

# When Oskar Kokoshka, who in 1968 had come to Istanbul,

took a look outside Prof. Naumann's home, yet another urban portrait was added to his collection: Istanbul.

In fact every picture of a city is a face seen in profile, and Kokoshka's Istanbul once again gave support to that reality. A face looked at frontally turns naturally into a profile here.

Istanbul negates the notion that one must take an external perspective in order to be cognisant of a city's visual existence, because while in the midst of the city there is always a degree of distance between us and what is in front of us. So much so, that even in the most unexpected neighbourhoods one can in this city confront "its face facing the sky" at any moment.

Istanbul, because our lines of perspective never cross, is actually a perfect object of observation. It looks at the sky; and we at it. It is as if the only reason for the existence of the seas surrounding it is to emphasise the silhouette of this city set on hills. Those left on the opposite shore along with the sea continuously generate viewers from our perspective. The Istanbul, perhaps for this reason, is to an extent that is not the case anywhere else, fated to continuously have a view of his city.

All of these things make it difficult to take refuge in the limitations of being in the background. That's because the portrait of the city takes every opportunity to devour that which is in front of it. As a result, the artist who selects a corner of Istanbul as his background must be prepared to execute a

painting with double "prima donnas." Every painting of Istanbul that does take this reality into account is doomed to look flat on the picture plane.

On the other hand, for the western painter this place is above all a mystical "city of atmosphere." In the primitive East, where strange customs and practices were the norm, we always witness the same thing, at least for a list of names beginning with Jean-Etienne Liotard and running to Amadeo Preziosi: Istanbul is viewed as an interesting document, especially its daily life. The costumes people wore, the peddlars, for some, the various degrees of separation of the worlds of women and men: This Istanbul is really another world. The foreign painter whose path led him to Istanbul, whether he was concerned with documentation or tried to find support for the image of the mystical East he had constructed in his imagination, has always had some degree of artifice in his work. The distance which Istanbul placed in front of itself fell victim to the concern for being a witness of something. Without any doubt, we must admit that this played an important role in the fact that most of the painters who came to Istanbul were second or even third rate artists. The result: Some poor examples, one worse than the other, of 'pictures of' rather than paintings. Only Kokoschka is an exception; because he did the same thing here as he did with the paintings of Vienna or London on which he placed his signature. In other words, rather than doing a painting of Istanbul, he had an encounter with Istanbul in the form of a painting.

Paintings which are done only out of curiosity for the city of necessity lose out in painterly language, because the thing that is embodied turns out to be a tourist's postcard picture of that city. So Istanbul, which is a real booby trap for foreign painters, also makes Turkish artists sweat a bit. If there is no coherent justification of what is portrayed rooted in the unity of lived experience then, just like with the gondolas of Venice, the mosques of Istanbul are so easily transformed into kitsch. The issue is not being able to see a detail the foreigner is not aware of, but rather one of making ordinary that which is always visually available and making it a part of one's personal experience. The real face of a city always emerges right after the impact of the first

sighting of it. So, as a result, the important thing in a portrait of a city, rather than a sharp observational sensibility, is the sharing of a common ground with the other founded in the self. When the artist sets out to use the city as an instrument to find himself, then the city reveals itself and enriches our imaginative powers. The artist who looks at the other side of the Bosphorus through an open slot in his neighbourhood is bound to be defeated by Istanbul if he does not see what's over there through the lens of the place where he is located.

The possibility of seeing the panorama of Istanbul while in the midst of it really depends completely on an accident of one's geographic position. The Turkish painter, unlike those in the West, has never felt the necessity of leaving the city and looking at it from the outside in order to see it. That's because he has never felt the impact of the degree of urbanisation that would make him feel alone in the place in which he lived. In this residential region far from the industrial revolution we note that just as there is a rather diffuse boundary between social classes, the differentiation between city and nature is also not terribly clear. The Istanbuler is not depleted by the place in which he lives and is foreign to the longing for a bit of nature outside of the city limits where he can air his loneliness. The urban matrix in Istanbul is composed of gardens, orchards and numerous wooded areas, and nature is right in the very midst of the city. Because the individual is deprived of the opportunity to question his existence via nature, he is forced to make the city he lives in the subject of his accounting. And the painter who is not able to project onto the city the anxious loneliness of having lived in nature, just sees "views" around him, the particular atmosphere representative of a common urban sensibility - in the final analysis, the sum of a coming to terms with his self.

However, it would be misleading just to explain the particularity of Istanbul in terms of its geographic situation without taking into consideration its socio-cultural structure. In these terms, and as Dogan Kuban has emphasised, we note that in step with the strengthening of the nuclear family - something which we observe in this Turkish-Islamic civilization - the fabric of the city has weakened and has become more dispersed. Istanbul is above all else a city without an urban plan. The idea of

the public square, something that requires a high level and long-range kind of abstraction is completely foreign to this place. "There is basically no planned public square in cities [here]. Open spaces have emerged in the environs of the mosque or marketplace in a spontaneous sort of way...(...) We have no sense that the mosques, medreses, public baths and commercial buildings constructed for public use have been crowned in advance with an architectural perspective in a planned sort of way. The most monumental of these structures, the mosques, have not developed public squares in their environs as is the case in the equivalents found in European cities."<sup>1</sup>

Maurice Aymard approaches this issue in a somewhat different way. He argues that Islamic culture did not allot space for the public square, the sign of urban well-being throughout the history of its civilisation. Muslim cities excluded themselves in advance from such a space, the locus of public demonstrations, a space which decreased in size and took on other functions as the city grew. "The particular fate of Muslim cities did away with the functions of the public square and was the source of a very different use of space. In the urban centres there were no spaces where people might collect other than in the mosques, in the mosque courtyards and in the medreses, in the commercial houses and in the baths surrounding them. This was where the decisions of those in power were announced to the public and where prayers were said in the name of the ruler. This was the centre of commercial life, the bazaar, the marketplace."<sup>2</sup>

For us, the important point to recognise in this respect is the fact that the public square in its relationship to the city served as a locus of public display. The square is, as the symbol of the city, above all an object of observation available from a certain distance. In dealing with this problem of distancing within the framework of its unique topography from the vantage point of the Asian shore of the city, Istanbul contributes a new dimension to the concept of the urban district without really being aware of

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1 Doğan Kuban, *Sanat Tarihimizin Sorunları [Issues in Our Art History]*, Cagdas Publications, Istanbul, 1975, p. 153.

2 Fernand Braudel, *Akdeniz, Mekan ve Tarih [The Mediterranean]*, Metis Publications, Istanbul, 1990, p. 140.

doing so. The sense of distance that would have been available via the public square is here provided by the districts. To be in love with Istanbul is equivalent to knowing the various districts and to feeling a longing for each in its own way. So, as a result, there is no *one* picture of Istanbul; there are separate pictures each of which somehow is unable to represent the whole. Perhaps, it is for this reason that the best picture of Istanbul was painted not by a painter but by a writer, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar.

Tanpınar, who had an artistic sensibility incapable of discriminating location in time, painted a portrait of Istanbul where past and present meld, and was constantly breathless with a kind of passion. This obsession verging on euphoria turned him into a passionate lover of Istanbul typically unsatisfied with the place where he was located. This person so confused about where he was in time had finally stepped onto a spot which was slowly slipping out from under his feet. "In Istanbul, right in the midst of everything you happen to be doing at the moment, you all of a sudden get the urge to be in Nisantasi district, and while in Nisantasi there are, surely, places you'd like to see in Eyup and Üsküdar. Sometimes, just because you've brought all of them to mind and want all of them, you find yourself stuck in the place where you happen to be at the moment."<sup>3</sup> According to Tanpınar, it takes just a brief moment in this city for a person to step "from a gentle fantasy world where with a few easy blows one can earn one's bread from poetry into an unfamiliar, rude and legendary night of the Argonauts." In actuality, the point that Tanpınar really wants to make is that time is a fiction in an Istanbul composed of old/new, local/foreign, beautiful/ugly and the like. This is so much the case that even an imported clock upon arrival here "begins to strike Muslim time," because "the city itself really pulses with an architecture of our own, a music and a life of our own, and in the end gushes with an overflow of all-encompassing sui generis feelings, sadnesses, joys, and fantasies, all in the final analysis set to a time sensibility very much our own."<sup>4</sup>

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3 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Beş Şehir [Five Cities]*, Ministry of Culture Publications, Istanbul, 1969, p. 142.

4 Ibid., p. 151.

In this respect another interesting effort is Çetin Altan's "So Here's Istanbul." In Altan's Istanbul which focuses directly on the present, the smells of urine and grilled meatballs intermingle. In contrast to Tanpınar, this is a portrait of Istanbul as colourful and as realistic as can be executed by an artist who bears witness to the down-to-earth and to the present moment, once again with the city viewed as distinct urban districts.

Finally, Murat Belge's "Istanbul", though in appearance a guide to the city, in fact really goes way beyond the limits of a guide and assumes a serious and critical stance vis-à-vis the city. In this experimental portrait we encounter neither Tanpınar's poetic style nor Altan's striking observations. But when we become attuned to Belge's cool, academic approach, we soon see that this work is a basso continuo after the fact to Tanpınar's and Altan's portraits.

No doubt, all of this reveals that books such as these which are able to allot separate sections to each district in the city, are able to embrace the whole city more completely than can a painting. Istanbul is the *sui generis* whole of which is no one district is a representative part. The sum of the parts is either more or less than the whole. As a result, the districts which compete with each other to become fetishes/prima donnas in the end breathlessly concede defeat to the whole.

If we were to try and evaluate the paintings of Istanbul painted during the past one hundred years as a whole, we would see that those painters who came to understand the unique mosaic of this city in the end selected a particular district and identified with it. This is, in a sense, the end result of the syndrome pointed out somewhat obliquely by Tanpınar. The painter desiring to see all of Istanbul at once but stuck in one spot and increasingly confronted with the same view finally constructs an imaginary Istanbul. The point of departure of those artists who have really had the opportunity to get to know this city is as follows: Istanbul does not fit into its panorama, because in the backdrop there is that essential other face of the city.

Let us try and think about Hoca Ali Rıza. Though the coastal strip stretching from Kadıköy to Beykoz fell within his area of interest, he was above all an Üsküdar painter. So much was that so that when we take a look at all of the paintings he did of

Üsküdar in public and private collections, we see that that district has taken on an entirely new dimension in his hands. Hoca's Üsküdar is authentic not because it has been executed with the excitement of a person getting to know some place new, but rather with the ease of one who is deeply rooted in the place in which he was born and grew up. In the words of Yahya Kemal, this is a part of the city which witnessed the conquest of Istanbul and kept it alive in its imagination for centuries. So much is clear: for a person who awakens to the call to prayer in this once elite community, the young boy sporting a fez or the typical old wooden houses have quite naturally become organic components of the imaginative vessel. Hoca, rather than being surprised at what he saw, confronted his "true self" and chose no more than to be enchanted by his vision. It is perhaps for that reason that we are able to feel in his paintings not an Üsküdar which during those years still carried the traces of its deeply rooted and glorious past, but a sadness rather difficult to identify.

In every documentary sort of painting that has emerged in spite of the artist, the "present" portrayed survives if it is rooted in authentic feelings. By its very nature that which is portrayed via the fixed "present" of the canvas is the residue of time which has flowed along. The only difference between Hoca and the foreign clock "which begins to strike Muslim time" is that Hoca is genuinely local material.

The paintings of Eyup that Naile Akıncı has been doing for almost forty years are, on the other hand, among the most striking examples of its kind because they have transformed the settling of accounts with a particular district into a creative obsession. This is an Eyup that is without any concrete connections either to its past or to the lived *present*. Akıncı has in the end cancelled out the relationship between the thing observed and the thing seen by transforming it into a vacuum to be filled by others. And he has in the end turned what is left of the image of Eyup into a form in the service of an amorphic and totally spiritual field. For this reason Eyup, his forty-year obsession, has, with this self-examination alone, become a little more enriched with every stroke, and without at all violating the whole of which it is a part.

There is no doubt that many more names could be added to this list, from Halil Pasha to Devrim Erbil, but the end result would not change. There is no single painting of Istanbul, There are only the paintings of artists who have devoted their lives to any one of its districts.

At the end of "So Here's Istanbul" Çetin Altan is right in his lament: "Of course the Istanbul that we write about while we are alive does not come to an end here... It will not come to an end as long as we live and write. In the final analysis we will cease to be, but it will not. It will never ever, ever cease to be..."<sup>5</sup>

While looking at thousands of paintings of Istanbul we keep thinking the same thing: The painter too does not fear an Istanbul that the writer has not been able to consume!

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<sup>5</sup> Çetin Altan, *Al İste Istanbul [So Here's Istanbul]*, Yazko, Istanbul, p. 141.





*View from Haliç, 1979, 73x92 cm., oil on canvas, Nilüfer Boran Collection.*

