

Conflicting Visualities on Display: National Museums from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic

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National museums in the late 19th and early 20th century of Turkish history can be interpreted as conflicting paradigms between the binary concepts of West and East, modern and traditional, patron and architect, and theory and practice. In this paper, I would like to explore within these dualities how first museum buildings functioned as a formative space or a vehicle for visualizing power, collective memory, identity, and historical heritage in two different contexts during the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish nation-state. In that sense, what I will attempt to analyze is the themes such as how Western concepts of archaeology and national museums relate to the creation of the first imperial museum during the late Ottoman period and the first national museum during the early Republican era; how national museums were constructed differently with the changes in political system – empire or nation-state, how history, archaeology and museums were utilized and represented as part of political strategies such as modernization or nationalism, how and to what extent the architectural design of museums contributed to the narrative of national museum; in other words, how the representation of the past coincided with architectural features of these museums. What kind of a relationship can be established between the contents of the first museum of the Ottoman Empire and its architectural style; and how were the objects displayed integrated with the narration and spatial formulation of the museum? I will also discuss the underlying reasons for adopting a particular architectural style for the museum building, its harmony with its environment, and compatibility of interior and exterior of the museum building; who the patrons and the clients were in the building of a national museum; what kind of power the intelligentsia had in this process; and to what extent the collections, building and location of the museums contributed to the formation of collective memory and identity, considering whether the collections of the museums, the museum buildings themselves and their visibility are the instruments of display or not.

Conflicting Visualities

The Imperial Museum (Istanbul Archaeological Museum [1891]) [Fig. 1] in the late Ottoman period and Ankara Museum of Ethnography (1927) [Fig. 2] and Ankara Anatolian Civilizations Museum (1938) [Fig. 3] in the early Republican period were the first museums planned and built to function as such.¹



**Figure 1. The Imperial Museum (Istanbul Archaeological Museum [1891])
(Photographed in 2005 by the Author)**



**Figure 2. Ankara Museum of Ethnography (1927)
(Sözen, Metin. 1984. Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türk Mimarlığı, Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları).**

¹ There was the idea of establishing a national museum during the early Republican period. But for some reasons the foundation of such a museum did never come through.



Figure 3. The Museum of Ankara Anatolian Civilizations

(An old Ottoman market complex including a *bedesten* and a *han* from the 15th century, which was restored as a museum in 1938.)
(*Ankara Arkeoloji Müzesi*. 1966. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi).

Those museums represent two different ideological agendas. Before dealing with the first Ottoman Museum, it would be appropriate to discuss those notions such as museum, history, historical heritage and archaeology during the late Ottoman period. The history of those initially emerged with the 19th century. Before that there was not even a consciousness observed clearly towards the notions. For centuries as the Westerners did, the Ottomans did not deem it necessary to collect or conserve these values except in palace collections and *vakıf* works. It was after the vivid and disseminating winds of nationalism and the increasing popularity of museums in Europe, and the smuggling of antiquities in the Ottoman lands by foreigners, that the formation of such an interest during the late Ottoman period was motivated. The legislation regarding the prohibition of taking away worthy pieces outside of the Ottoman lands could have come through in 1846. And the idea of the first museum came through with the storage of the antiquities in 1846 in *Hagia Eirene*. But it was shortly after the serious attempts of the foundation of the first imperial museum that came to the agenda of the empire thanks to efforts of a few of the Ottoman elites. Although the western originated notions of archaeology and museum were imported during the late Ottoman period this implicitly indicates a progress for its term. The minister of education of the era, Münif Paşa, reveals this development at the opening ceremony of the former museum building, *Çinili Köşk*, saying that “it was the goal of our developing country to establish a museum in Istanbul as it had been the case for other civilized countries. The completion of this museum filling a niche should be a fountain of serenity for all of us as a monumental masterpiece created by His Almighty and Imperial Highness the Sultan who has been serving his royal efforts for augmentation and extension of similar monumental art pieces.” (Cezar 1995:241)² Besides its value in its term, during the late Ottoman period the imperial

2 Great interest of Ottoman intelligentsia towards archaeology concretised by their attempt to preserve cultural heritage and aspire to display them in a monumental museum building, on the other hand it is contradictory that the intension of the foreign director’s of the Imperial Museum about selling some of the

power tried to form a single Ottoman identity by co-opting Greco-Roman and Byzantine heritage and displaying objects found by excavations on the lands under Ottoman hegemony. Therefore, in order to protect its authority against the potential threat of independence by multi-religious and multi-ethnic communities, the imperial power utilized the Imperial Museum as a communicative device to show how the Empire embraced various cultures under its roof. Thus, the imperial museum in Istanbul which would display the lands under Ottoman rule imitated the institutions for exhibition and hereby corresponded to the way of what European museums did that was to compile collections brought from around the world, particularly colonized dependants to emphasize their imperial power. Thus, by representing the cultures and values of different parts through museums, the empire would prove its power to the masses, which suggests the concrete instrumentality of the museums in power-knowledge relations.

On the other hand, museums were used as effective instruments for the declaration of nationalistic idealism and progress through modernization for the Republican regime in the early 20th century. Both in the Ethnographical Museum and Anatolian Civilizations Museum in Ankara, the practice of exhibiting was confined to the collection of historical works, designated to be displayed as the best representation of the national past. Indeed, the nations which had revolutions would utilize the museum idea which was for praising historical national entities. In that sense, the museums in the early Republican era were appropriate tools to suggest a collective identity for the nation based on the idea of a common culture rooted in common history. (Arik 1953:5) The Ankara Museum of Ethnography displayed Turkish society through its past and folkloric culture. But it is striking that “in the Ethnography Museum, the exhibits consisted of familiar things still part of everyday use, which were labeled as historical and placed on display for the viewing of the locals... By taking the familiar out of its context and thereby estranging it from its common users, the Ethnography Museum deliberately attempted to seal off from the present the practices and objects that defined a way of life that, according to the official ideology, was to remain in the past.” (Kezer 2000:107-108) Besides the Ethnographical Museum, the first archaeological museum of the new Republic, the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations displayed the archaeological heritage of the new nation, which was claimed to have been built mainly upon the Hittites -a culture which established its empire in Anatolia- instead of the Greco-Roman culture. In the process of nation building, the goal of the government was to create a new Turkish identity and Turkish past, which depended upon new symbols. And the designated representation was neither Ottoman nor Greco-Roman, rather Turkish history was constructed through Anatolian civilizations which was viewed as its own past. Besides this, the establishment of those museums in Ankara, the new capital city of Turkish Republic, in the cradle of Anatolia, was also a representation of an attempt for a complete break with the Ottoman past. In that sense, the government decided to make serious rules and regulations about how to classify, preserve and display the antiquities. The palaces of the Ottoman Sultans which symbolize the earlier political system of the empire were converted into museums in early republican years. The Topkapı Palace became a museum in 1924, just after the foundation of the republic, and the Museum of Paintings and Sculpture was formed in the Dolmabahçe Palace in 1937. Besides, all over Anatolia, there was an incredible interest towards opening new museums in such big cities as Izmir, Bursa, Edirne, Adana, Konya, Manisa, Kayseri, Sivas. For these museums teachers graduated from archaeology and history departments were assigned. The first excavations were made in Ahlatlıbel and Alacahöyük, and were conducted by the natives. The Alacahöyük excavation conducted by the Turkish Historical Foundation (TTK) was quite illuminating in terms of showing 5000 years of Turkish history and it was very much helpful to re-construct Turkish history. Hence, scientific

antiquities in order to be able to cover the expenses of such a monumental museum building in the middle of a serious financial crisis.

research in Turkish history, archeology and museology gained momentum with the implementation of new state regulations.

Speaking of their place in architectural production these first museum buildings suggest conflicting visualities. 19th century European influence can be seen in the neo-classical style of Istanbul Archaeological Museum built as the Royal Imperial Museum during the late Ottoman period. In Europe the first a museum building constructed in the same century “invokes a classical tradition that resonates with an idealised past, both remote and Arcadian.” (Giebelhausen 2003:1-2) Classicism was central to the concept of nationalism in the nineteenth century and these monumental structures represent “the idealised power of civilisation and the paternalistic concerns of the nation state” (Giebelhausen 2003:4) in a significantly chosen spot in the urban context.³ In the same vein, like European museums the architectural style echoed the primary collection of Greco-Roman art displayed in the museum. Such thematic correlation between style and contents are found in many other museums established in the 19th century in the West, such as the British Museum in London (1823-46) and the Altes Museum in Berlin (1823-30). However, the imperial museum had a different background. Osman Hamdi Bey, the French-trained founder of the Ottoman Academy of Fine Arts, was the mastermind of the project, and the building was designed by the French architect Alexander Vallaury. Since *Tanzimat* was a period when the Ottoman intelligentsia gradually had gained power they also had the opportunity to intervene and to form the architectural taste of the empire. The architects had been charged by the elites and those people became the creators of the architectural style of the empire. This meant that the architectural products became concretized with talent and architectural taste of the architects. The intelligentsia was so active and powerful that, despite serious financial crisis of the empire and disinterest towards archaeology and historical heritage, the permission of the Sultan for the foundation of such a glorious museum could have been taken with the efforts of these people and thus the museum building had been constructed in the palace area being competitive to other classical ottoman buildings of the Topkapı Palace.

On the other hand, Ankara Museum of Ethnography was designed by a Turkish architect Arif Hikmet Koyunoğlu in an historical Turkish style, and had a rich collection of Anatolian folk art, which was appropriate to the nationalist ideology of the new Republican regime. As Aslanoğlu pointed out, “the contesting projects for the competition of the Ethnographic Museum in Ankara in 1927, is a strong evidence to show the intimacy of the ideology of Turkish nationalism and the architecture of those years.” (Aslanoğlu 1986:16) The style of the museum is called as the first national movement that was corresponding to the nationalist sentiments, which were understood as the cladding of facades with Seljuk and Ottoman elements such as pointed arches, domes, ornate mouldings, cornices and pediments. “The Museum of Ethnography was organized and commissioned by Atatürk himself who saw it as the repository of folk art and culture, the base for his new cultural policy.” (Yıldırım & Özkan 1984: 63) Beyond its architectural features, the

3 Lewis Mumford deals with the museum as “the most typical institution of the metropolis, as characteristic of its ideal life as the gymnasium was of the Hellenic city or the hospital of the medieval city.” Mumford, Lewis. 1975. *The City in History*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p.639. Indeed, the museums were the symbolic representations of the city, and were generally situated at the central points alongside the public parks, and built with marble and interiors with marble halls. Because of its monumental image, the museum was “a shrine of cultural treasures, a place for calm and deep communion with the great works of art of the past ages.” Trachtenberg, Marvin and Isabelle Hyman. 2002. *Architecture, from Prehistory to Postmodernity*, Upper Saddle River, N.J: Prentice-Hall, p.419. Hence such buildings had a powerful notion; the site and approach to the museum were appropriate and contribute to this effect. Carol Duncan in her book called *Civilizing Rituals* states “art museums have always been compared to older ceremonial monuments such as palaces or temples. Indeed, from the eighteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries, they were deliberately designed to resemble them.” Duncan, Carol. 1995. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London and New York: Routledge, p.7.

site of the museum was the result of a decision that conveyed “a prominent hill halfway between old and new Ankara, as if the repository were meant to be the mediator between tradition and revolution.” (Yıldırım & Özkan 1984: 63) Besides the Ethnographical Museum, the contemporary choice of an Ottoman building to display Hittite artifacts in the case of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations (an old Ottoman market complex including a *bedesten* and a *han* from the 15th century, which was restored as a museum in 1938)⁴ also reflects the importance given to the museum building as an integral element of the formation of a cultural identity provided with the collection of antiquities brought from every corner of Anatolia.

Conclusion

In this paper I attempt to examine the relationship between narrative and space focusing on the first national museum buildings as the concrete symbols of social, cultural, economic, technological transformation and a vehicle for political and ideological meanings created through the discourse of visual representation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of Turkish history. Architecture has always been a powerful symbol as well as an effective instrument of reform and change in the modern world. Thus, to examine how the national museums were designed differently with the changes in the political system – empire or nation-state; how archaeology and archaeological museums were utilized in order to support those political systems and ideologies such as modernization or nationalism; and particularly how the representation of the past, cultures, history and antiquities were designated in national museums as appropriate to existing approaches and in this process; or which ones of these cultures, histories and objects were subject to be excluded or included deliberately as part of political agenda are all worthy to study. Speaking of the museums, not only style of the museum building but also the collection, and how it was classified and displayed are issues closely related to spatial planning of the building which contributes to the formation of collective memory and national identity. Greenhill states, “the existing systems of classification enable some ways of knowing, but prevent others? Are the inclusions, exclusions and priorities that determine whether objects become part of collections, also creating systems of knowledge?” (Greenhill 1992:5) This becomes clearer with reference to Foucault’s ideas that reason and truth are relative, rather than absolute concepts, because reason and truth have historical, social and cultural contexts.⁵

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4 The delay in beginning of the project was proceeding that the foreign architect Ernst Egli’s project didn’t satisfy the authorities that’s why a Turkish architect, Macit Kural’s project was applied who was thought to be someone who knew Turkish building techniques very well. This presents an important note for our architectural history since the restoration work was given to a Turkish architect rather than a foreign architect who was in charge of building many education and state buildings in the same period.

5 Gordon, Colin. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*/ Michel Foucault, Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, p.257.

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