

BOOK REVIEW

Gülru Necipoğlu and Sibel Bozdoğan, editors

History and Ideology: Architectural Heritage of the “Lands of Rum” (Muqarnas 24)

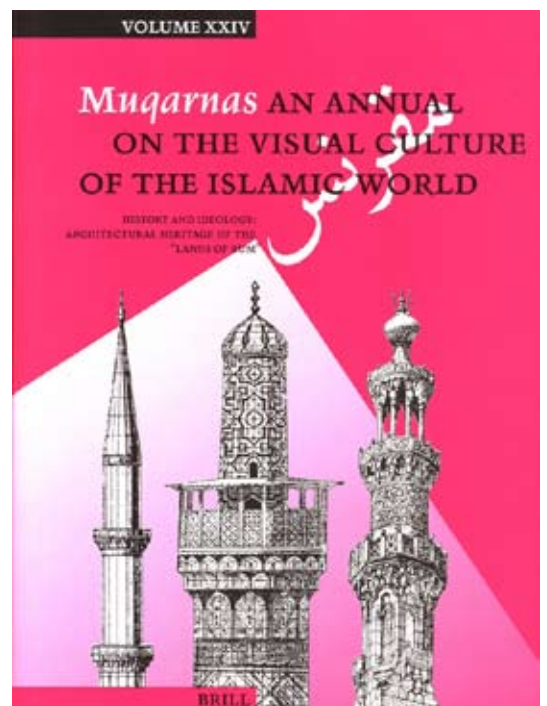
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Volume 24 of the renowned Harvard-based journal *Muqarnas*, an annual on “the visual culture of the Islamic world,” is a special issue dedicated to the proceedings of the conference “History and Ideology: Architectural Heritage of the ‘Lands of Rum’” held in Cambridge, Massachusetts in May 2006. Published little more than a year after the event, editors and authors seemingly did not want to lose time in addressing problems close to their hearts. And an important contribution to the field of Ottoman architectural history it is indeed, being no less than a direct critique of past and present scholarship in that discipline. We find fourteen papers by talented scholars whose backgrounds are fairly similar. It is not surprising, therefore, that the critiques are also quite uniform (and only at times openly polemical), whereby the core articles (see below) of *Muqarnas 24* read almost like chapters of a single book. They are not really a contribution to art history in the traditional sense, but rather a reconstruction of episodes in twentieth-century intellectual history that cannot be ignored by any student of Ottoman architecture. The authors must be commended for not sparing criticism and, more importantly, for concentrating it where it can still serve constructively. Rather than a work of chance, *Muqarnas 24* is an orchestrated effort.

A key paper, setting the mood, is editor Gülru Necipoğlu’s piece on the Ottomans’ best-known architect, Mimar Sinan, programmatically titled “Creation of a National Genius.” Once styled the “Turkish Michelangelo,” fierce battles came to be fought over the ethnic origins of the master who came to personify the essence of the Ottoman style. Official history eventually settled for an insistence on his having been a “Christian Turk” as something still more acceptable than Greek or Armenian. An exhumation of his skull eventually “proved” his membership in the “brachycephalic Turkish race.” The story then disseminated in a 1950s historical novel by no less than Atatürk’s adopted daughter was that Sinan, upon visiting

Seljuk-period monuments in Anatolia with his grandfather (presumably a Christian Turk as well), was advised by the latter to accept Islam and serve the Turkish “race” by “creating civilized works” of architecture (p. 167). Atatürk himself had similarly realized the utility of Sinan in the crafting of national pride (and, to begin with, a nation). While his desire to have the famed Süleymaniye complex transformed into a commemorative theme park for Sinan (*Sinan sitesi*) never materialized, the idea of a statue of Sinan in the new capital Ankara did: it was modelled on the physiognomy of a stone mason from Sinan’s native village in Central Anatolia, who claimed to be a direct descendent of the master. Invited to the inauguration ceremony, the public could corroborate that the physical likeness was indeed met. Needless to say, we have little or no trustworthy evidence for Sinan’s appearance. The episode is thus all the more significant in reflecting the young Republic’s altered approach to representations of the body on one hand, and of the necessity of visualizing history as cultural (or “national”) capital on the other. However entertaining some of the episodes revisited in the course of the historio-



graphical reviews may be, the writings of the late Ottoman and early Republican period (roughly the first half of the twentieth century), an age of nation-building, are indeed analyzed with some scholarly distance; they are a product of their time. More recent authors, however, are more openly criticized for not questioning concepts they had in part inherited from the nationalist scholarly tradition, or even developing them further. The tendency for formalism in Turkish architectural historical scholarship is identified not only as the dominant method (here asserted as a legacy of the Vienna School in Turkey, really Josef Strzygowski and his students) but also a strategy to circumvent thorny questions. Building plans so acquired “paramount epistemic importance” in a tradition that came to be “concerned primarily with morphological continuities and transformations assessed in a comparative framework” (Pancaroglu, pp. 68, 81). This tradition had remained largely out of touch with new empirical and theoretical developments in neighboring disciplines (including Ottoman history), and the utility (or necessity) of primary sources has been generously ignored, promoting a “frozen vision of architecture ... largely divorced from historical context” (ibid., p. 67). This is specifically addressed in several papers as informed by the nationalist substructure of the scholarly tradition. A tripartite sequence of Turkish-Islamic architecture in Anatolia, relegating “Ottoman” as merely a period identifier in a wider Turkish-Islamic history succeeding the Seljuk and Beylik periods, was “naturalized as a teleological, uninterrupted sequence.” This tripartite sequence of “Turkish-Islamic” architecture had, Necipoğlu (p. 174) charges, deliberately masked “discontinuities, ruptures, and external connections.”

But *Muqarnas* 24—beyond its primary theme of Ottoman architectural historiography—can also be read as a supplement, perhaps even as a reaction, to an earlier volume on much the same topic, yet with a wider regional focus: the multi-author volume *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850-1950*.^{*} This book, in many ways a first, similarly sought to address the history of a discipline - if such we can call “Islamic art history” (see the discussion in the preface) - by exploring it through the work and sensibilities of the persons who shaped it. What it largely repeated was the generous omission of the artistic output of the Ottomans routine to the discipline and its scholars on one hand (here referred to as the “medieval bias”), and the omission of German scholarship on the other; it was the reductive framework of Said’s *Orientalism* applied to art history.

*Stephen Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic Arts, Collectors and Collections, 1850-1950* (London and New York: Taurus / St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

Muqarnas 24 now most accurately fills that gap. If carefully read, it is bound (and hoped) to inform future studies with a more critical approach to the subject matter. Then it could indeed mark a turning point. To ensure the intended impact, however, editors and authors may not be able to avoid a translation into Turkish—perhaps slimmed down by the exclusion of the pieces by Rizvi, Flood, and Watenpaugh, which stand a bit apart from the other papers.

Maximilian Hartmuth
Sabancı Üniversitesi, Istanbul
hartmuth@su.sabanciuniv.edu