Art and Identity: Ataturk and the End of the Ottoman Empire

ELSIE MOUNTFORD

Following the end of the First World War, Kemal Ataturk sought to create a new sense of national identity through the promotion of the arts. The reforms issued by Ataturk during his presidency sought to create a united Turkish state distinct from the remains of the Ottoman Empire. While his changes included the usual political, economic, and educational reforms, he also instituted a series of cultural and artistic reforms that drastically changed how the Turkish people would identify themselves.

When Kemal Ataturk[1] became the president of Turkey in 1923, he instituted reforms designed to create a Turkish state distinct and separate from what was left of the Ottoman Empire. His efforts to create a national identity from the pieces left after the First World War arose from the need to continue the past modernizing efforts of the nineteenth century. Along with economic, political, religious, and educational reforms, Ataturk implemented a series of cultural and artistic changes designed to blur the lines between the diverse communities of Turkey and unite them under one Turkish banner. Leaving the Ottoman

---

[1] Ataturk was born Mustafa in Selânik (today Thessaloniki, Greece). Due to Islamic naming traditions, he did not have a last name. When he entered school he chose the last name Kemal and is recorded as Mustafa Kemal. Later, in 1934, a law was passed requiring all citizens to have surnames. The Republic chose Ataturk for Mustafa Kemal with his blessing. Ataturk means "father of the Turks" and was chosen as for "him and used for him alone." As Ataturk fashioned himself as the father of the Turks, I have used his chosen name throughout this essay. Information regarding his naming comes from: Andrew Mango, "Ataturk," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, ed. Resat Kasaba (n.p.: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4: 148, 165, accessed December 13, 2013, doi:10.1017/CHOL9780520963.007.

Empire and its varied traditions behind was a critical step in creating a Turkish national identity from the ashes of the Ottoman legacy.

When Ibn Khaldun wrote *The Muqaddimah* in the fourteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had yet to conquer Constantinople. The Ottoman's story, however, would hardly have surprised this astute observer of history. The Ottoman Turks originating from the Anatolian plains stormed the Islamic and Byzantine worlds in the fourteenth century, bringing with them a long lasting dynasty comprised of such notable rulers as Suleiman the Magnificent and Mehmed the V. The arts flourished under the Ottomans: painting, Iznik pottery, and architectural monuments such as the Blue Mosque, Topkapi Palace, and Suleymaniye Complex appeared in the landscape of Turkey. However, the Ottoman Empire was subject to the same principles as other dynasties, a recurring theme that Ibn Khaldun astutely notes: "… eventually, a great change takes place in the world…. [and] royal authority is transferred from one group to another.[2] The long lasting Ottoman dynasty experienced the same rise, plateau, and fall as many of the other dynasties Ibn Khaldun wrote about in *The Muqaddimah*. The last Ottoman Sultan and second to last Islamic Caliph, Mehmed VI, left Turkey in 1922.

The last traces of the Ottoman Empire disappeared in the 1920s as the Turkish Republic began to assert itself. By 1924, the Caliphate, the highest office of Islam, was abolished.[3] The new leader of the Republic, and the instigator of these political and religious changes, Ataturk, implemented a program of

---

[2] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, abr. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 115.

[3] Elie Kedourie, "The End of the Ottoman Empire," *Jounral of Contemporary History* 3, no. 4 (October 1968): 21, accessed December 13, 2013, http://www.jstor.org/stable/259848.

modernization designed to create a "greater degree of social cohesiveness than the [previous] Ottoman reformers had done."[4] Before the Great War, beginning in the early nineteenth century, Sultan Mahmut II implemented a series of cultural and political reforms designed to maintain and stop the Ottoman Empire's decline without reducing the power of the caliphate and sultanate. The reforms, known as the Tanzimat, were an attempt to modernize the empire's institutions. [5] The Tanzimat era began with decisive steps towards European-styled institutional models.[6] This shift entailed a gradual move away from Islamic law and embraced equality for all nations under Ottoman rule.[7] These early reforms instigated the first phase of a modern Turkey, and influenced Ataturk's strict cultural policies of the post-war era.

If Mahmut II's Tanzimat reforms sought to revive the Ottoman Empire, Ataturk aggressively transformed it. Ataturk's cultural, political, and religious reforms altered Ottoman Turkey into a rapidly modernizing state. Influenced by Ziya Gökalp's ideas on Turkish Nationalism, Ataturk worked to separate religion from national identity.[8] According to Gökalp, a person's religion and nationality were different entities that together constitute nationalism, but religion was "supranational," meaning it connected the nation to a wider international community, but did not create a strong national identity within the state.[9] Ataturk believed that the state would only survive if it adopted Western

---

[4] Renata Holod and Ahmet Evin, introduction to *Modern Turkish Architecture* (n.p.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 6.
[5] Sibel Bozdogan, *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic* (Washington, D.C.: University of Washington Press, 2001), 56.
[6] Holod and Evin, introduction to *Modern Turkish Architecture*, 4.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Bozdogan, *Modernism and Nation Building*, 35.
[9] Bozdogan, *Modernism and Nation Building,* 35.

institutions and created a new national identity based on Turks, not Islam.[10] This required a definitive split from Ottoman culture, and a movement towards establishing a new Turkish Republic with a strong national identity based on internal secular arts and folk culture.[11] Producing a feeling of national unity, based on similarities and not religious fervour, was paramount in Ataturk's creation of a strong state; Ataturk was essentially creating Ibn Khaldun's "asabiyah" on a grander scale.[12] However, for an empire as old and large as that of the Ottomans, there were several barriers to overcome.

By the end of the First World War, it seemed inevitable that the Sikes Picot agreement would divide the Ottoman Empire amongst the Western allies.[13] Ataturk, seeing his country threatened, refused to recognize the Sultan's authority and continued to fight to create an independent Turkish nation. The difficulty, however, lay in the fact that the Ottoman Empire (and now Turkey) held within it many different nations.[14] Within the borders of Turkey, diverse populations identifying themselves as Armenian, Kurdish, Arabic, Greek, and Turkish created distinctly different communities, even within the same villages and cities.

Turkey's cultural demographics changed significantly during the Great War. The Armenian population of Turkey fled or was killed in 1915, while the Greeks of Turkey left at the war's

---

[10] Kedourie, "The End of the Ottoman," 21.

[11] Since the Ottoman dynasty ruled the empire as both sultans and caliphs, Ataturk's move to abolish the caliphate affected more than just the Turkish. Ataturk effectively separated his country from centuries of Islamic tradition and from other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries still practicing it.

[12] Ibn Khaldun, "On Dynasties, Royal Authority, the Caliphate, Government Ranks, and all that Goes with These Things…" in *The Muqaddimah,* 123-132.

[13] Margaret Macmillan, "The End of the Ottomans," in *Paris 1919* (New York: Random House, 2001), 374.

[14] Ibid., 376.

end. [15]   The Turkish Greeks, under the 1922 Lausanne Treaty, were sent to Greece in exchange for Greece's Turkish population.[16] When Ataturk gained control of Turkey in 1923, the skilled and learned population had decreased significantly, meaning that the majority of the Turkish population was illiterate and "deficient in modern skills."[17] This mass population exchange left a country that primarily identified itself as Turkish. Ataturk's cultural reforms consisted of "political-organizational and cultural-artistic aims," to create an efficient bureaucracy while at the same time establishing a single national Turkish identity.[18] Ataturk's reforms targeted everything from the fez, to the educational systems, to art and architecture.

Ataturk promoted the arts as a "national ideal."[19] He valued both the arts and crafts equally, disparagingly commenting on the ignorance of Ottoman rulers for having allowed artists and artisans to leave the Empire and work in other nations.[20] Ataturk believed that art was necessary for the survival of a nation, indirectly suggesting that his Ottoman predecessor's abuse of art was one of the reasons for its downfall. [21] He invited artists and artisans to participate in the creation of a Turkish national identity. Ataturk took inspiration from Gökalp, and earlier European national movements, embracing certain aspects of Turkey's cultural history while avoiding others. Gökalp's

---

[15] Mango, "Ataturk," 159.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Metin And, "Ataturk and the Arts, with Special Reference to Music and Theater," in *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey*, ed. Jacob M. Landau (Colorado: Westview Press, 1984), 215.

[19] And, "Ataturk and the Arts," in *Ataturk and the Modernization*, 217.

[20] And, "Ataturk and the Arts," in *Ataturk and the Modernization,* 217-218.

[21] Cemren Altan, "Visual Narration of a Nation: Painting and National Identity in Turkey," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 4, no. 2 (2004): 2-3, accessed December 13, 2013, doi:10.1111/j.1754-9469.2004.tb00064.x.

influential "culture theory" considers every nation to be a two-part entity based on civilization (scientific and technological), and the national culture built by the people of a nation.[22] According to Gökalp, civilization is an international phenomenon, while culture is inherent and unique to the nation.[23] Based on these theories, Gökalp and Ataturk valued folk culture and arts over the imperial Ottoman culture, believing it possible to create a technologically forward-looking nation on principles of a historic national identity.

The arts provide an avenue to communicate broad-based cultural values. For instance, when Islam first developed its artistic and cultural identity, the coin was one the first mediums through which they demonstrated their values; based on the Byzantine coin, the Muslims removed the figural imagery and put calligraphic inscriptions in its place.[24] When Ataturk took over the government of Turkey, the currency changed once again, but this time with symbols of nationalism. For Ataturk, the symbolic power of art served as a way to unite Turkish identity, and signify to citizens and visitors alike that the old regime was gone.

An Ottoman coin, (Figure 1) held by the Coins and Medals department of the British Museum, provides an example of how the Turkish Republic pulled away from Ottoman culture. The coins date to the nineteenth century, during Mahmud II's reign, and demonstrate a style of coinage used by the Muslims for centuries. Mahmud's coins do not feature figural imagery. One side contains the signature of the Sultan. In previous centuries, dynasties like the Umayyad's included the shahada on the

---

[22] Ibid., 5.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Robert Hillenbrand, "The Birth of Islamic Art: the Umayyads," in *Islamic Art and Architecture*, 10-37, 2nd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2010), 21-22.

opposite side. The shahada, an Islamic statement of faith reads: "there is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the messenger of God."[25] This very simple but effective imagery demonstrates both the Ottoman ruler's ideological beliefs and his preservation of tradition.

Figure 1: *Ottoman Coin*, early 19th c, silver, Coins and Medals, The British Museum. Photograph from www.britishmuseum.org.

The first bills produced by the Turkish Republic contain a very different sort of imagery. Introduced in 1927, Ataturk's bills (Figures 2 and 3) contained imagery symbolic of the nation of Turkey instead of a singular religious identity. They were symbols of "independence of sovereignty of state."[26] The single

---

[25] Anthony Welch, "Sana Treasure" (Lecture, HA 357, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, September 20, 2013).
[26] "History of Paper Money," Turkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankasi, last modified 2006, accessed December 13, 2013, http://www.tcmb.gov.tr/yeni/eng/.

Figure 2 and 3: *1 Turkish Lira*, Front and back image, 1927, Turkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankasi. Photograph from: www.tcm.gov.tr/yeni/banknote/E1/6.htm.

Turkish Lira bills featured the "House of Parliament in the Citadel of Ankara," a plowing farmer on the front, and the "Former Building of Prime Ministry" on the back.[27] Choosing to depict Ankara, the new Turkish Capital, signifies the new government's desire to emphasize the nation and not the individual.[28] The ploughman evokes imagery of the common person, and indicates value placed on the people of Turkey. It is important to note the Arabic script featured on these notes. These bills were in

---

[27] "E1 - One Turkish LIra I. Series," Turkiye Cumhuriyet Merkex Bankasi, last modified 2006, accessed December 13, 2013, http://www.tcmb.gov.tr/yeni/banknote/E1/6.htm.

[28] Moving the capital to Ankara provided Ataturk with an important opportunity to develop new cultural and artistic styles away from centuries' worth of imperial and religious iconography and politics in Istanbul. Ataturk encouraged designs and buildings with European influences and figural statues that oppose the very core of Islamic understanding.

circulation before Ataturk converted the Arabic alphabet to the Latin one. While the Arabic script does not demonstrate Ataturk's move to westernize the nation, it does illustrate the first attempts towards uniting the Turkish state under a common Turkish identity and not an Islamic/Ottoman one.

Coins and banknotes act as one of the most influential forms of art in a new nation because they circulate widely, passing through many hands.   Currency performs a similar function in communicating basic cultural ideas to a mass audience as public art. Ataturk's statuary and architecture worked in the same way to distinguish the new Turkish state from the Ottoman one.

Statuary, while forbidden in the Ottoman era as a sign of paganism, flourished in the new Turkish Republic.[29] The highly aniconic Islamic religion forbade figural representations, while many Islamic arts and artisans painted or created two dimensional representations of people for private secular use, three dimensional representations became dangerously akin to the icons of the Christians. While some figurative statues were allowable in graveyards, they were limited to an abstract style.[30] Walking past graves near Suleyman's mausoleum in Istanbul, one can readily see abstract imagery. Sculpted turbans and fezzes appear in Islamic graveyards where crosses and angels would appear in Christian ones. The absence or presence of statues became a way for Christians and Muslims to understand each other's constructed identities.[31] By the time Ataturk installed a secular government, the majority of Turkish Muslims would have little contact with

---

[29] Faik Gur, "Sculpting the Nation in Early Republican Turkey," *Historical Research* 86, no. 232 (May 2013): 344, accessed December 13, 2013, doi:10.11111/468-2281.12000.
[30] Ibid., 344.
[31] Ibid.

the statuary styles prevalent in Europe.[32] Statuary has always been influential in establishing and legitimizing government. Statues, like currency, are a form of public art that unequivocally state their nation's beliefs and values. The statues and monuments erected by the new Turkish Republic of Ataturk (Figure 4) visibly divorced the new regime from that of the Ottomans, and added another layer to the construction of the Turkish national identity.

Figure 4: *Statue of Ataturk*, Gulhane Park, Istanbul, Turkey. 2013. Photograph by the author.

The Kemalist model was intended to create a modern, European-style, secular state.   Ataturk firmly believed that religion should stay in the home or the mosque.   Ataturk's

---

[32] Ibid.

reforms changed the way in which religion functioned in Turkey. The arts of Turkey prior to Ataturk's reforms participated in Islamic tradition. Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, was steeped in Islamic architectural and artistic practices centuries old. Ibn Khaldun in *The Muqaddimah* describes the difficulty of destroying the monuments of a strong dynasty by listing the great Umayyad Mosque in Cordoba and the Mosque of al-Walid as some of those monuments that following dynasties were unable to destroy, simply because of their size and importance.[33]

Ibn Khaldun, writing several centuries earlier, pointed out one of the problems Ataturk would face in the construction of his new nation. The characteristic architecture of the Great Sinan in the Suleymaniye Complex of Istanbul, and the Selimiye in Edirne, represented a challenge to the Christian Hagia Sophia and declared a victory for the beauty of Islam and the power of the Ottoman Empire. This imperial and religious architecture, however, also challenged the growing identity of the new state of Turkey. In a way, Ataturk's move to transform the Hagia Sophia from a mosque into a museum visibly demonstrated his secular victory over the Ottoman Empire and the Greek nationalists who desired to return the building to its former Christian glory.[34] Ataturk continued to challenge the Ottoman Empire and the power of Islam by encouraging Turkey to modernize its art.

The end of the Ottoman Empire saw the rise of the new Turkish Republic. In order to make a strong national identity, Ataturk implemented reforms that embraced Westernization. His political, religious, and culturally based changes led to different art forms as folk art and the artists of the nation were called upon to reinvent Turkey. Ataturk respected the preceding arts and

---

[33] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, 143.
[34] Macmillan, "The End of the Ottomans," in *Paris 1919*, 372.

culture, but saw change as necessary in order to compete on a global scale. Many of his public art movements rejected the Islamic artistic program of previous years, and decisions such as including figures on the currency and statues in parks reinforced Ataturk's reforms. Although Ibn Khaldun wrote about group feeling in the context of the rise and fall of dynasties, Ataturk's reforms worked to create "asabiyah" on a national scale, which, in accordance with Ibn Khaldun's ideas, necessarily meant leaving much of the Ottoman culture behind.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Altan, Cemren. "Visual Narration of a Nation: Painting and National Identity in Turkey." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 4, no. 2 (2004): 2-17. Accessed December 13, 2013. doi:10.1111/ j.1754-9469.2004.tb00064.x

And, Metin. "Ataturk and the Arts, with Special Reference to Music and Theater." In *Ataturk and the Modernization of Turkey*, edited by Jacob M. Landau, 215-32. Colorado: Westview Press, 1984.

Bozdogan, Sibel. *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic*. Washington, D.C.: University of Washington Press, 2001.

Gur, Faik. "Sculpting the Nation in Early Republican Turkey." *Historical Research* 86, no. 232 (May 2013): 342-72. Accessed December 13, 2013. doi:10.11111/468-2281.12000.

Hillenbrand, Robert. "The Birth of Islamic Art: the Umayyads." In *Islamic Art and Architecture*, 10-37. 2nd ed. New York: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2010.

"History of Paper Money." Turkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankasi. Last modified 2006. Accessed December 13, 2013. http://www.tcmb.gov.tr/yeni/eng/.

Holod, Renata, and Ahmet Evin. Introduction to *Modern Turkish Architecture*, 1-8. N.p.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984.

Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah*. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. Abr. ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Kedourie, Elie. "The End of the Ottoman Empire." *Jounral of Contemporary History* 3, no. 4 (October 1968): 19-28. Accessed December 13, 2013. http://www.jstor.org/stable/259848.

Kramer, Heinz. "The Kemalist Model of Shaping Politics and Society." In *A Changing Turkey: The Challenge to Europe and the United States*, 3-10. Washington, D.C.: The Bookings Institution, 2000.

Macmillan, Margaret. "The End of the Ottomans." In *Paris 1919*, 366-80. New York: Random House, 2001.

Mango, Andrew. "Ataturk." In *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, edited by Resat Kasaba, 147-72. Vol. 4. N.p.: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Accessed December 13, 2013. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521620963.007.

Welch, Anthony. "Sana Treasure." Lecture, HA 357, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, September 20, 2013.

Image Sources:

Silver Coin; Mahmud II. Nineteenth[th] c. Coins and Medals, British Museum, London, UK. Accessed February 16, 2014. http://britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/.

Mountford, Elsie. *Photograph of Statue of Kemal Ataturk*. Personal Photograph. August 2013.

TCMB. "E1 - One Turkish Lira I. Series." Turkiye Cumhuriyet Merkex Bankasi. Last modified 2006. Accessed December 13, 2013. http://www.tcmb.gov.tr/yeni/banknote/E1/6.htm.