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Martina Becker*

Congeries beyond Categories: Approaching the Complex Actuality of Art Practices in the Early Turkish Republic

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Abstract: This article investigates the incoherence of art practices in the early Turkish Republic using the example of the variations present in Malik Aksel's (1901–1987) work. The article starts from three conventional angles and then branches out along Aksel's specific trajectories. It inquires into his relationship to a) the modernization processes in Ankara, b) the Art-Craft Department, the state institution at which he had been employed as an art teacher, and c) Europe, where he studied for four years in preparation for his position at the Art-Craft Department. The inquiry relies only on tangible traces of these relationships. In doing so, it recovers fragments of the complex actuality of creative practices, and identifies layers of what specifically the abstract notions of modernization, the institution and the state, as well as Westernization, actually covered in the case of this artist. These fragments also steer the investigation towards facets of Aksel's work that the established notions do not encompass. With this approach this article seeks to supplement the prevailing reception-oriented studies on art in the early Turkish Republic and to contribute to the critical discussion of the methodological implications of art-historical research that expands the traditional disciplinary confines. The aim is to open avenues to recognize and account for art practices, or facets of them, that do not relate to the preserved, processed, and easily accessible art histories, thus aiming for an extended, more inclusive art historiography.

Keywords: art education, non-canonical art, early Turkish Republic, transcultural art history, transregional art history

The etching *Nenek Köyü* (Figure 1) is an oddity. Its medium and execution already make it a rarity among extant visual works of the early Turkish Republic. The motif, however, is unique: self-built houses cower on the slope under a dramatic sky. The settlement is irregular. Uncultivated greenery claims the space between

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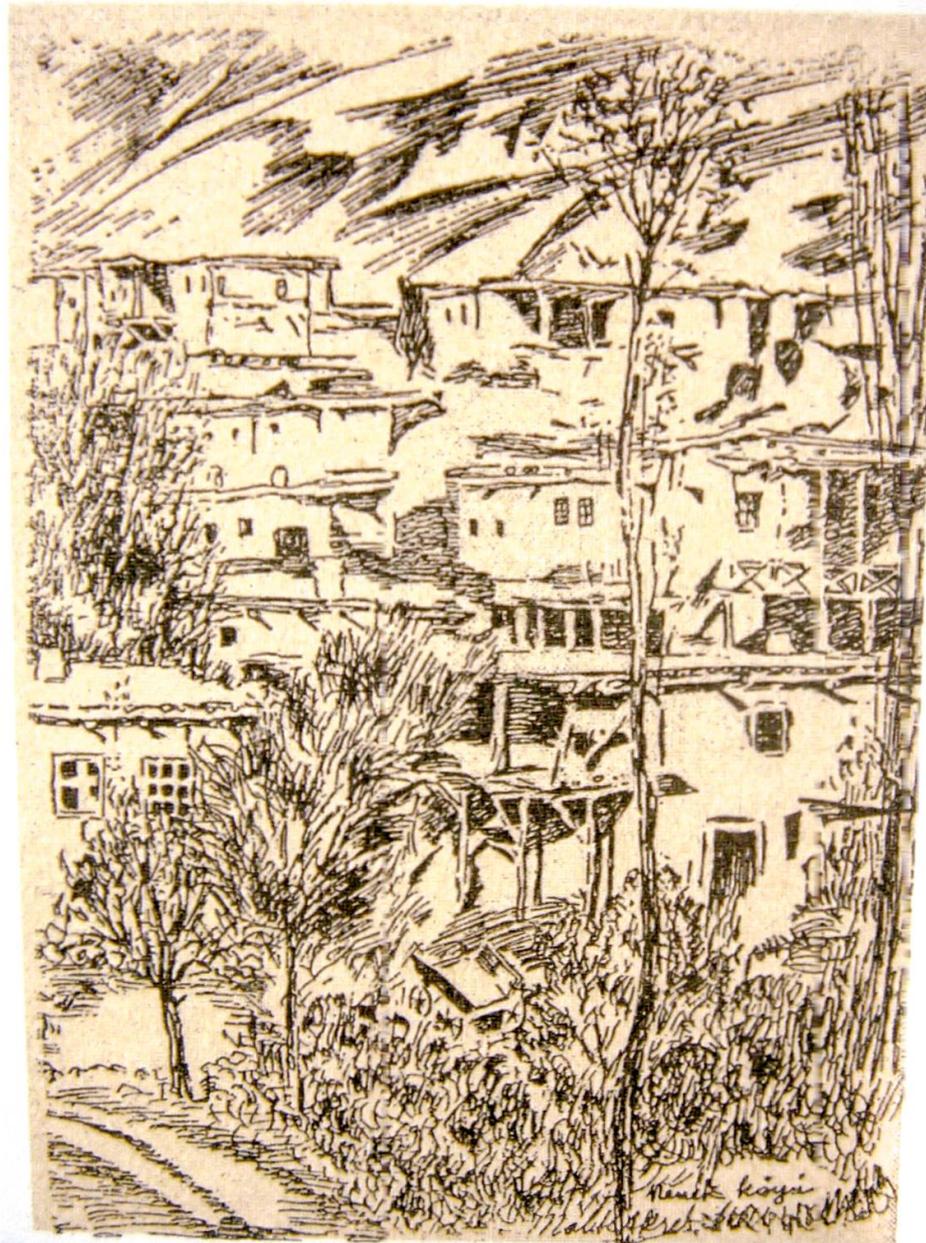


Figure 1: Malik Aksel, *Nenek Köyü*, ca. 1930s. Etching.

the uneven shacks. The framing of the motif seems arbitrary or casual. No building stands out, no monument guides the gaze, and the settlement may have continued well outside the picture as the houses cropped by the left and right edges of the print suggest. The half-hidden signature at the bottom right of the etching identifies its author as Malik Aksel (1901–1987).¹ A date is indiscernible.

¹ Note on nomenclature: This article covers both the period before the introduction of surnames in the Republic of Turkey in 1934 and the years following this introduction. To facilitate reading

Aksel was both an art teacher and practising artist. He had studied at the Teachers' Training College [*Dârülmua'llimîn*] in Istanbul from 1918 to 1921.² After his graduation, he worked in various village schools before obtaining a position in Istanbul at the end of 1922.³ While this office secured his regular income, Aksel was also drawing and painting.⁴ In 1928 he left for Berlin, where he continued his training on a public stipend with the aim of becoming the first teacher for visual arts in the Art-Craft Department [*Resim-İş Bölümü*] at the Gazi Education Institute [*Gazi Eğitim Enstitüsü*] in Ankara.⁵ He started this new job in Turkey's new capital right after receiving his German diploma in 1932.

Nenek Köyü is the former name of Gökçeyurt, a village about twenty kilometres to the east of Ankara. This suggests that Aksel made the print after 1932. In 1928, the total number of houses built in the entire country since the foundation of the Republic was 7,279.⁶ By that time, Ankara's population alone had quintupled from approximately 20,000 in 1920 to over 100,000.⁷ The architect of the building of the Gazi Education Institute, Kemalettin (1870–1927), head of the Directorate for Construction and Restoration [*Insaât ve Tamirât Müdürlüğü*], describes in various letters to his wife in Istanbul the decrepit and unhygienic conditions of the room he rented for himself and his desperation at not finding an adequate place to resettle his family to Ankara.⁸ On 1 October 1925, he wrote that the rents in Ankara for a tolerable place were exceedingly high and affordable shelter was barely better than homelessness.⁹ If even higher officials like

and to help identify historical persons with the names under which they are known today, they are added in brackets when used in reference to the period prior to 1934, except for Malik Aksel who is mentioned throughout the article under his surname.

2 Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 15–21.

3 Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 31 and 38.

4 Aksel's participation in the annual Galatasaray Exhibitions, the main art event in Istanbul since it was first organized in 1916, is documented for the years from 1923 to 1927. See Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 28. On the role of the Galatasaray exhibitions, see Şerifoğlu 2003.

5 Altunya 2006: 558. The Art-Craft Department demonstrated affinities with the Arts and Crafts Movement, but must be distinguished from it. The name of the Art-Craft Department [*Resim-İş Bölümü*] was definitively established only in 1934. A document of 1929 (reproduced in Altunya 2006: 552–553) directly relates the Turkish term *resim* of the Art-Craft Department's educational programme to the German word *Kunst* and *iş* to *Werk*. The German terms are both in the singular and are clearly translatable into Art and Craft. The present translation keeps the hyphen of the Turkish name.

6 Bozdoğan 2001: 223.

7 Cengizkan 2010.

8 The letters are reproduced and transcribed in Yavuz 2009; see especially the letters on pages 421, 436 and 438.

9 See letter in Yavuz 2009: 436.

Kemalettin could not manage to find an affordable house, how, then, must the other tens of thousands of less privileged refugees and migrants who had arrived in Ankara have lived? By 1935, the informal settlements had become a topic of newspaper articles and satires, and were addressed by the Minister of the Interior Şükrü Kaya [1883–1959].¹⁰ They surrounded the city in a perimeter of twenty kilometres with Nenek Köyü nestling at the eastern fringes. It can thus be assumed that the motif of Aksel's etching that bears the village's name as its title corresponds with the built environment that most of the people in and around the new capital inhabited at the time. The etching *Nenek Köyü* is an oddity not in terms of the contemporary environment it carries as its motif; it is an oddity because it differs entirely from contemporary representations of Ankara.

The Republican government had assigned the new capital the role of the model city for the young Republic.¹¹ It strategically deployed architecture and urban planning as marker and transformative force of change from the presumably old, backward, and religious Ottoman Empire into the envisioned modern, progressive, and secular Republic of Turkey, and used visual media as the vehicle to disseminate this new image nationally and internationally.¹² Ankara assumed centre stage in this strategy, and photography in particular captured the city's urban and architectural transformation. The selective camera angles excluded the old town and informal settlements, and focused instead on the new broad, straight boulevards, the parks, the large administrative and governmental buildings, and especially those of higher education, conveying the impression of a total modernizing overhaul of Ankara.¹³ The building of the Gazi Education Institute featured prominently among the circulating pictures because it was the first newly founded institution of higher education in the Republican period, and also the first for which a new setting was designed and constructed in Ankara.¹⁴ What is more, the institute was not only a passive motif. The faculty and students of its Art-Craft Department, including Aksel, actively participated

¹⁰ Kezer 1998: 11–19.

¹¹ Kezer 1999: 42. The Building Administration Commission, a subdivision of the Municipality founded on 17 October 1923 – only four days after Ankara was proclaimed the capital city – was not only meant to coordinate the building activities in Ankara; its decisions regarding Ankara were directly taken as guidelines for other cities in Turkey. See Cengizkan 2010.

¹² The seminal study of this process is Bozdoğan 2001.

¹³ As Esra Akcan has pointed out, this contrast between old and new Ankara was also exaggerated in official historiography. See Akcan 2012: 31.

¹⁴ See, for instance, the articles in the contemporary bimonthly journal published by the Head Office of Press at the Ministry of Internal Affairs under the title *La Turquie Kemaliste*, such as Süreyya 1934: 4–6.

in the very creation of the official presentation through their visual works and the exhibitions they organized.¹⁵

The etching *Nenek Köyü* thus varies from the official visual presentation. More importantly, it hints at variations in the creative practices of a single artist: Aksel not only participated in the creation of the official presentation, but also depicted the actuality outside the representational frame. This disparity is particularly noteworthy precisely because he was the art teacher at the Art-Craft Department. It indicates that Aksel did not create a coherent body of work that conformed to state priorities simply because he was an employee in one of the prime Republican modernization projects.

Until now, art historians have generally centred on the question of how art in the early Turkish Republic conformed to or reflected the state-driven reforms.¹⁶ These scholars based their observations on paintings and sculptures that feature either patriotic motifs, or styles and genres that explicitly draw on art executed in Europe – thus reflecting, in their view, the turn to “the West” or Westernization, which they associated if not understood synonymously with modernization. A canonical or even generic understanding of the history of art made in Europe thereby provided the exclusive reference point and analytical framework. The selective focus on specific traits of artworks from the early Turkish Republic that support the interpretation of an alignment of the arts with the reformative fervour of the period might even be a legacy of traditional art history, with its coherent conceptualization of the oeuvres of individual artists as much as of national cultures. Certainly, during the post-war period artists were driven to actively pursue state sponsorship, not least due to precarious financial circumstances, by claiming the necessity of the arts for the formation of the young state, and appealing with their work to the Republican spirit.¹⁷ Gradually, the state did indeed become a major patron.¹⁸ The majority of the works that have entered the purview of art-historical studies were either directly commissioned by the state or belong to public collections.¹⁹ These works offer coherent, unifying facets and invite categorization; what remains largely ignored, however, are all those works and facets that transcend or defy this coherence.²⁰

15 Aksel 1973a: 185.

16 Aslier et al. 1988; Erol/Renda 1980–82; Öndin 2003; Shaw 2011a.

17 Shaw 2011a: 168.

18 Given the dearth of research on the independent art market it is impossible to evaluate the actual significance of state funding in the early Turkish Republic.

19 Germaner et al. 2009; Özsezgin 1996.

20 Even though not reflecting the methodological implications, primary-research-intensive studies such as Burcu Pelvanoğlu’s biography of Hale Asaf have contributed to a more differentiated view of artistic practices of the period. Pelvanoğlu 2007.

The etching *Nenek Köyü* prompts this article to investigate the incoherence in artistic practices in the early Turkish Republic, using the example of the variations present in Aksel's work. The article starts out from three conventional angles, and then branches out along Aksel's specific trajectories. It inquires into his relationship to a) the modernization processes in Ankara, b) the Art-Craft Department, the state institution at which he was employed as an art teacher, and c) Europe, where he studied for four years in preparation for his position at the Art-Craft Department. In the process the inquiry relies only on tangible traces of these relationships. The intent is to recover fragments of the complex actuality of art practices in order to identify what specifically the abstract notions of modernization, the institution and the state, as well as Westernization, actually meant in the case of this artist. These fragments also steer the investigation towards facets of Aksel's work that the established notions do not encompass.

Using this approach, this article draws on the critical discussion of the methodological implications of art-historical research that expands the discipline's traditional confines.²¹ While this extension is often merely understood as addressing so-called non-Western art, the methodological challenge concerns any research on art that has had no agency in the formation of the precepts of the art-historical discipline, and thus refutes the universal applicability of these precepts. In the case of studies on art made in Turkey or by artists from Turkey, Deniz Artun and Wendy Shaw in particular have highlighted this issue, introducing the notion of translation to tackle reconfigurations of meaning along the trajectories of art practices and their conceptualization.²² However, the notion of translation still reproduces the path of investigation that originates in art histories that are already part of the circuit of knowledge – usually, given the predominant focus on the Westernization process, in art histories written in Europe, if not in Eurocentric art historiography altogether. This article seeks to supplement this line of inquiry and open avenues to recognize and account for creative practices, or facets of them, that do not relate to preserved, processed, and easily accessible art histories, thus aiming for an extended and more inclusive art history.

21 For major contributions to an extended history of modern art, see especially Craven 2006; Dadi 2010; Harney 2004; Mercer 2005; Mercer 2006; Mercer 2007; Mercer 2008; Mitter 2008; Ramirez 2004.

22 Artun 2007; Shaw 2011a.

1 A backstage view of modernization

In 1956, the journal *Yeni İstanbul* [New Istanbul] published Malik Aksel's article "How did the *Gecekondu* begin?"²³ In the article he himself defines the term *gecekondu* (plural: *gecekondu*) as an informal overnight construction (as it is understood today), and describes how Ankara exploded under the influx of people after the city became the capital of the Republic. He contrasts the housing shortage with the construction of generous parks and avenues, which expelled residents from their land in return for meagre compensation and gave them no alternative place to settle.²⁴ He concluded that Ankara's unpreparedness to address its necessities had turned the city into a "bad example for Turkey".²⁵ It is very likely that Aksel deliberately used the term "example" to make an explicit link with Ankara's above-mentioned role as a model.

Ankara was probably the main motif of the representations of Republican Turkey because it was the only place in the first decade of the Republic that substantially changed in a way that was considered presentable. Change is not a miracle but a resource-consuming endeavour, and many of the few resources that still remained after World War I and the Turkish War of Independence were channelled to create the capital of the new state.²⁶ The concentration of means in Ankara demonstrates the importance to the decision makers of developing the Republican capital. Ankara's role as an object of representation is entwined with its role as a model to be followed throughout the country. The notion of the model implies two things: first that it is made for reception, otherwise it could not be taken as an example and be implemented elsewhere; and second, that it is a unique case, different from other places, which provides the impulse for change according to the model. If all places had already been like Ankara was envisioned to be, it would not have been necessary to make an example of it. The notion itself highlights the gradual process of transformation of the country and its capital, and requires looking beyond the fable of holistic change suggested by the "almost continuous refrain of dates and reform legislations" that

²³ Aksel 1956: 2.

²⁴ Regarding the extensive rights of the Ankara Master Plan Bureau to expropriate without compensation any property that it considered necessary for urban development projects, see also Kezer 1999: 202.

²⁵ "[...] ihtiyaçları vaktinde düşünmemek [...] Ankara'yı Türkiye'ye kötü bir örnek haline soktu": Aksel 1956: 219.

²⁶ Kezer has shown that the absorption of disproportionate resources by Ankara was not without opposition, but that the opposition was ineffective. Kezer 1999: 43.

runs, as Gavin D. Brockett observes, through the most canonical books on Turkish history.²⁷

In playing with the notion of Ankara as an example, Aksel showed not only that he was aware of this role for the city, but that he assumed his reader was aware of it, too. The same function was attached to the Gazi Education Institute, of which the Art-Craft Department was going to form part. When its building was commissioned, Mustafa Necati, the acting Minister of Education, promised to promote “an exemplary building [*örnek bir bina*]”.²⁸ The Gazi Institute effectively echoed Ankara’s role as an ideal model. It is difficult to find sources that do not reflect total affirmation of this vision. The absence of public debate may simply reflect the reality, or the impossibility of dissent, especially for those working or studying at the exemplary institution; or it may be the result of a historiographical blind spot. Aksel provides exceptional insights into the actual experience of the gradual change, and even of participating in the fabrication of the representation of change. This is not only of documentary value but of importance here because it directly affected his work. An anecdotal account, an extant work of 1935, and a group of unpreserved works by Aksel provide evidence for this argument.

Upon coming to Ankara as the painting teacher of the Art-Craft Department in 1932, one of Aksel’s first tasks was to prepare, together with his colleagues and students, the enormous comparative exhibition that contrasted the new (Republican) with the old (Ottoman) culture on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Republic. Thus Aksel participated in the dissemination – if not the invention – of this theme of binary oppositions of the official discourse, which gained notoriety in Turkey in the 1930s.²⁹ According to Aksel, “Ankara turned into an open-air museum [*Ankara açık hava müzesi hâline giriyordu*], with boards lined up along the avenue leading from the symbolically invested Grand National Assembly building at the central square to the train station at its margin, featuring statistics and images comparing the Republic with the Ottoman Empire.³⁰ The classrooms of the Girls Institute, one of the five new schools in Ankara, became the exhibition halls for installations of comparative themes.³¹

²⁷ Brockett 2011: 13–16. Brockett refers particularly to Geoffrey Lewis’ *Turkey* (1955), Bernard Lewis’ *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961) and Lord Kinross (Patrick Balfour)’s *Atatürk: A Biography of Mustafa Kemal, Father of Modern Turkey* (1964).

²⁸ Altunya 2006: 74.

²⁹ Ankara’s mythical aura was exploited and developed in many metaphorical terms, visually and literally. For an analysis of this old-new theme, see Bozdoğan 2001: 62–79.

³⁰ Aksel 1973a: 185.

³¹ Aksel 1973a: 185.

The exhibition was commissioned by the Minister of Education and organized by faculty members and students of the Art-Craft Department and the Girls Institute.³² Thus, the conception of the comparative theme did not lie in Aksel's hands. In an account of this event, he even demonstrates a certain disagreement with the way it was rendered. The anecdote belongs to what shall be called here the genre of "Atatürk Anecdotes". It seems for every aspect of early Republican life there exists a quote of what Mustafa Kemal Atatürk allegedly said about it; the use of these anecdotes does not appear to be driven by an interest in the veracity of the quote, but in the importance and legitimacy it lends to a specific subject. In the case of Aksel's account it refers to Mustafa Kemal's visit to the comparative exhibition in the company of İhsan [Sungu] (1881–1946), the president of the Education Board, and the director of the Art-Craft Department, İsmail Hakkı [Tunguç] (1893–1960). According to Aksel, Mustafa Kemal wandered among and contemplated with attention the different rooms that the students and faculty members had decorated. First he entered the "modern Turkish room [*modern Türk odası*]" with furniture with "foreign names [*yabancı adlı*]", meaning all the furniture that was not used in ordinary Ottoman households and that derived, judging from the etymology of the Turkish names "*komodin, gardırop, etajer*", from France. Then, the president was led to the "old Turkish room [*eski Türk odası*]", with objects and furniture from the Ottoman period, and he said: "Our old houses were not ugly at all [*Eski evlerimiz hiç de çirkin değil*]." After the president had left, İhsan [Sungu] rushed back into the room scolding İsmail Hakkı [Tunguç] for having decorated the "old room" too much.³³ This anecdote demonstrates that Aksel was not in conformity with the rejection of the Ottoman cultural heritage and the introduction of a "foreign" lifestyle. It also demonstrates his awareness of the role that perspective and representation played in elevating or degrading the value of one culture in relation to the other.

It has to be kept in mind that Aksel's personal, anecdotal account was published only in 1973, and it is uncertain whether he wrote this text long before that year. Yet his paintings of the early 1930s similarly bear the ambiguity of a complicated cultural change. They demonstrate that he was already incorporating his nuanced observations in his works in the first years in Ankara. For instance, the watercolour in Figure 2, dating from 1935, includes elements that could have been in the "new Turkish room" and that Aksel might have labelled "foreign". It depicts a girl sitting on a chair apparently made of tubular steel. Before Marcel Breuer's *Wassily Chair*, which he designed at the Bauhaus in

³² Aksel 1973a: 185.

³³ Aksel 1973a: 186.

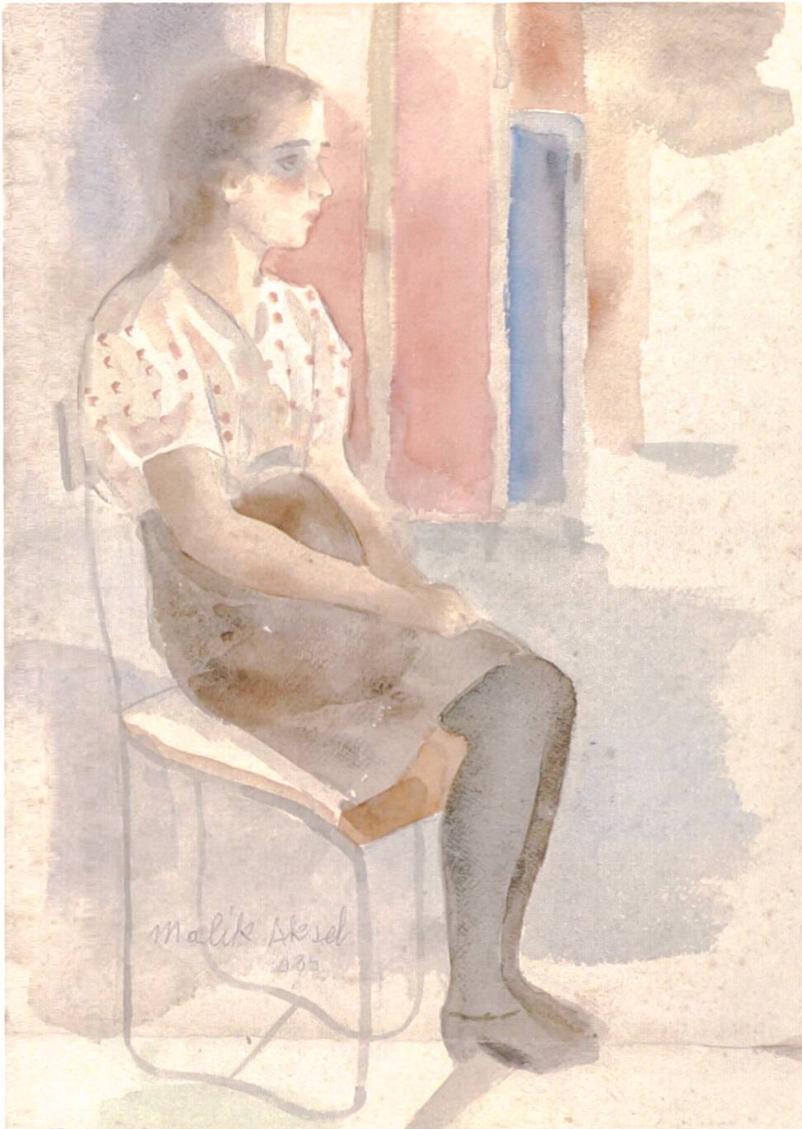


Figure 2: Malik Aksel, *Untitled* – Girl on a chair, 1935. Watercolour, 45.0 × 32.0 cm.

Dessau, Germany, in 1926, there was no chair made of this material. If the represented chair is not merely an invention in reference to modernist furniture, the painting shows either an import or a local experiment with that style and material. The primary blue and red colours and the straight lines in the background further stress the modernist look of the depicted setting. The girl wears a light summer blouse with short sleeves and a skirt short enough to expose her knees and her legs in dark stockings. The girl's expression and posture, however, do not reflect the lightness of the furniture, colour, and summer blouse, and none of the liberation that was promised to come with modernization. On the contrary, she is sitting as one would sit in an unfamiliar environment: she

looks shy, if not intimidated, and seems awkward and uncomfortable on the piece of “foreign” furniture.

A faint trace of a group of lost works by Aksel hint at a further angle on his Republican environment. In 1934, Aksel initiated a series of exhibitions of works of students and faculty members at the Art-Craft Department that were to take place on a regular basis on the top floor of the building of the Gazi Education Institute. In his position as director of the Art-Craft Department, İsmail Hakkı Tonguç reviewed the first exhibition for the journal *Ülkü* [Ideal].³⁴ *Ülkü* was the nationwide periodical of the People’s Houses [*Halk Evleri*], the cultural centres the government opened in cities and towns throughout the country between 1932 and 1950.³⁵ *Ülkü* informed readers about activities at the People’s Houses in the field of education, language, social sciences, the arts, and the economy, placing the Republican service to the people and the people’s reciprocal participation exclusively in a favourable light. In his review, İsmail Hakkı [Tonguç] celebrates the exhibition and Aksel’s efforts as truly Republican in spirit.

The student works that were chosen to illustrate the review include linocuts, one representing Ankara’s iconic rock, and another with the equestrian statue of Atatürk that stands before the building that was the first People’s House in Ankara. These are decisively patriotic motifs. Again it is Aksel who refrains from joining the seemingly widely shared glorification of the Republic. He himself had a number of works in this first exhibition. Reproductions of these works have not been traced, let alone the works themselves. But titles such as “Poor Children [*Fakir Çocuklar*]” and “Village Street”, along with short descriptions of the disconcerting effect of the paintings, have been preserved and suggest a sharp contrast between Tonguç’s celebratory language and Aksel’s works, which likely referred to the harsh conditions of the time.³⁶

Malik Aksel’s nuanced take on the modernization of Ankara originates in his individual perspective and experience as observer and participant. His experience can hardly be extrapolated and shown to be representative of the overall popular experience. However, the existence of this individual view suffices to complicate the idealized picture of modernization in the official discourse. To interpret Aksel’s perspective, he consciously perceived and reflected modernization as something to be rehearsed and staged.

³⁴ Tonguç 1934: 299–303.

³⁵ In this period, close to 500 People’s Houses were successively opened. These state-funded centres were meant to propagate state ideology. In practice, the population assumed a range of agencies in their engagement with the activities at the People’s Houses, and assimilated, shaped or resisted the reforms in multiple ways; see Lamprou 2015.

³⁶ Tonguç 1934: 299–303.

2 The institution had a threshold

By 1929, the building of the Gazi Education Institute loomed far beyond Ankara's urbanized area, outside of its mapped and even its planned terrain, on the steppe soil typical of the region. It was easily the largest construction in the city (Figure 3); it was also the most expensive building in the entire country so far, and consumed over six percent of the budget of the Ministry of Education during its three-year construction.³⁷ The expenses soared not least because of the Institute's imported state-of-the-art equipment, not only the general installations for heating, kitchen, and bathrooms, but also the multiple facilities, such as cinema, darkroom, radio station, and laboratories, for the training and leisure of the students and faculty members.³⁸ The Gazi Education Institute was a boarding institution conceived for 500 students.³⁹ Accounts from former teachers and students indicate that the building and its facilities were perceived as luxurious and progressive, and the atmosphere in the classrooms and daylight-



Figure 3: Gazi Education Institute, ca. 1932.

³⁷ Altunya 2006: 83.

³⁸ Yavuz 2009: 247–251.

³⁹ Altunya 2006: 86.

filled studios were highly stimulating.⁴⁰ Thus distanced from the city and the burden of its housing and economic issues and encapsulated in apparent self-sufficiency, the Gazi Education Institute, and within it the Art-Craft Department, conveys a first impression of a monolithic and hermetic institution, possibly exposed to high expectations and supervision after the state's immense investment in its setting and running. This impression needs to be nuanced given the permeability of the institution suggested by the minor remaining traces of Malik Aksel's perception of the building, his teaching practice, and its relation to the programme of the Art-Craft Department.

Shortly after his arrival in Ankara in 1932, Aksel was portrayed at the plinth of one of the building's columns. His height in comparison to the massive plinth provides a notion of the scale of the building (Figure 4). The same photograph offers only a slice of the background on the left, yet it suffices to see that it becomes lost in the vast swathes of barren landscape. The clods of mud on the porch indicate that the huge, elaborate building stands in the middle of



Figure 4: Malik Aksel in front of the building of the Gazi Education Institute, ca. 1932.

40 Altunya 2006: 83.

unlandscaped ground. Its isolation highlighted its size, in Aksel's perception. In a retrospective text of 1976, Aksel claims to remember how at the beginning of every summer holiday, everyone, especially the teachers, left Ankara and went to Istanbul for three months.⁴¹ Returning after the long absence, the building in the steppe appeared to him like a "a fairytale building [*masal yapı*]", like a "mirage [*serap*]"⁴² In his room underneath the roof right next to the attic, he heard the winds howling through the vast building.⁴³ For Aksel, the building seemed to exude an ambivalent impression between fascination and intimidation. He did not, however, de-contextualize the abundance of the building from the scarcity prevailing in Ankara, and he appears to have been receptive to the contrast between the riches of the capital's new constructions and a lack of care for the basic needs of average people. In an undated text he lists much of the "modern" equipment of the building of the Gazi Education Institute.⁴⁴ The laudatory tone of the enumeration would almost fall into the widespread genre of uncritical, affirmative celebration of Republican achievements, were it not turned into a virtual parody of the same with the concluding remark: "In this immense building sitting on the rocks there is plenty of everything, only the water is scarce [*Kayalar üzerine oturtulmuş bu koca yapıda her şey bol, yalnız su kıt*]."⁴⁵

Through Aksel's teaching practice there was also a direct, indeed a physical, link to the poor people of the city. Beşir Ayvazoğlu included in his anthologies of Aksel's writings an etching by Aksel with the title "Ankara's first models [*Ankara'nın İlk Modelleri*]", referring to the introduction of drawing classes with life models at the Art-Craft Department.⁴⁶ Two sketches by Aksel with a comparable motif, from 1933 and 1936 respectively, are preserved in the Malik Aksel archive (Figures 5 and 6). Judging from their similarity to the etching in Ayvazoğlu's publication, they most likely also resulted from working with life models at the Art-Craft Department. The department employed the very poor as models, who were dependent on any possible income, because other people in Ankara were unwilling to pose, even if dressed, in front of others.⁴⁷ If more of these drawings had been preserved (or are yet to be discovered by the descendants of Aksel's students), some of Ankara's generally underrepresented

41 Aksel 1976: 178.

42 Aksel 1976: 178.

43 Aksel 1976: 175.

44 Aksel undated: 180.

45 Aksel undated: 180.

46 Ayvazoğlu 2011a: 152.

47 Aksel 1974a: 154.

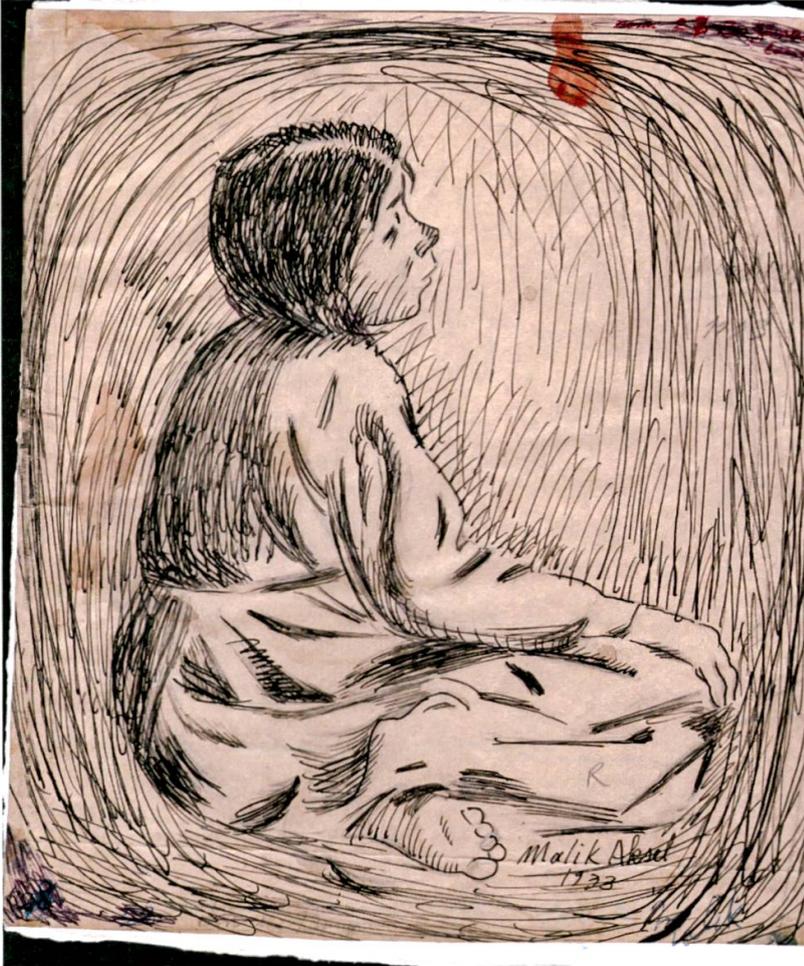


Figure 5: Malik Aksel, *Untitled*, 1933. Ink on paper, 24.0 × 20.0 cm.

inhabitants of the period would have made a late appearance on the stage of the city's modernization.

The introduction of drawing, painting, and sculpting from a nude model at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul following the foundation of the Republic has been interpreted as an integral and important part of the modernization of art in Turkey.⁴⁸ Nudes by the painters at the Academy such as Namık İsmail (1890–1935) or İbrahim Çallı (1882–1960) are among the renowned works of the early Republican period. Aksel's two sketches here differ radically from those works, and not only because the models were clothed. Something else distinguishes these drawings from the idealized bodies of the Academy's approach to

⁴⁸ Antmen et al.: 2015. For critical analyses of the depiction of women in paintings of the early Turkish Republic from a gender perspective, see Shaw 2011a: 165–166; Shaw 2011b.



Figure 6: Malik Aksel, *Untitled*, 1936, Ink on paper, 28.0 × 20.0 cm.

the human figure: Aksel did not objectify the individuals posing for the studies, but portrayed the individual in their integrity.

As stated above, Aksel was not trained at the Academy of Fine Arts, but attended, in the first part of his education, the *Dârülmualimîn* [Teachers' Training College] in Istanbul. During these years of war and occupation, the College lacked a permanent location, and the training had to adjust to occasionally inadequate spaces. Aksel's art and handicraft classes were linked with excursions through the city.⁴⁹ Aksel was assistant to his art teacher, Şefket [Dağ]

⁴⁹ Aksel 1973b: 12–16.

(1876–1944), who is known for his mosque paintings, which supplemented his income, but was also drawn to the popular arts and cut Karagöz figures which he played himself.⁵⁰ He fostered Aksel's interest in the colourful life in the Istanbul quarters Beyazıt and Çağaloğlu between Istanbul University and Hagia Sophia that included not only the Teachers' Training College and the schools of Aksel's prior education, but were also densely populated with refugees from various parts of the shrinking Ottoman Empire, who displayed or performed their different trades, crafts, and arts in the crowded streets.⁵¹ Aksel himself had left Serres, a city close to his birthplace Salonica, with his parents in the course of the Balkan War and arrived in Istanbul in 1913.⁵² These outdoor experiences during his training as an art teacher added to the strictly institutional impact of his training.

Aksel's legacy includes a series of photographs from excursions he undertook with his students at the Art-Craft Department through Ankara's surroundings (Figure 7). Was this practice a regular and integral part of his teaching? It possibly was. While the programme of the Art-Craft Department provided for



Figure 7: Malik Aksel on excursion with his students, school term 1943–44.

⁵⁰ Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 27.

⁵¹ Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 27.

⁵² Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 11.

training in figurative arts as well as in photography and graphic design, it emphasized engagement with daily life and the environment.⁵³ The approaches to art reflected in this programme were not completely detached from the concept of academic and object or result-oriented art, as exemplified by the organization of the exhibitions mentioned in the previous section. Nevertheless, the processes of making, the act of visual or plastic creation itself as aesthetic practice, came to the fore. And the training was geared towards the training of teachers, not individual artists. The aim was to prepare the students to impart, as teachers, the creative activities themselves to the populace, instead of a mere receptive attitude.

This approach drew directly from process philosophies as formulated by the so-called Progressive Education Movement and Pragmatism, as explicitly stated in the programme.⁵⁴ The approach also goes back to the reforms in art education that Sati' [al-Husri] (1880–1969) conceived and sought to implement at Aksel's alma mater, the Teachers' Training College in Istanbul, within the general overhaul of this institution during his tenure as its director between 1909 and 1912.⁵⁵ Sati' [Al-Husri] saw the objective of education as the strengthening of individual faculties in order to create autonomous and self-reliant citizens, on whom the social development of a country would be based.⁵⁶ According to him, the appropriate way to reach this aim was through creative, inventive, and active practices, rather than passive assimilation and learning by rote.⁵⁷ Aksel makes no reference to Sati' [al-Husri]'s reforms and it remains to be investigated how far the Teachers' Training College followed his legacy during and after World War I. However, the main author of the programme of the Art-Craft Department, which bears close comparison with the reforms promoted by Sati' [al-Husri], was his close collaborator İsmail Hakkı [Baltacıoğlu] (1887–1978).⁵⁸

53 Decree of the Maarif Vekaleti Talim ve Terbiye Dairesi [Ministry of Education], 12.08.1934, no. 184.

54 The programme even mentions representatives of the philosophical and pedagogical strands by name: “Pestalozzi [Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827)], Dövey [John Dewey (1859–1952)], Kerschsteiner [Georg Kerschsteiner (1854–1932)], Blonski [Pavel Petrovich Blonsky (1884–1941)], Gaudig [Hugo Gaudig (1860–1923)].” Decree of the Maarif Vekaleti Talim ve Terbiye Dairesi [Ministry of Education], 12 Aug. 1934, no. 184.

55 Kara 2006: 264–293. Cevat Kara's article is one of the very few studies on Sati' [al-Husri]'s work prior to 1919. At present, therefore, he is generally known as one of the major ideologists of Arab nationalism, which he became in the period after 1919.

56 Kara 2006: 282–283.

57 Kara 2006: 282–283.

58 Altunya 2006: 40–42.

The Art-Craft Department, although looming like a monolith in the steppe outside of Ankara, had its doors ajar for people and their experiences and ideas to enter and act upon the training it provided. Aksel's nuanced perception of the building of the Art-Craft Department, his teaching practice, and the use of models from the poor strata of Ankara's society are only minor indicators of the permeability of this institution. This openness deserves further investigation given that the programme – itself composed of ideas deriving from many places and individuals, and insisting on learning from life and engaging with the environment – conceived of an institution that would be open by default.

3 Berlin selection

A resolution of the Turkish Education Board [*Talim ve Terbiye Kurulu*] from 27 June 1928 stipulates that for the “projected Handicraft and Art Teacher Schools [*Açılacak El İşleri ve Resim Muallim Mektepleri*]” four graduates of the Teachers' Training College were to be sent on a public stipend to Europe at the beginning of the academic year, one to study “art pedagogy [*resim pedagojisi*]”, a second to study “craft pedagogy [*iş pedagojisi*]”, and the last two to study “art [*sanat*]” in Sweden and Denmark.⁵⁹ The four students would be selected by an exam in August 1928 in the Teachers' Training College in Istanbul.⁶⁰ A statement of the Education board issued four years later on 12 October 1932 ratifies the studies that the teachers “İsmail Hakkı, Şinasi, Hayrullah and Mehmet Ali Beyler” completed in their respective field of expertise in Cologne, Bonn, and Nääs, and notes and that they would return to the Gazi Education Institute to open the “Arts-Handicrafts School [*Resim-Elişleri Mektebi*]”.⁶¹ This statement reveals that the plan to send four students abroad for the specific purpose of studying subjects related to the envisioned Art-Craft Department did indeed come to pass. Aksel, however, is not mentioned in any of the documents, nor is Berlin, the city in which he studied. Later in his life, Aksel recalled that, thanks to the good offices of his former teacher Şevket [Dağ], he participated in an exam at the

⁵⁹ For full text see Altunya 2006: 552–553.

⁶⁰ Altunya 2006: 552–553.

⁶¹ For a transcription of the whole document, see Altunya 2006: 553. The two documents of the Education Board also manifest the slow transition from the initially separate conception of “El İşleri ve Resim [Arts and Handicraft]” schools to the hyphenated form of “Resim-Elişleri [Art-Handicraft]”, which soon afterwards became Art-Craft.

Teachers' Training College in Istanbul in 1928, and succeeded in obtaining one of the grants to study in Germany.⁶² Yet, as will be elaborated in this section, Aksel's study activities in Berlin suggest that it was planned from the outset that he too would join the faculty of the Art-Craft Department in Ankara.

The practice of sending teachers abroad, mainly to Europe, on a public grant for complementary studies was not limited to the Art-Craft Department. The first scholar not to deduce from this practice a sweeping Westernization and to look instead into the particularities of the experiences of specific art students from the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey was Deniz Artun.⁶³ This section follows in her footsteps and traces not only Aksel's training experiences but also his extracurricular activities in Berlin.

The impact of the Progressive Education Movement on the approach to art and craft education in Germany is apparent from the numerous books on the subject in the 1920s that Malik had bought in Berlin and brought to Turkey after his return.⁶⁴ This approach is the basis for numerous pedagogical academies [*Pädagogische Akademien*] and teachers' schools for craft pedagogy [*Werkpädagogik*] and art pedagogy [*Kunstpädagogik*] that were opened in the Weimar Republic in 1925 in order to counter the lack of teachers in general, and teachers of this approach to education in particular.⁶⁵ Bonn and Cologne were among the cities in which the new teacher-training institutions were opened. Şinasi Barutçu and Hayrulla Örs, both named in the above-mentioned document, studied at the Institut für Werkpädagogik Köln [Craft Pedagogy Institute Cologne] and the Pädagogische Akademie [Academy of Pedagogy] in Bonn, respectively.

⁶² Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 38.

⁶³ Artun 2007.

⁶⁴ Aksel's collection of the books he bought in Germany are at the Şehbenderler Konağı Kütüphanesi in Bursa, Turkey. The books on art education in this collection are: Paul Brandt, *Sehen und Erkennen: Eine Anleitung zu vergleichender Kunstbetrachtung*, seventh revised and expanded edition (Leipzig: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1929); Hans Cornelius, *Elementargesetze der Bildenden Kunst*, 3rd expanded edition (Leipzig: Teubner, 1921); Erna Dreiack: *Ein Weg zum zeitgemäßen Zeichenunterricht* (Goslar: Lattmann, 1927); Philipp Franck, *Zeichen- und Kunstunterricht* (Frankfurt am Main: Moritz Diesterweg, 1928); Philipp Franck, *Das Schaffende Kind* (Berlin: Otto Stollbergverlag, 1929); "Werden – Geist – Form des Kunstunterrichtes im bildhaften Gestalten," *Mitteilungen der Pelikan-Werke Günther Wagner Hannover und Wien*, with contributions by J. F. Vydra for Czechoslovakia, Gustav Kolb for Germany and Richard Rothe for Austria (Hannover und Wien: Günther Wagner, 1928); Zentralinstitut für Erziehung und Unterricht, ed., *Museum und Schule* (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1930); Karl Scheffler, *Talente* (Berlin: Verlag Bruno Cassirer, 1919).

⁶⁵ Reiss 1981.

Two of the books on art education that Malik acquired in Germany were by Philipp Franck (1860–1944). He was one of the most influential art educators of the time in Germany, and the director of the *Staatliche Kunstschule* [State Art School] in Berlin from 1915 to 1929.⁶⁶ After several months of German lessons in Potsdam, a town close to Berlin, Aksel attended precisely this institution from spring 1929 to fall 1932, the date of his graduation. Even though Franck left his position two semesters after Malik began studying there, he maintained professional connections to the institution. Franck was also a member of Aksel’s exam committee.⁶⁷ The orientation of the institutions at which the Turkish students studied in Germany suggests that they were chosen deliberately by the Turkish Education Board. Sedad Hakkı [Baltacıoğlu]’s engagement with the progressive education movement and his contacts with German educational institutions suggest that he was the driving force behind these choices, which lends some individual agency to the abstract notion of state-driven education.⁶⁸

Very little can be said about Aksel’s actual study experience at the school itself, and the information has to be deduced from the two subjects he chose and the rather vague descriptions of the requirements of his graduation exam. Malik’s main subject was “drawing [Zeichnen]”.⁶⁹ The examination regulations demonstrate that “drawing” is used here in the general sense, as in “drawing teacher”. It included various types of visual arts, including painting, printing techniques, graphic design, and calligraphy.⁷⁰ Aksel was also tested in art history and pedagogy, but no details about the specific orientation of these subjects can be deduced from the documentation.⁷¹

According to Aksel, his teacher at the State Art School was Rudolf Großmann (1882–1941).⁷² Großmann had indeed been employed at this institution since 1 May 1929 as a drawing teacher.⁷³ He was, however, not a “famous [ünlü]” painter as Ayvazoğlu claims. Großmann’s work is characterized by

66 Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 9, Nr. 165.

67 See minutes of the *Staatliches Künstlerisches Prüfungsamt* [Public Arts Examination Office] from 22 June 1932 and the signature on Aksel’s graduation certificate. Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 9, Nr. 1089. Both documents are in the folder with this number.

68 Sedad Hakkı [Baltacıoğlu] had developed these contacts already since his time as Sati’ al-Husri’s collaborator at the Teachers’ Training College in Istanbul when he travelled with Sati’ or alone to various institutions in Europe, and attended international conferences on the topic of education. Zorlu-Durukan 2012: 47.

69 Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 9, Nr. 1089.

70 Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 9, Nr. 1080.

71 Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 9, Nr. 1089.

72 Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 41–42.

73 Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 9, Nr. 179.

relentless observation of social life in the streets of Berlin. In his drawings, watercolours, and prints he depicted the other side of the Golden Twenties in Berlin, that of war invalids, refugees in the streets, inflation, and unemployment. His figures are rendered in a sketchy manner, the faces only adumbrated or blurred, a feature that would increasingly characterize Malik's watercolours from the late 1930s onwards. Aksel had arrived in Berlin in the year of the Great Depression, thus stumbling right into the next impoverished metropolis. Given the inclination he demonstrated during his prior formation in Istanbul, he might have felt akin to Grossmann's way of approaching daily life around him and setting down his observations in small, quickly executed works.

No sources point to Aksel's reception of the philosophical underpinnings of the approach to art education at the State Art School. The development of the training along the lines of Progressive Education under Franck's directorship took a hazardous course, disturbed by the drastic events and economic situation of World War I and the postwar period, the piecemeal adaption of the school building to the needs of the new approach, and the abilities and motivations of the existing faculty.⁷⁴ At most, Aksel could realise only a partial fulfilment of the official objective of his stay in Berlin, through combined training in figurative drawing, painting, and graphic arts and, under Grossmann's tutorship, an engagement with Berlin's urban environment which nurtured an inclination he had already developed in Istanbul prior to his arrival in Germany.

It is important, however, to inquire into the interests he pursued outside of his duties as a student. The only two works which Aksel made in Berlin that have been preserved, two etchings, derive from his extracurricular activities. In one of them (Figure 8) he depicts the building of the Academy of Fine Arts in the stately Prinz-Albrecht-Straße in Berlin Charlottenburg. The most remarkable feature of this etching is its perspective. On the basis of the observations of Aksel's work throughout this article, his decision to view the building from an angle that depicts its backyard instead of its representative façade was a deliberate choice. But the etchings also possess a value as historical documents, because they confirm that Aksel also worked inside the Academy building, which was a different one from the State Art School. Until 15 January 1931, Großmann rented an extra studio in the building.⁷⁵ It is remarkable that Großmann paid 39 RM (Reichsmark) for a studio while he also had one in the building of the State Art School.⁷⁶ In any case, he may also have

74 Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 9, Nr. 12.

75 Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 8, Nr. 229, Blatt 3.

76 Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 8, Nr. 229, Blatt 5.

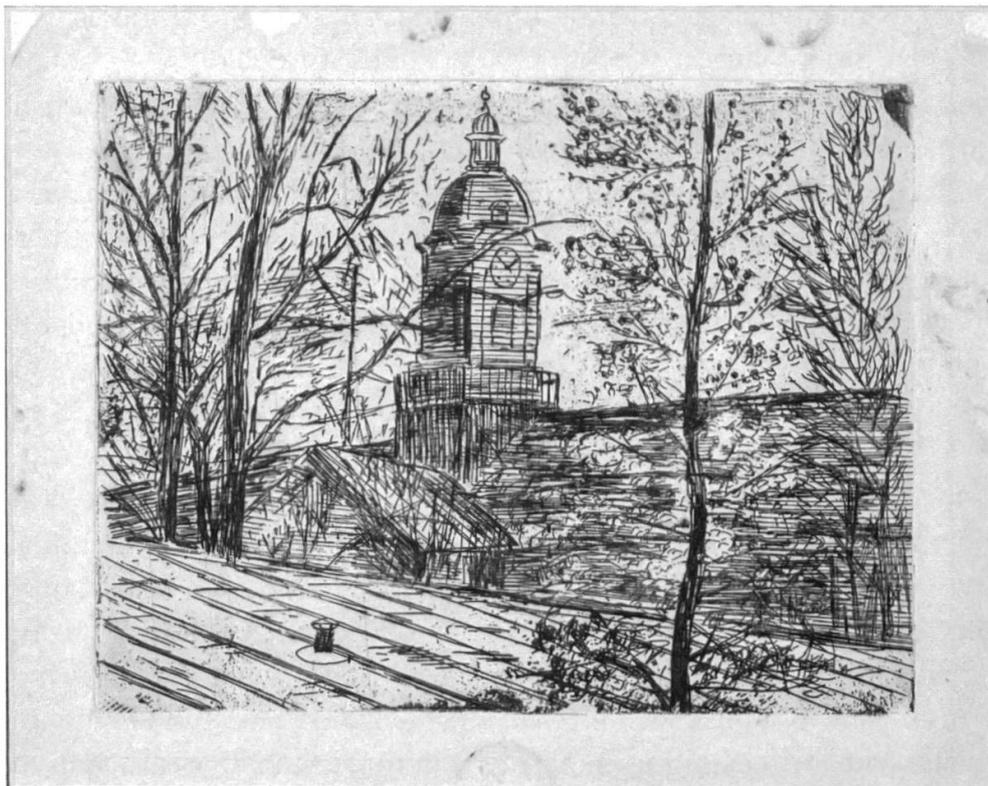


Figure 8: Malik Aksel, *Untitled* – View of the backyard of the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin, between 1929 and 1931. Etching, 18.0 × 14.0 cm.

given classes in the Academy building, as his studio, with its 36m², was big enough for teaching.⁷⁷ Moreover, among Malik Aksel's texts in which he recorded conversations and observations made during the third State Painting and Sculpture Exhibition in Ankara in 1941 is a very detailed description of the process of selecting nude models for the drawing classes at the Academy on the Stein-Platz, the square right in front of the main entrance of the Academy building.⁷⁸ Even though written as if simply overhearing the account of a third person and with a considerably satirical voice, Ayvazoğlu has justifiably interpreted the described experiences of the practices at the Academy in Berlin as Aksel's own experiences, and concludes that Aksel had frequented the Academy building and the drawing classes there on a regular basis.⁷⁹

However, given the dynamics and diversity of the artists, teachers, and students at both the State Art School and the Academy, it would be

⁷⁷ Universität der Künste Berlin, Universitätsarchiv, Bestand 8, Nr. 229, Blatt 5.

⁷⁸ Aksel 1942, edited by Ayvazoğlu 2010.

⁷⁹ Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 55–56.

unreasonable to limit Malik's artistic development in Berlin to the "influence" of Großmann or the programme of the State Art School alone. The most eloquent manifestation of Malik's engagement with the diversity of Berlin's artistic domain and its knowledge production is his collection of books on art history that he purchased during his years in Germany.⁸⁰ It comprises a number of conventional art historical studies that centre on the European canon, particularly the Italian Renaissance, and deploy the categorization according to standardised epochs and artistic disciplines, but it also holds as many publications on contemporary art, mainly on Expressionism and Cubism, that are adventurous in their choice of subject but still defined by traditional art-historical precepts.

A third type of book within his collection indicates a growing interest in art that was practised outside of the hitherto dominant focus of art historiography. Based on the extant publications in his collection, Malik bought at least sixteen books – twice as many as on contemporary art or European art history – about modern and ancient world art history, published in Germany between 1910 and 1931.⁸¹ This profusion of books is the result of intensified research activity on world art history at the beginning of the twentieth century that has not yet received any consistent scholarly attention. This research activity correlated with the establishment of ethnographic museums in the late nineteenth century. Aksel was an enthusiastic visitor to the Ethnographic Museum in Berlin's centre, and probably also of the Wasmuth book store right next to the Stein-Platz in front of the Academy, which specialized in world art history.⁸²

Whatever the certainly contrary motivations behind the research on world art history, the books in Aksel's collection include initial thoughts that depart from universalist claims and orientalist clichés, and venture a rethinking of the conceptual framework of world art history, distinct from the one developed around the masterpieces of European artists of the academic triad of architecture, sculpture, and painting. With today's renewed interest in world or global art history, those initial steps in that direction are worth attention in future studies.

The broad thematic sweep of the book collection demonstrates that Aksel's aim was not merely to study "Western" or even "German" art (whatever that might have been) during his years in Berlin; nor did he limit himself to the official task of studying a certain approach to art pedagogy in a narrow sense.

80 These books are also at the Sehbenderler Konağı Kütüphanesi in Bursa, Turkey.

81 A list of these publications follows after the bibliography at the end of this article.

82 Aksel 1974b: 265.

Rather it appears that in Berlin he discovered his interest in underrepresented cultural and artistic artefacts and practices far outside of the German territory, and would, not long after his return, himself undertake the study of folk culture in the Turkish provinces.⁸³ What is more, Malik was not a naïve and uncritical recipient of the interest of the arts and art history in overseas cultures and cultural production. He was aware and critical of unequal power relations and issues of domination inherent in the prevailing Eurocentric perspective. In his reference to the above-mentioned model market on the Stein-Platz in front of the main entrance of the Academy building in Berlin he in fact uses much harsher language to describe the model-selection process. The market reminded him of “slave markets [*esir pazarları*]”, the models were treated in his view like pieces of furniture, and when it was his turn to hire a model for the next drawing class, he had to select a “black and gypsy [*zenci ve çingene*]” model according to the “Gauguin fashion [*Gauguin modası*]” of the time.⁸⁴ This critique of the objectification of the life models mirrors his sense of the individuals’ integrity that would characterize his portraits.

4 Summary and outlook

As the art teacher in the Art-Craft Department in Ankara and, in preparation for this position, as a student on a public stipend in Europe, Malik Aksel was directly and closely linked to one of the large state projects geared towards the reform of the newly founded Republic of Turkey. Because of this affiliation Aksel found himself at the intersection of the processes and entities that had a significant impact on artistic practices in the country (and on its historicization), namely modernization, the state and its institutions, and Westernization. This article has set out to differentiate this general observation by centring on specific, tangible details of Aksel’s trajectory through this constellation. Thereby, the guiding questions have been not only around Aksel’s individual relation to them, but also what else he engaged with: what aesthetic and creative practices unfolded in the midst of and beyond the larger processes the early Turkish Republic tends to be associated with.

83 Aksel started to collect popular lithography, images of folk stories, postcards, calligraphy and religious visual art from Anatolia and produced a number of texts on this material. For a collection of these texts see Aksel 2010 [1960]. For a full bibliography of Aksel’s studies see Ayvazoğlu 2011b: 137–147.

84 Aksel 1942: 126–127.

Modernization from Aksel's perspective did not come as an instant, holistic change. It was not all around, but something to be staged, rehearsed, and looked at. He partook, in varying degrees of conformity and defiance, in all of these three modes of creating and relating to it. He participated in the creation of the large exhibition that juxtaposed the envisioned new way of life in the Republic with images of the Ottoman era, to promote the first and denigrate the latter; he let his students depict distinctive patriotic motifs that represented the advent of a new era; and he addressed the actual situation outside the selectively framed "examples" of modernization in his texts and visual works. It is this latter practice that exposes the staging of modernity in the first place as well as the gap in historiography as concerns the actual context of art in the early Turkish Republic.

The Art-Craft Department, as part of the Gazi Education Institute, sat in the middle of this context, in Aksel's perception, like a "mirage". The Ministry of Education channelled a substantial part of its budget into this institution, so that its physical form rose to tower over its environment in the outskirts of Ankara. As a boarding institution, and with the building's state-of-the-art equipment and activities that supplemented the educational programme, the Institute assumed an apparent self-sufficiency. These facets alone invite an interpretation of the Institute as a monolithic and hermetic institution. Given the immense public funds it absorbed, it was very likely exposed to high expectations, if not control, by the state. However, considering the teaching activities at the school from the documents relating to the programme of the Art-Craft Department, or to Aksel's legacy alone, requires differentiation of that interpretation and acknowledgement of the permeability of the state institution. Not unlike his own training experience in Istanbul, Aksel took his students on excursions to the surroundings of the school and the city; the drawing classes within the school building employed individuals from the poorest strata, people who actually lived in the *gecekondular* that are conspicuously absent from contemporary representations; and the programme of the Art-Craft Department stressed, in direct reference to process philosophies, engagement with daily life and the environment, implying a concept of art that was based not merely on the object or result, but on the very act, the process of engaging with the environment through creative practice.

Aksel's training at the State Art School in Berlin, with its programme akin to Progressive Education, was a deliberate choice in preparation for his teaching position in the Art-Craft Department. His host institution did not, however, impart this approach as it was conceived in theory, but was subjected to the very practical limits and opportunities of its space, equipment, and faculty, leading to a varied programme in which the practice-oriented approach to art overlapped and intersected with other practices, some as conventional as

figurative drawing. Within this varied programme Aksel made his own choices. He also engaged in extracurricular activities; he took classes with a teacher who was an observer of unvarnished street life, thus resonating with the inclination Aksel demonstrated during his previous training in Istanbul and his later teaching and art practice in Ankara. He also took interest in both past and contemporary arts that were made not only within but also outside of Europe – particularly Islamic art. It is impossible to understand Aksel's complementary formation in the European city and the choices he made there simply as a further catalysing step in the Westernization of art in Turkey. The variety of Aksel's activities demonstrates that he diverged from or at least expanded on the official assignment that underlay his public stipend. The accessibility and mediation of the wide, heterogeneous range of cultural practices and heritages Aksel engaged with in Berlin may have been shaped by Eurocentrism, but his critical remarks and particular perspectives on the city prove that he absorbed the options available to him not in an unfiltered manner but with awareness of the biases involved.

This article has inverted the process of organizing diversity in terms of adequate concepts, seeking instead the complex historical phenomena that these concepts comprise – and that also transcend their boundaries. Already the investigation of the variations in the practices of a single artist has nuanced the understanding of the impact of modernization, the state and its institutions, and Westernization on art practices in the early Turkish Republic. Addressing variations in art practices minimizes the universalising or essentializing dynamic of these terms, and reminds us that they are merely abstractions from the congeries of actuality. It has also opened avenues to the recognition of understandings of art that are absent from art historiography on the period, especially on this region. These insights provide the basis for the continuation of the research presented here. Future research will add the perspectives of further teachers at the Art-Craft Department and pursue the investigation of this practice-oriented approach to art, defined here as “engagement art” for its emphasis on engagement with the environment through creative practices.

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