

Modern Women Artists in Turkey Meet Their Trailblazing Counterparts

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ISTANBUL — “Dream and Reality,” a show at the Istanbul Modern art museum, pairs “nearly forgotten” painters from the Ottoman era with some of the most intriguing artists in [Turkey](#) today.

The common thread? All are women.

Levent Calikoglu, chief curator for the Modern, said by e-mail last week that female artists “have a very important, critical and pioneering position in the Turkish art world. One of the objectives of the show was to render this visible.”

Another goal, he said, was to illustrate the social and cultural transformation in Turkey over the past century by reintroducing the older painters’ accomplishments alongside the work of contemporary artists who tackle more modern challenges through newer mediums like video.

In 1913, for example, the Newspaper of the Ottoman Painters’ Association wrote that the profession of painting and womanhood had never “agreed with each other.” It argued further that a deep love of art and the “inextinguishable” desire to paint were inherently male attributes.

But toward the end of the [Ottoman Empire](#), daughters of the wealthy or upper-middle class intellectuals, particularly in Istanbul and especially in non-Muslim families, were encouraged to learn to paint, to speak French and to play the piano, Mr. Calikoglu noted, all in an effort to appear more Westernized.

Even so, being an artist was not encouraged as a career track, since society’s main objective for women was to fill roles as wives and mothers.

“Art for women was considered a mere hobby, a pastime,” he said. “Professionally speaking, men monopolized art, just as they did the word ‘genius.’”

This was not the case only in Turkey, of course. “I don’t think the Ottoman society presented a more constraining environment than that experienced by French Impressionist women artists,” Mr. Calikoglu said. “If we consider the examples of Mary Cassatt or Berthe Morisot we can realize how Ottoman and French women artists stood up to similar difficulties” inherent in the social roles assigned to them.

In the 1920s, the Turkish Republic continued to send artists to Europe for study and training, as ambassadors of a sort for the new Turkey. According to the “Dreams” exhibit catalog, when the figurative

painter Mihri Musfik, who was born in 1886, traveled to the United States, a Turkish newspaper referred to her 1928 visit as “powerful and effective propaganda in America on behalf of Turkey and the Turks.”

Yet life was hardly easy for such trailblazers. Ms. Musfik had run away from her home in Istanbul in her 20s to go to Rome, and later lived in the Montparnasse area of Paris, selling portraits to earn a living. Her niece Hale Asaf became a painter, and worked in Berlin, Munich and Paris, also finding more of an audience abroad than at home. Ms. Musfik died in the 1950s, impoverished, her portraits already fading from the art world’s collective memory.

“Very little information about the individual life stories of this generation of female artists exists,” Mr. Calikoglu wrote in the exhibit catalog, “and there is no clear and accurate information about the number of their works.”

Even for the most accomplished ones like Ms. Musfik, “female artists are mentioned in the texts of male authors of history in one or two sentences at most,” he wrote.

Fatmagul Berktag, another curator of the “Dream” exhibit, wrote that “Patriarchal ideology assigned men the attributes of rationality, civilization and culture, while the female identity was one of irrationality and sentimentality,” right down to a Turkish proverb that says women are “long of hair, short of sense.”

In Turkey as elsewhere, female artists of the era were mainly confined to becoming teachers of painting, if they had careers at all. And a dearth of documentation — like the paper trails built by the catalogs or biographies common for male artists — led to a number of what Mr. Calikoglu termed “dead ends” for the team of curators mounting this anthology of works by 74 women.

“Most of the works by women artists from the late Ottoman and early Republican periods are lost and have not been registered,” he said during the interview. “When it comes to women artists of the same period we are in a haze. Of course there are many reasons for this. The fact that these women artists did not enter the private collections of their time nor state collections — which were the greatest patrons of art during that time — is the most important factor in their works not having survived.

“No doubt this deficiency is related to many sexist factors,” but not just in Turkey, he said. “Women artists have had to put up with similar problems in many different geographies.”

By the 1950s, painters like Fahrelnissa Zeid and Aliye Berger were producing abstract pieces and finding more notoriety in a field previously considered exclusive to male artists. Their works avoided overt expressions of femininity, a contrast to many of today’s women artists in Turkey who home in on questions of gender and sexual identity.

But in 1954, when an international jury gave Ms. Berger, once a student of Ms. Musfik's, the top prize for "Sun Rising," her first oil painting, it set off a roaring scandal. The competitions sponsored by the bank Yapi Kredi were the first large-scale private sector support for the arts in Turkey, and until then, art historians say, most male artists sniffed at women's painting as amateurish. But experts now credit her work with breaking free of the stiff academic criteria of the era, spurring a new field of expression.

It was not until the 1990s, the exhibit contends, that Turkish women artists really began focusing on the theme of women's roles and identities.

Do today's Turkish women artists feel excluded by a heavily patriarchal society? Yes and no.

Some contend that the term "women artists" is itself a form of ghettoization, while others say that being female is what allowed them to go into art in the first place.

Canan, who was born in 1970 and uses only her first name, studied business administration before turning to art. Her work looks at what she calls the harassment and oppression of women in both traditional and modern cultures, by family, religion and government.

Her pieces are far more rebellious than the portraits by the earliest "Dream" artists. "I describe myself as an activist feminist artist," she said. "Social sexism politics, bodily governance practiced by the power holders and concepts of biopolitics are the main themes of my works."

The video "Exemplary" tells the story of a girl in southeastern Anatolia who is not allowed "to be herself even in her dreams."

Through the work, Canan says, "I try to discuss the repressive structure of the foundations like marriage and family, the transformation of woman's body into a political and religious merchandise, the Orientalization of the concept of feminine beauty, and the consumptive exploitation."

To be part of the "Dreams" exhibit is a chance for her to broadcast her messages but also to learn of feminists who preceded her in the field. "I had heard some of the earlier artists but they were mostly new names to me," she said.

"Although the works in the exhibition have a pessimistic atmosphere," she added, "it is a positive situation being able to discuss these problems, and establishing exhibitions of women artists, especially the ones with a feminist statement."

"Our dreams," she said, "are becoming real as our visibility increases."

Azade Koker, 62, whose studio is in Berlin, is another artist in the exhibit who shines a bright light on women squeezed between tradition and modernity. In her mixed-media sculptures, women seem to be part of the furniture, a situation which, she said, still makes it difficult “for a woman to take a place as a artist in the circle and to be able to live from it.”

The work of Nilbar Gures, 34, examines women perceived as being on the fringe of society as lesbians or perhaps as head-scarved conservatives.

Her 2006 video, “Undressing,” looks at Islamophobia and the pressure it exerts on women’s identity, she said last week.

Born in Istanbul, she lived in Vienna for 11 years and is now in New York on a scholarship from the Austrian Ministry of Culture.

Being female, she said, did not discourage her from a career in art. “On the contrary, I feel I was able to study art because I am a woman,” she said. “Perhaps this was true of our generation; precisely because we are women our families allowed and approved of us being engaged with painting, which was seen as a sort of ‘handicraft’ and we were thus able to study art.

“I think the challenges of being a woman artist emerge later, in other places, such as after graduation, when men get support more readily than women artists. Women artists are presumed to get support from their families or their husbands,” she said, while men receive more rapid support as a result of “the patriarchal role ascribed to them.”

It was neither a female artist nor a male one that inspired Ms. Gures to dedicate her life to art, but rather an elderly woman of Greek descent who babysat her in Istanbul.

“When I took my bag and escaped to her house, we used to talk and she used to tell me about the futility of social taboos, that it was a good thing to get married late,” Ms. Gures said. “Maria would show me photographs of her nieces, single women on vacation in Egypt or England. For example, a picture of a woman smiling to the camera on camel back in the desert really fascinated me.”

“I think that is when I understood that if we really set our mind and heart to it, it wasn’t just a dream to change our lives,” she said. “As for Turkey today, there is no longer the need for Western role models in photographs as it was in my case. Women in Turkey are becoming more integrated into economic life, it’s not enough, but there is progress.”

Living in Austria opened doors in some ways, and roadblocks in others. “Austria is essentially a country that invests in arts and culture and espouses its artists,” she said. “On the other hand, Europe is not a place

where an artist from Turkey is neutrally perceived as merely a woman artist. In countries like Austria and Germany, in addition to racism and enmity toward foreigners there is an extra animosity toward Turkish people.”

Ms. Gures also uses still photography to examine injustices in social relations.

In “The Front Balcony,” a 1997 photo originally done for the Berlin Biennial, a young woman covered with a wedding gown is tugging on the toe of another young woman’s white pantyhose. This and other pictures “explore the competition or solidarity between women, or how they work out their inner conflicts among themselves. Generally the women in my photographs,” she said, “resolve their issues among themselves and don’t let others — such as men — have a say.”

One man who did have a say was Mr. Calikoglu, the Modern’s chief curator. For him, one of the most important things about the show is that “it has brought together these artists not just because they are women but because they are very good, prominent, original artists.”

One of his inspirations for “Dreams” was a 2006 digital print called “The Future for Turkish Women Artists,” by the Guerrilla Girls collective, which began as a group of New York-based feminists. It asserts that female artists in Turkey are in a better environment than those in Europe or the United States, with more than 40 percent of the art shown in Istanbul galleries coming from women.

“Of course this does not mean that we have overcome the inequality between sexes,” he said. “We cannot imagine art to be a sterile field that is isolated from social life.”

“Dream and Reality: Modern and Contemporary Women Artists from Turkey” runs through Jan. 23.