

Review Essay

Contemplation and Craft in Turkish Material Arts

Books Reviewed: Mehmet Zeki Kuşoğlu, *The Ottoman Touch: Traditional Decorative Arts and Crafts* (Istanbul: Blue Dome Press, 2015); Mehmet Zeki Kuşoğlu, *Silver in Turkish Art* (Istanbul: Blue Dome Press, 2015); Sema Onat, *Islamic Art of Illumination: Classical Tazhib from Ottoman to Contemporary Times* (Istanbul: Blue Dome Press, 2015); Laurelie Rae, *Islamic Art and Architecture: Memories of Seljuk and Ottoman Masterpieces* (Istanbul: Blue Dome Press, 2015).

The unusual aspect connecting these four books is not the fact that they share the same publisher or even the same general scope of Turkish arts, but that they have been authored by practicing artists who have featured some of their original works between their covers.

Blue Dome Press, a relatively new publisher, has offices in the major western cities; however, all of the printing done in Istanbul. In addition, the majority of its publications, which range from Turkish cooking to fiction, from current affairs to various arts, focus on some aspect of Turkish culture. By supporting the publication of these texts, one gets the sense that various sectors of Turkish society continue to value the traditional and important historical contributions that the featured and other contemporary artists continue to make to the national culture.

The three artists featured in this review (one is the author of two books) come from different backgrounds that have enabled them to practice their art today. Mehmet Zeki Kuşoğlu author of *The Ottoman Touch: Traditional Decorative Arts and Crafts* and *Silver in Turkish Art*, has practiced the crafts of silverwork and other art forms based on traditional methods for over forty years. During his career, he has apprenticed with craftsmen – he identifies them by name – and completed two art degrees in Turkey. His efforts to understand, reconcile, and ultimately interpret the country's historical craft methods through his own creations lends a tremendous insight into the meanings and processes of crafts, one that brings them palpably alive. Sema Onat, author

of *Islamic Art of Illumination: Classical Tazhib from Ottoman to Contemporary Times*, completed specialty courses in illumination in 2009. A culture ministry artist, she currently practices and teaches workshops on this artistic form in Turkey. Laurelie Rae, a Canadian artist with an undergraduate degree in arts from Concordia who is now working on her Master's degree at the Prince's School of Traditional Arts in London, authored *Islamic Art and Architecture: Memories of Seljuk and Ottoman Masterpieces*.

Of the three, Kuşoğlu has studied in the most traditional method, that of the master-apprentice relationship, and has successfully paired it with academic study. Onat and Rae have approached their art in the more common manner – taking courses in order to learn about their respective fields and then branching out through practice. It should be noted that a key catalyst in the revival of traditional Islamic crafts is the Prince's School of Traditional Arts, founded in 2004 by HRH the Prince of Wales, and, more specifically, the Visual Islamic and Traditional Arts program established in 1984 by the renowned scholar Keith Critchlow, author of seminal books on the subject, including *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach*. The courses taught in the program include the hands-on creation and application of traditional crafts (e.g., tile making, mosaics, manuscript illumination, and plaster and wood carving). This program's influence on the arts in Turkey and the Islamic world as a whole has been significant, because aside from the postgraduate program in London, its outreach workshops in over twenty countries have revived significant interest in the traditional arts. Clearly, these programs have had an impact upon two of the authors featured here, namely, Onat and Rae, as well as upon thousands of aspiring artists and craftspeople worldwide.

The important fact that practicing artists have authored the four books under review is not immediately evident, nor do they elaborate to any great degree upon their own creative process and inherent analysis that comes from contemplating historical material in this manner. *The Ottoman Touch*, *Silver in Turkish Art*, and *Islamic Art of Illumination* all examine craftsmanship in a variety of material arts from Turkish history, ranging from the filigree silverwork found in jewelry to illuminated manuscripts to the elaboration of surfaces on objects and architectural elements. The fourth book, *Islamic Art and Architecture*, looks at some aspects of architectural detailing, but remains far more general in its subject approach than do the other three. Geometric, arabesque, and calligraphical motifs naturally dominate the material arts covered, to no surprise, as they generally frame the production of the Islamic world's material art, but with distinctly regional differences. For those interested in learning the history and generation of Islamic geometric forms or cal-

igraphy, it is best to look to Eric Broug's *Islamic Geometric Design* [see AJISS 32, no. 1 (2015); 126-30] and Ahmed Moustafa and Stefan Sperl's *The Cosmic Script* [see AJISS 33, no. 2 (2016); 125-29].

The first three books offer some insight regarding the composition and process of creating the arts, and the visual documentation renders their subjects well. However, in the fourth book the connection between what the artist/author is creating and the rest of the content is simply not made.

In *The Ottoman Touch*, artist/author Kuşoğlu, who has practiced metal craftwork for over forty years, used his own experiences, as well as the knowledge that he has gathered from his teachers and other crafts people, to put together a compelling visual collection of crafts in 29 sections. The first five chapters deal with five types of detailed silver work and are followed by chapters on incrustation, beading, engraving, cup holders, headdress, talismans, censers, belts and buckles, mirrors, amulets, Qur'an cases, ewers, rings, spoons, door knockers, bracelets, shadow play puppets, pipes, tombstones, inscriptions, visiting cards, mother-of-pearl inlay, prayer beads, and the signatures of calligraphers, respectively. While one can see from this impressive list of crafts that the variety of objects, materials, and sizes is great, the thread of connection clearly lies in the attention to craftsmanship and themes of ornamentation.

Each chapter begins by defining the Turkish term used to describe the objects and a brief history of their use and role in society. However, it is the description of the processes, tools, and materials that truly enrich this study. Photographs of the contemporary tools used by craftspeople to make these objects, as well as the reproductions of historical paintings and engravings showing how they were worn or used, help create the visual context that allows the readers to appreciate the skill needed to fashion each object – something that the author is keen to emphasize. Unfortunately, not all of the images are labeled, and rarely is there any notation of date or references to their sources/locations. Moreover, the images of the artist/author's original works are only identified by a small symbol (without notation), a lost opportunity to further elaborate upon the synthetic process of understanding historical craftsmanship through contemporary procedures.

Kuşoğlu is also the artist/author of *Silver in Turkish Art*, which is similar in size, graphics, and layout to the previous book and contains many images and examples from it. The systematic outline of seven types of silver is given in the table of contents. The author substantiates the authenticity of this medium in Turkish culture based on semantics: "All names of metals in old Turkish are of purely Turkish origin, having resisted foreign influence" (p. 9) As this is not an academic study of the material and very little of the informa-

tion contained is supported by any references at all, the relevance of this statement is questionable.

Each section focuses on one of the following specific silver-related techniques: beating (to make silver sheets), hand engraving (for words, seals, and blackening), openwork (using a chisel and a fretsaw), inlaying (hammering, etching, and integration with wood), wirework (filigree), pinning (casting, tamping, and other works), and decorative beading. Organizing the chapters by technique instead of object presents an interesting (if only visual) connection and context that runs through several types of objects and sizes and emphasizes the deep connection of each era's material arts with motifs and designs.

Like the previous book, the photography is beautiful and the color images printed on glossy paper seems to emphasize their presence. Each section begins with a brief history of the featured technique's meaning and role, and then branches out into a discussion of the specific process and tools used in that technique along with reproductions of historical images, including the objects in use. The artist/author's original artworks are included but, as in the first book, without any reflection or notation. The photographs are outstanding: high resolution with focus on the finest grain of each work that may normally not be perceived by the naked eye. The photographer is credited as Murat Simsek, and the dominance of these images easily expresses the content. The book concludes with a glossary of terms – some with one-word translations, others with descriptions – that is useful for those unacquainted with the Turkish terms used in these crafts.

In the *Islamic Art of Illumination*, Sema Onat analyzes the composition of what is commonly called “arabesque” in seven parts and an introduction. Sharing the same physical dimensions as the previous two books, as well as the same photography and art directors, this book is similar in the layout of material arts study by the artist/author. The lengthy introduction (pp. 9-42) begins with a brief and generalized outline of how illumination/arabesque is used to embellish a range of surfaces and is accompanied by a collection of large color photographs that display this technique in manuscripts, textiles, clothing, carpets, metalwork, silverware, jewelry, weaponry, furniture, doors, ceramics, and architectural elements. The luxury of details and materials in the photographs are paired with brief descriptive texts in gold on a black background.

Part 1, “A Short History of Turkish Illumination Art,” provides a brief overview of its centuries-long use in Ottoman and Turkish arts and images from historical manuscripts (with notations) and concludes with a brief reference to contemporary artists working with these motifs both in Turkey and

abroad. Part 2, “Different Schools Developing in the Art of Illumination,” is divided into several “styles” in Turkish terms, including *halkar* (light ornamentation with gold or gilt), *sazyolu* (brush and black ink), Turkish Rococo (influenced by French Rococo art), and classical illumination (small motifs sometimes with gold). The descriptions are minimal and only a few images are depicted for each style.

Part 3, “Motifs and Figures Used in Illumination,” a far more substantial section, goes into great detail about many motifs, among them leaves, stems, *conca* (bud), *khatai* (floral), *panch* (foliation with five cusps), spirals, *bulut* (cloud), Rumi as well as variations on the Rumi motif, geometric, *munhani* (curved), *shukufa* (naturalist flower), *zarafshan* (scattering gold), *tigh* (needle-pointed), and *karamemi*. Each motif has a few examples of the sketched and final illuminated forms. The sketches bear a startling and unreferenced resemblance to the distinct studies used by Adam Williamson and Richard Henry in their “Art of Islamic Pattern” (www.artofislamicpattern.com) workshops. However, both of these forms simply illustrate the named motif, for the degree of explanation or rigor with respect to context is insufficient. For the curious who want more information, I would suggest taking a look at Owen Jones’ comprehensive lexicon of arabesque and decorative motifs in the Islamic world (and other regions and eras), *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856), which remains just as useful today as it was during the author’s lifetime.

In part 4, “Materials Used in Illumination,” the artist/author briefly describes the materials needed with images borrowed from a Turkish text on the same subject: İlhan Özkeçeci and Şule Bilge Özkeçeci’s *Türk Sanatında Tezhip*. Again, the description of the materials and tools is cursory and contains no elaboration on process or techniques. It would have been interesting, and appropriate, to see the artist/author showcase her own tools and methods for preparation, rather than borrowing images from another book on the same subject. Part 5, “Making Illumination,” reproduces the nearly exact step-by-step sketch process that Williamson and Henry employ in their workshops – without any credit being given to them. These are paired with images of completed and in-process works of manuscript illumination.

Part 6, “General Forms Used in Illumination,” showcases, with very brief descriptions, the *shamsa* (Sun) used in metallic Qur’an covers, the *hilya* in Qur’anic manuscript illumination, the *kit’a* (small panels) in the author’s artwork, the Ottoman *ferman* (edict) in a historical example, and the *tughra* (insignia) of the sultan in historical examples. Part 7, “Manuscript Illumination,” briefly reviews the various areas of the manuscript page covered by illumination, namely, full pages, headings, margins, stops, end pages, and other orna-

mentation with examples of borders clearly borrowed from other texts and without any reference to the original source.

The book concludes with a number of full color reproductions of contemporary works of art, some of which were created by Onat; however, very little information is given or explained for the panels. The absence of a textual conclusion leaves the reader wondering what the threads of connection were between the extensive and varied materials outlined in the introduction (e.g., metals, textiles, and furniture) to the process and craftsmanship of this art other than manuscript illumination.

The fact that many images are clearly borrowed from other sources without references is highly problematic and clearly unfair in terms of representing the body of work established by Williamson and Henry, who have taught workshops all over the world, at various universities, and in the Prince's School of Traditional Arts. In fact, one would be better off looking at Williamson's chapter on arabesque (also called *Islimi*) in *Arts and Crafts of Islamic Lands*, edited by Khaled Azzam of the Prince's School of Traditional Arts.

The fourth book, Laurelie Rae's *Islamic Art and Architecture*, benefits from the same art director and graphic designer as the previous books, and is heavily dependent upon on photographs sourced from ten different people and from three general sources (*istock*, *thinkstock*, and *shutterstock*). This reliance upon photographs, along with the book's large format and general title, may give the impression of a typical (and highly unoriginal) coffee table book, which is certainly accentuated by the very brief general descriptions of mosques within and the highly personal notes made throughout. One very interesting aspect of this book, which is unfortunately under-emphasized, is that it contains original artwork by the artist/author, a Canadian who spent some time in Istanbul. She is clearly enamored with the city and trained in various art schools and programs, including the Prince's School of Traditional Arts.

The book's four chapters are divided by historical era. But instead of chapters with suitable introductions or conclusions that frame the material, one finds only a choppy collection of buildings without any connecting threads. In fact, no connection at all is made with the artistic works expressed by the artist/author. Rae's works are used as the front pieces of each chapter, but without any explanation or discussion. The first chapter, "Haiga Sophia and History," focuses on this single building but provides only a very brief and general history and a variety of photographs. The second chapter, "Elusive Seljuks," covers eight buildings – but we are never told why the Seljuks were elusive. The descriptions for each building are brief and written for an audience who knows nothing about the architecture of these periods. Chapter 3,

“Building of an Empire: Early Ottoman,” covers eight buildings and features the same approach: generalized texts peppered with very personal comments and supported with large photographs. Chapter 4, “Masterpieces of Ottoman Empire,” showcases twelve buildings with “stories that pique my interest” (p. 104). The book ends without a conclusion, and the reader is left with a similarly incomplete sense of the subject.

The problem here, I believe, lies in the attempt to frame the book as something other than the strengths of the artist/author. Her works remain as decorative front pages and are never discussed – they are interesting compositions of architectural elements, perspectives and details juxtaposed to create a synthesized study of the building, but are ignored by the book’s text and format. If the book’s title, text, and format had focused on the creation and interpretation integrated within these works, something far richer could have been presented.

There is a wonderful opportunity for new and insightful books to be published, ones that share the artists’ experiences with mediums and crafts, parallel to but very different from academic texts (or coffee table) texts on the subjects. It is important that the focus on this unique approach is not lost in the attempt to frame the book for a wider audience, because at best such books like *Islamic Art and Architecture: Memories of Seljuk and Ottoman Masterpieces* and *Islamic Art of Illumination: Classical Tazhib from Ottoman to Contemporary Times* will seem like glorified coffee table books and, at worst, the lack of sufficient academic rigor will undermine the book’s credibility in an already vast collection of books published on these topics.

Of the four books, *The Ottoman Touch: Traditional Decorative Arts and Crafts and Silver in Turkish Art* (although there are heavy overlaps between them) start to express the unique and special approach of an artist who is interpreting and analyzing historic crafts. It is to Kuşoğlu’s credit that he has practiced for over forty years and that the books include some of his beautiful work. Those with a general or even specific interest in the metal works produced during Turkey’s various historical eras would enjoy either of these two books. However, I hope that in the future the artists/authors would be supported and encouraged (by their publishers and other relevant parties) to focus specifically on their own artworks and delve into expressing the processes of integrating material culture – potentially with truly original results that would contribute to a field of historical study dominated by textual academic studies.

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