist" and made important contributions to the interaction between Ottoman and Italian cultures. He created 1350 paintings reflecting Istanbul's many different sides during the 19-year period he spent in Istanbul between 1891 and 1910. The subjects he chose during the period he lived in Istanbul are as colorful and abundant as the city's cosmopolitan population.

Fausto Zonaro was a painter of life and light. He painted pictures in a distinctive style of his own, neither copying nor following anyone else. Everyone knew him as an orientalist, but he was not interested in labels and excelled not only in orientalist subjects of Istanbul but also in works that he depicted on his soil. His most beautiful works were inspired by his love for life in Istanbul (Makzume, 2021, p. 72).

The minarets rising over the Golden Horn, the moon shining exquisitely over the Bosphorus, families having a picnic in Goksu, the boatmen helping local women cross from one side of the Bosphorus to the other, sailing boats and men in their fez were all captured in their entire color and naturalness in Zonaro's paintings. The artist reproduced life in Istanbul and its elements, its ever-changing colors, its culture, its poverty, and its magnificence with unequaled candor. Through the eyes of a Western artist, he captured Istanbul's socio-culture makeup, human portraits, the city's different corners, and sea sceneries onto his canvas. These paintings take us on a journey into the Istanbul of those days.

Zonaro gained himself a unique place in art history by demonstrating the importance the Ottoman Palace attached to fine arts and by introducing the newly emerging Western art styles to the Ottoman art circles during their development years. He encouraged a spirit of collaboration among the artists by painting portraits on plates together with his Ottoman counterparts at the Yildiz Tile Factory. He contributed to the development of Turkish arts by mentoring many prominent local artists and through his active role in Sanayi-i Nefise which was established in 1883: he had a deep impact on the artistic views of Ferik Tevfik Pasha³ and Seker Ahmet Pasha⁴, who were among the pioneers of Western-style paintings in the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, the artist Celal Esad Arseven, Mihri Musvik (one of the first female Turkish painters), and Nazim Hikmet's mother Celile Hanim learned a lot from his style and teachings.

³ 1819 - 1866

⁴ 1841 - 1907

In this respect, the fact that Zonaro was honored with the title of Palace Artist "*shows the attitude of the Palace towards the art of painting. Zonaro's Istanbul paintings, his duties as Palace Artist, and his training of new era Turkish artists are among his contributions to Turkish painting*" (Süzen, 2018, p. 167-168). Today, Zonaro is one of the most popular artists in Türkiye. Thousands of people visit regularly his exhibitions. His paintings are sold for thousands of liras at auctions (Falchi & Spigno, 1993). In this context, Zonaro holds a prominent position among the Western artists who, during the last quarter of the 19th century, further enriched the historic Ottoman–Italian relationships and relayed their impressions of the eastern imageries of those days to the present.

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