

Writing With Images: A Tradition Living Today In The Art of Tayfun Erdoğan

The earliest stages of modern Turkish art were marked by tradition, from which there was a break until the 1950s, when, until the 70s, this process was, due to the dominance of abstract art, virtually reversed, as an effort to rediscover the visual values of the past became the determining element of the quest for a formal language in painting. Behind the "reawakening" which Turkish painters experienced regarding their own tradition lay the conviction that in fact even the greatest Western painters made use of the abstract aesthetic values inherent in Islamic art. Calligraphic associations, arabesque embellishment and imperial seal motifs are frequently encountered in the paintings of this period, during which one senses a confidence imparted by the idea that the abstracting tendency of modern art was being embraced in its essence. Erol Akyavaş's "Triumph of the Sultans" (1959), Zeki Faik İzer's "Imperial Symphony With Seal" (1964), Sabri Berkel's "Calligraphy" (1970) and Abidin Elderoğlu's "Life in the Water" (1970) are examples of paintings which reflect this confidence while embracing a tradition. In our day too, every artist in whose work there are associations with traditional ornamental art is in fact drawing on a legacy peculiar to this region as well as on a much older tradition, one that belongs to the modern art which became pertinent in Turkey after the founding of the republic.

It should be emphasized that making use of this tradition properly in our day is not such an easy task. Simply making use of formal associations or reviving certain motifs with a new take is not enough; not enough by itself. Wherever today's art consumes something old or new, there is an expectation and quest for a depth involving multi-layered visual, historical and philosophical readings that look from the present to the past. When it's a question of painting the matter becomes even more difficult; one has to devise an original form "from discourse to speech," and create a visual language which the viewer will perceive and grasp somewhat intuitively.

In the art of Tayfun Erdoğan this visual language is shaped partly by formal echoes of the visual past peculiar to this region, but equally through the presence of an interrogative eye that looks at the past and at tradition from within and without. The fact that writing is considered sacred; that the word becomes image; that a text is read as the concrete sign of divine faith... In paintings which he "writes" with a natural alphabet – flowers and leaves – which give the impression that they conceal a sacred text, there is a powerful interpretation, in the present time, after the historical process and quest for identity which have been experienced in this land, regarding the appearance, meaning and impact of calligraphy, an art from which we have become estranged. Bringing to mind the way in which words in Islamic art are transformed into images, the way they are written in wall embellishments, for example, on fabrics or other surfaces, not to be read but to be enjoyed visually, these "abstract" paintings thus silently point to a history, and are read "without being read." In these paintings Erdoğan touches not only upon an alphabet which modern Turkey has left behind, but also on the existence of certain abandoned artistic traditions with which today we are thoroughly out of touch. Because they allude, albeit subtly, to the social memory and unconscious, to remote and recent history, as well as to the genesis of cultural and individual identity, it is difficult to assume that these pictures have been painted with a purely aesthetic concern, despite the fact that they have a powerful aesthetic impact on the viewer.

Yet it is aesthetics, a "sense of beauty" in the full meaning of the phrase, that first strikes one in these paintings. In his most recent work, Erdoğan obviously is in pursuit of "beauty" above all else; although indeed we feel that this quest has to do with exploring the limits of aiming at the beautiful in art, of the urge to embellish and stylize, and of the concern with being or not being "decorative." In the post-anti-aesthetic period, one which also follows the dominance of the concept, it is possible to speak of a reawakening vis-à-vis the beautiful, the aesthetic, and handicrafts; and this recent trend is shared by Erdoğan. In these paintings, which render visible a labor-intensive creative process, it may be said that the artist attaches special importance to the process of making, that he strives to infuse the finished product with the spell/energy of that process, and that he aspires to a kind of alchemy which will result in the acquisition by his materials of an aesthetic dimension. People no longer have much to do with goods exhibiting fine workmanship, but Erdoğan opens a page onto their past and, in his paintings, reflects not only the

influence of calligraphic pages with gilded margins, but also that of embroidered cloth, woven carpets and motif-embellished china that have a greater ability to work their way into daily life.

The fact that Erdoğan builds his paintings in a facing relationship like the pages of a book, that in the paintings (which he creates as diptychs) he also alludes to mirror writing, that he rejects perspective as well as the effect of light and shadow, that he shoulders a meditative effort and intensive craftsmanship of the hand, that he expends on his work a long time and great patience while attaching importance to fine details—all this is plentiful evidence that he is thinking of the conditions peculiar, in this land and region, to creating not pictures but images. Made with flowers, leaves and natural paper as well as oxidized and unoxidized gold and silver powder plus acrylic emissions of the desired consistency, these pictures are the result of four or five years of work. This extensive labor includes picking the flowers and leaves seen on the picture surface, collecting them, and drying them individually. It also includes exploring the effect these elements may have on the canvas (for each becomes a found object) and then “writing” them line by line on the surface, “treating” them, and finally making of the canvas a series of surfaces, layers superimposed on one another and so transparent that they are visible. Rejecting the traditional language of painting, although not canvas or the picture, Erdoğan in a sense also calls into question the language and values of the Western painting tradition – for instance, in leaning to the decorative he shows that an intellectual effort need not necessarily be rejected. Recalling that “still life” in French is “nature morte,” he makes this a reality through his use of, not representation, but plants which are in fact dead, and even this encourages us to think about about intellectual, theoretical phenomena such as the relation between reality and representation or art’s fiction and the truth, and to reach out beyond the surface and what we see.

Still, it would be more apt to connect Erdoğan’s element of flowers not with the realistic still lifes of Western art but rather with the passion for gardens and nature expressed in the stylized leaf and flower motifs of Eastern art, and to say that they specifically quote this type of motif. In the regions where Islam spread, the dry, arid, monotonous scenery was offset by gardens displaying a certain geometric order, gardens which according to Richard Ettinghausen in Islamic art were the reflection of heaven on earth. And indubitably one of the main areas where this interest in gardens found expression was decorative art. Ettinghausen points out that as the arts in Turkey began to gain greater realism starting in the mid-16th century, representations of flowers with their species beginning to be more identifiable appeared on a variety of surfaces, from ceramics and china to fabrics and albums. Erdoğan’s paintings follow a tradition to completely focus on the surface, and it is possible to think of them as a continuation of the above-cited process. In his work the flowers are real, but dried and stuck to the surface they look like stylized embellishments. Symbolically charged flowers, rich in references to the rose, tulip, carnation, lily and the like, through the technique he employs become anonymous and converted to purely formal elements by Erdoğan, who thus transforms flowers into an original vehicle of narrative, part of his own style. A motif which had long been forgotten in Turkish art is, in a sense, brought back to life. Another feature of flower accumulation in these pictures is that differing arrangements call to mind different types of writing, such as sülüs, nesih and ta’lik. One thinks of the leading 16th- century calligrapher Ahmet Karahisari, the author of such innovations as using flower motifs to fill the interiors of letters. And when we contemplate the depth of Erdoğan’s interest in vegetation motifs, together with his creative variety, how can we forget the gilded margins of Ottoman manuscripts?

Let us recall an article written in the 1950s by Malik Aksel in which, somewhat reproachfully, he speaks of flowers as a motif at one time the most widespread of all but almost entirely abandoned by modern Turkish art:

“While walls and windows in a building were embellished with the flowers of art, gardens were adorned by natural flowers. One type is alive, the other lifeless, one is fragrant, the other odorless, one never fades, the other does; and the difference between these two types of flower is that one is the work of nature, the other a product of human intelligence. While architectural works were adorned with artificial flowers, natural flowers were used as the ornaments of gardens. This dual beauty was not a matter of opposition but of two elements complementing one another. Mosques, madrasahs (Islamic seminaries) and houses were encircled by fountains and pools, as many-petalled roses, peonies, passion flowers, tulips, hyacinths, vines and morning glories surrounded buildings, works of

nature entwining with works of art. In oldtime Turkish houses the first thought was for the garden, with the house being considered after that. A house without its garden and flowers was unthinkable.

In the Tulip Age there was a flower academy known as 'Meclis-i Şükufe' (The Assembly of Blossoms), a sign of the importance attached to flowers.

Until 25 or 30 years ago the courtyards of mosques, the gardens of madrasahs, and even houses would be rich with flowers. The roses in the courtyard of Fatih Mosque especially, and the asters at Nuruosmaniye, were cultivated with great care. The courtyards of many mosques today are not only choked with weeds, at all hours of the day they serve as football pitches for the jobless and idle.

Meanwhile numerous flowers that originally went from the Orient to Europe return to us today with their names Europeanized. Those who believe that Europe is the source of everything fine and beautiful at one time, in designing the grounds of the Gazi Institute in Ankara, imported vine-growing roses from Luxembourg, notable for their lack even of any fragrance. Similarly, the tulip bulbs which once went from here to Holland are brought from that country to embellish Ankara's Atatürk Boulevard.

In Istanbul today the harbinger of spring in the apartment buildings is either a flowerpot on a window ledge or a leaf from a calendar. Although flower festivals are held every year, each day the city bids farewell to its flowers a little more fully. In a Gülhane Park without roses (gül is the Turkish word for rose), the holiday festivities see only young girls bedecked with flowers, while around them everything is barren... As for the new architecture, it cannot abide even the picture of a flower, much less the real thing. It deems a flower-embellished wall ugly, and brings forth nothing but blank walls that stifle the imagination."

(Malik Aksel, "San'at Çiçekleri-Tabiat Çiçekleri" {Flowers of Art-Flowers of Nature}, Türk Düşüncesi {Turkish Thought}, P. 30, 15 May 1956)

Blank walls stifling the imagination... How well Malik Aksel puts it! In contrast, how the imagination is beguiled by the stylized images of flowers on various surfaces, their fine detail work and flow! In his pictures Erdoğan interprets this rhythmic fluency of Eastern painting, striving to convey that it is something other than "decoration," that it has another meaning. And the fact that he makes his pictures using real flowers expands the context of the readings we can engage in at this juncture. For example, the fine detail and rhythmic flow of flowers in the images worked onto the surface confronts us with the intriguing structural shapes afforded by nature: Here it is a matter of unusual motifs offered up not only by the artist but by nature as well, and this is one of the most interesting features in Erdoğan's most recent work. Borrowing from Chinese to give the name "li" to the manifestation of designs present in the nature of flowers (as well as everything in nature), David Wade quotes George Steiner to suggest that in the veins and branches of trees, in the motion of the microcosmos and the proportions of the celestial spheres, in the designs on the shell of a tortoise and the veined genesis of boulders, in all of this there may exist codes which the baroque artists above all were able to see. Putting together an album of the graphical expressions of these "codes", codes which lead to archetypes by filtering through the dynamic forms presented by nature, Wade gives a nod to Plato in asserting that if completely unrelated phenomena which arise under very different conditions nevertheless have features that are astonishingly similar, this is proof that there are forms which have "existed always and forever." Erdoğan too allows for these eternal forms in his paintings, using geometric forms such as the circle, triangle and square as symbols of a rational order superceding nature. It may be a clue that in one picture he has put his own silhouette portrait as a symbol of the human effort to understand.

Erdoğan's use in his pictures of elements reminiscent of the sun, moon and other celestial bodies, plus the fact that a closer look at certain stain-like elements reveals such constellations as the big bear and little bear, in other words another dimension of his allusion to elements that recall the cosmos as a symbol speaks of his interest in viewing history not only from the standpoint of art but also from that of science. Elements reminiscent of drawings in the manuscripts of Islamic sages can be read as allusions by Erdoğan to the golden age of medieval Islam.

Expressing a rational movement in Islamic history and symbolizing an interest in the learning of antiquity, these elements emerge in the layers of the painting, sometimes more clearly, sometimes rather veiled, and call to mind the course of the relationship between learning and Islam in its later periods. In short, one may assert that these pictures have been made, not purely on the formal level, but as the result of stratified thought that includes points where various fields intersect, fields such as art, aesthetics, science, culture and history, and that they achieve their layered visual impact from just such a perspective.

Tayfun Erdoğan is among the few artists who strive to read a now-abandoned artistic tradition in today's terms, and who in a way carry on this tradition in a contemporary setting. Perhaps just because they continue that tradition, the artists who come to mind in this context attach importance to the visual aspect and form of their works, in brief to the aesthetic dimension; in speaking today a language whose rules they did not establish themselves they recognize the intrinsic respectability of that language even when their purpose is to turn the tradition on its head. One thinks of the Egyptian artist Ghada Amer, who in woven pictures reminiscent of calligraphy conveys feminist messages; or the ethnically Palestinian artist Maliheh Afnan, whose pictures refer to the various meanings of covering the face and body while using calligraphy as a formal element. Among the artists who use associations of "written painting" to render visible the process by which writing is transformed into image there are also Iranians, such as Siah Armajani, who departs from traditional rules to extol calligraphy, or Shirazeh Houshiary, who makes traditional motifs into cosmic symbols. Known less in their own country than in Western art circles, these artists show, with tradition, history, the East and the West, how it is possible to discuss matters relating to intercultural difference and resemblance using an abstract language, and how the seemingly abstract can be charged with rich meanings. These artists generally work in ink on paper or oil on canvas, and among them one can say that Tayfun Erdoğan, making found objects of flowers and using them like letters, has developed a unique technique/interpretation/style. The monumental dimensions of his recent work, the complementing of natural materials with experiments using chemical solutions, the accentuation of the layered effect of the surface with paper, glue, gold dust, glass and other glossy objects/materials—these are some of the elements giving Erdoğan's art its unique character. Furthermore, one notes that with all this material, but especially with flowers, Erdoğan avoids the pitfall of a tradition that leads most artists into an effect of purely surface decoration to create a rhythmic flow and an aesthetic all his own. Consequently in these works there is a dedication, concentration, depth, simplicity and humility which bring to mind the way artists worked when pictures could only exist together with the art of books.

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