

Original Research Article

An Analysis and Review of Erol Akyavaş's Calligraphic Works in the Cultural Context of Modern Turkey

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Abstract

Statement of the problem: The 19th century witnessed the intense pressure of the academies and their dominance over paintings. In addition, with the beginning of modern painting in Western societies, the impressionists started producing works of art against the academies. This was reinforced by the advancement of technology - the invention of the photographic camera and the influence of cinema. With the emergence of art movements and styles, one after the other, artists were encouraged to investigate traditional and local arts. Moreover, the rejection of academicism and the attention of leading Western artists to Islamic and Eastern artistic heritage, especially in the field of calligraphy, encouraged modern Turkish artists to take this path. Erol Akyavaş is among these artists who, along with the experience of western teachings, has made great use of Islamic lines in his works, considering the cultural conditions of Turkey. The way he used calligraphy in Turkish painting is one of the important features on which this research focuses. This study attempts to explain and examine the calligraphic works of Erol Akyavaş in the cultural context of modern Turkey. This research employs the historical-descriptive and analytical method and with reference to the works, the artist's life, and the views of Turkish artists and art critics, seeks to understand Erol Akyavaş's calligraphic works in the cultural context of modern Turkey. The studied examples were calligraphic works published in books and catalogs, which were selected purposefully. The methods of data collection were library and documentary. Analysis of the data in the cultural conditions of modern Turkey shows that Akayavaş expressed his belief and mysticism clearly visible in the form of calligraphic works by highlighting his cultural and religious components.

Keywords: *Islamic calligraphy, Turkish painting, Erol Akyavaş, Modern Turkey.*

Introduction

Errol Akyavaş (1932-1999) was born in Istanbul and from 1950 to 1952 he was a guest student at the studio of Badri Rahmi Ayyoglu, one of the pioneers of the D art movement at the Istanbul Academy of

Fine Arts. Then he traveled to Florence and Paris and benefited from professors such as Fernand Leger and Andre Lotte. Then, he continued his education in the field of architecture in America. In 1954, he created works under the influence of abstract expressionism coloring, and from the mid-1950s and 1960s, the

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colored pages in Akyavaş's canvases turned into a multitude of letters and symbols, vaguely reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy. The work of "Glory of the Kings" (Fig. 1) resulting from this period, found a way to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In New York, Akyavaş got interested in Sufism and communicated with Eastern philosophy and mysticism, and used calligraphy with Arabic letters, which is considered the artistic expression of writing in the East. In the course of Akyavaş's calligraphic works, traditional forms and symbols have a deep meaning and the relationship between form and content in a meaningful pattern includes mysticism. Therefore, the examination of his works based on the historical periods and the ideas governing his works in the cultural context of Turkey leads to a deeper understanding and decoding of his symbolic works.

Problem Statement

Considering the architectural and painting activities, Erol Akyavaş has used calligraphy in various ways in his works. This research is looking for the development and application of calligraphic forms according to the changes that have occurred in the context of modern Turkey. Due to the close religious, artistic, and cultural similarities between Iran and Turkey, it seems necessary to know the political and social factors that caused the emergence and diversity of Akiyawash's calligraphic works.

The Purpose of the Research

This research aims to study and examine the calligraphic works of Erol Akyavaş and explain the ratio of such works in the cultural context of modern Turkey.

Research method

The method used in this research is descriptive-analytical. The data for this research was classified through library studies and documents. This was done by referring to the works, the life of the artist

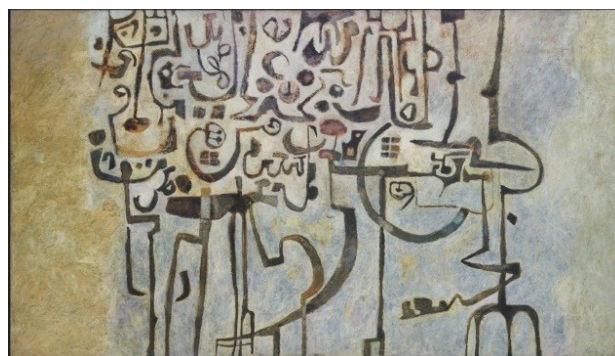


Fig. 1. Erol Akyavaş, Victory of Sultans, 1959, 121.8x214 cm. Oil paint on canvas. Source: <https://www.moma.org>.

and the views of the critics, and the analysis of his works in the historical context of modern Turkey. The method of classification, analysis, and review of Akyavaş's works is based on historical decades, so only the works in which the use of calligraphy is evident were selected as examples.

Theoretical Framework

This research has used the general method of structural investigation in terms of form and calligraphic visual elements in different working periods of the artist. Then, used description, features, and elements in their works and their analysis in the context of modern Turkish cultural history as the background and meaning of the artists' works and their comparison with each other have led to the conclusion and results of the research.

Definition of Keywords

Calligraphy: Murad Akyavaş did not repeat traditional calligraphy; rather, he had taken refuge in it as a tool and in some cases gave meaning to the creation of works. Since the foundation of these works is based on the use of the Persian and Arabic alphabets - although the term used by most Arab and Western researchers - is called "Harufiyeh School" and "Harufiyeh", which is related to the Sufi movement of Harufiyeh) in the middle of the 8th century of Hijri, there may be confusion, therefore the authors have used the word calligraphy to mean

the form of Islamic calligraphy in this research.

Research Background

In the field of Erol Akyavaş's works, due to the value and position of Akyavaş in traditional and modern Turkish painting, growing research has been conducted in the form of articles and books, "The influence of mysticism and Islamic calligraphy on the painting of Erol Akyavaş" (Digler & Soylo, 2020) is among the examples of articles in the Turkish language.

In this research, the paintings drawn by Erol Akyavaş and his interest in Sufism and Islamic calligraphic tendency have been examined. Also, a thesis on the topic "Erol Akyavaş'in Gelenekle Somutlaşan Resimlerinde Karsılaşan Tirmali KoMpozisyon Çözümlemeleri" which means a comparative analysis of the composition in the paintings of "Erol Akyavaş" embodied with tradition in Turkish (Yetgin, 2013), Ayşe examined the factors under the influence of which the artist creates a unique and new composition. Another article titled "The evolution of Islamic calligraphy in contemporary Turkey" (Amani & Farahmand, 2021) discusses the importance of the art of calligraphy in Islamic societies and the prominence of this art in Turkey and the process of its changes in recent years. Also, the confrontation of Western art with the traditional values of Turkish calligraphy and artists such as Erol Akyavaş who have benefited from this development in their works is researched. The article "Regeneration of painting with a new language in contemporary Turkey" (Farahmand & Amani, 2021) also describes how to revive the national culture and achieve a new identity and language in the art of traditional Turkish painting that serves to express court events and illustrate literary and historical texts to identify the revival of this art in the works of contemporary artists such as Akyavaş in the field of Turkish painting. This research analyzes the calligraphic works of Erol Akyavaş in the cultural context of modern Turkey because this

aspect has not been discussed in the analysis of this artist's works so far. It is worth noting that the reason for choosing this artist is because of his reputation for a new look at calligraphy and its application in paintings.

Akyavaş and the Trend of Westernization in Turkish Painting

In the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire became the scene of struggle and conflict between the colonial powers, and Muslims and thinkers were looking for the question of why the European nations, who lived in longing for the civilization of the Islamic world for many years, have defeated the Muslims in these wars today (Zabihzadeh, 2001, 74). With the establishment of reforms, the flow of approach to the West and Westernization, and the separation of religion from the state began in the Ottoman Empire, and with the rise of the Young Turks¹, the era of Westernization intensified (ibid., 76). At the beginning of the twenties of Turkish nationalism; insisted that not only industrial products, but also the spirit, system, and values of the West should be completely adapted, and Turkish nationality, pan-Turkism¹, and the ancient myths and legends of the Turkish people should be revived (ibid., 78). This process reached its peak with Atatürk (Kemalism) coming to power in 1922. The Young Turks and Atatürk started to establish registered parties in Turkish society to complete their reform project (ibid., 77) and Pan-Turkism was the beginning of the collapse of the empire (ibid., 76). The period of the republic, which began with the presidency of Atatürk, ordered anything related to the history of the Turks and the Ottoman Empire or Islam to be removed and changed the Turkish language from Arabic to Latin to grow the connection between Turkish Muslims and the Islamic world and connect to Europe (ibid., 78). According to the political and social developments of Turkey, the D art group was the fourth art group that started working in Turkey in 1933. It had a distinct aesthetic approach to modern

styles and displayed these styles in the form of Turkish themes. One of the prominent painters of this group was Turgut Zaim. His work was an introduction to the following generations of Turkish painters who wanted to create an artwork that had a distinctive Turkish feature, or in better words, an art that properly mixed the elements of eastern and western beauty in innovative ways. To better understand the approach of the groups formed in the early days of the republic, which played a significant role in the Westernization process of Turkish painting. The process of westernization in Turkish painting and the activity of various groups in this field, as shown in Table 1, continued until the Second World War, but during the Second World War, despite Turkey's declaration of neutrality, the relationship between the artists of this country and the Western art centers, in particular, France was cut off. Many painters seated in France emigrated to Africa or the United States or were sent to the army, but the artistic life in the newly established Turkish Republic did not collapse and the art institutions continued their activities strictly. The art of this Turkish period was a combination of Cubism, Fauvism, and Impressionism, which focused less on structural issues and more on social concerns (Farahmand Drov & Amani, 2022, 80). Akyavaş was also affiliated with this trend and joined them at the end of the formation of Group D. Although Akyavaş

spent most of his life in America, he was very successful in combining modernism and tradition and achieved the depth of mystical thoughts (Amani & Farahmand Drav, 2022, 74). Since the 1960s, he used religious symbols in his works and was active in various fields such as calligraphy, architecture, miniatures, and religious stories. In the paintings he made in the 1970s, architecture appears as symbolic forms. These are usually city or interior maps drawn from a bird's eye view (Yetgin, 2013, 53). In the 1980s, he conducted studies in the field of Sufism. His interest in miniature art started from this time. It was in this decade that he focused on the values of Islamic art and these values determined the trajectory of his works. His connection with Sufism came from his family. His grandfather was a sheik and one of his relatives, Golpınarlı, was famous for his works in the field of Sufism history and literature. This mystical knowledge that he inherited became a guide to his art and personality during his stay in the West (Amani & Farahmand Drav, 2021, 75). Influenced by Mies van Drohe, a great architect who was a member of the Bauhaus school, and absorbed in his views on decorations and functionalism in art, he created abstract reliefs, which were his first steps in calligraphy. His work titled "Blue" (Fig. 2) consists of blue geometric pieces that are placed on top of each other in an abstract way. Over time, his works

Table 1. Group D in Turkish painting and influential people. Source: Farhamand Drav & Amani, 2021, 81.

the name of the group	year of establishment (AD)	Prominent members	goals	Dominant art styles
group D	1933	Nurullah Barak, Leif Nachi, Obedin Dino, Zaki Fik Ezer, Kemal Tolu Esraf Oren, Turgut Zaim Badri Rahimoglu and sculptor Zahut Miridoglu	Rejection of impressionism, presentation of Turkish themes in modern formats to achieve a national style. The ability of the members of this group to integrate the traditional elements of painting, calligraphy and painting with contemporary trends paved the way for the separation of Turkish painting from the academic art that dominated it for year.	A distinct aesthetic approach to painting that combined Western trends such as Cubism, Constructivism, and Expressionism with specific Turkish subjects. The lack of cohesion in this group can be seen in artistic styles.

became simpler and became paintings with limited color ranges. After these paintings, Akyavaş turned to calligraphy and it was from here that calligraphy became a defining element in his art. He, who was interested in the ideas of American surrealism, abandoned the logical approach to painting and turned to spontaneity, a problem that increased the importance of motifs and lines in his works. The root of this art was in his cultural past, something that was recorded in his memory and subconscious (*ibid.*, 74).

Erol Akyavaş and Calligraphy in the Process of Westernization and Modern art

With the influence of Turkish art from modern art and western art styles, some calligraphers were not separated from these influences. Different approaches can be seen among Turkish artists who have studied the art of calligraphy in modern ways; The works in which handwriting has been used along with the painting while maintaining the principles and rules of calligraphy, the works in which the traditional structure of the handwriting has been invaded and taken over, and finally the works in which the calligraphy has been transformed and hidden in the painting. However, the use of calligraphy in the sense of calligraphy, not for writing, as it has been popular in the past, is the common point of these works (Amani & Farahmand Drav, 2021, 74). Akyavaş is one of the artists who were inspired by Islamic calligraphy in his paintings. His sensitivity to Islamic art emerged in parallel with the development of religious political institutions in Turkey. By examining Akyavaş's works using traditional elements such as calligraphy, it is concluded that he approached traditional art in two ways during his career. At first, the form of



Fig. 2. Erol Akyavaş, blue, 1955, paint, and oil on wood. Source: <https://www.star.com.tr>.

traditional shapes was important, but gradually and in his later works, traditional shapes and symbols have found a deeper meaning.

Akyavaş's interest in Sufism caused mystical images to gradually appear in his paintings. Some important events and people in the history of Sufism, as well as letters and sentences that have symbolic meanings in this sect, became an integral element of his works. One of the most important of these works is called Mansur Hallac (Fig. 3), which was created in 1987. This work shows his Islamic orientation and the idea of the unity of existence in the thought of Iranian Sufis. In this painting, the letter "W" is written in modern ways. In Sufism, the letter w (Vav) is a symbol of the relationship between the creator and the creature. With this style of calligraphy in large dimensions, Akyavaş has emphasized the value and symbolic meaning of that letter. In this way, he sought to discover the beauty behind the visible, that is, the concept that existed in Islamic thought. In these paintings, the calligraphy element is legible and is used symbolically in the painting, but there is no insistence on correct writing as it is in traditional calligraphy, and calligraphy is used in an abstract and symbolic style (*ibid.*, 75). By mixing the plasticity and abstract perception of Arabic letters with his works, he has pioneered an understanding in which calligraphy is made in the form of letters, words, or sentences while maintaining its legibility (ALAKUŞ, 2011, 38).

Erol Akyavaş's Artistic Perception in Paintings

Erol Akyavaş discovers in America that the source of light is the Eastern world. His closeness with the thought of Sufism can be seen by carefully examining the works that are placed together in chronological order. Especially, a series of works such as Kimya Saadat, Karbala, Mansur Hallac, and Mirajname (Fig. 4) have managed to capture the spirit of tradition. The Iconoclasts panel (Fig. 5) is an original work of art combined with wisdom. It draws attention to the symbols that are recorded with the images of ancient



Fig. 3. Erol Akyavaş, Mansur Hallac, acrylic, 300 x 350 cm, 1987.

Source: Amani & Farahmand Drav, 2021, 74.

coins and points to the materialism of the modern idols of our age. In this way, it brings a new interpretation of the discourse of banning imagery. The artistic structure of his works includes the world of East and West, modernism and postmodernism, traditional and contemporary. Placing this artist in a specific trend and style will be a wrong judgment. From Panofsky's point of view; "The content of a painting, in other words, its main meaning, by determining the basic principles that express the basic behavior of a nation, a period, a class, a religion or a philosophy, with the personality of an artist and focused on work" (Digler & Soyulu, 2020, 104) Akyavaş in his understanding of art; Islam brought the essence and aesthetics of Islamic culture and philosophy to his works. Akyavaş in his understanding of art; Islam brought the essence and aesthetics of Islamic culture and philosophy to his works. It combines the experiences and perceptions of western painting and traces of culture, eastern philosophy, and religious cultures, even accepting past cultures with its art and creating its artistic language and search by remembering them. Akyavaş, as one of the representatives of modern painting, has not cut his link with Islam and Sufism in art. Errol Akyavaş's calligraphy and mysticism opened a new horizon in modern Turkish painting. He finds his originality in

his native land and his culture and origin against the western understanding of art and painting. By returning to his essence, he escapes from the serious search for identity in America. Therefore, he follows Anatolian folk culture, which has many riches, not an East-West synthesis. In Akyavaş's paintings, spaces, roads, and walls are seen like Miniature art, and traces of a deep-rooted tradition can be seen along with mystical signs. Sezer Tansuğ states that Akyavaş "intends to display a tragic feeling and share it with the audience". He is an artist who moves towards a goal in the labyrinth, presents mystical keys and mental indicators, and enables man to see and feel the right paths in the labyrinth of life. When Akyavaş is mentioned, only handwriting doesn't come to mind, he doesn't fit into a single format, he is versatile, he has different talents and he has proven these evaluations from every aspect in certain stages of his life. In 1979, Akyavaş turned to Islamic arts with abstract calligraphy and composition approach with the help of architecture in his early paintings, and with miniature and abstraction, he approached an artist who was influenced by surrealism. As an architect, he was used to building plans, geometric shapes, and surface transfer of these forms. About Akyavaş, Sönemz states: "Since his main profession is architecture, he was able to give his paintings extraordinary spatial designs and gradually turned to miniature landscapes, and this progress led him to the point where he interpreted the religious themes of Islam and he created modern images of the Kaaba." Abstract geometric shapes are dominant in Akyavaş's early works. His technique in his works is acrylic and a combination of various media. He also uses gouache, powder paint, and gilding. In Akyavaş's works, which connect the art of calligraphy with the art of painting, the red color is dominant. His closeness to Sufism is visible in his works. He uses geometric shapes such as squares and cubes belonging to ancient civilizations as a symbolic expression (ibid., 105). In his paintings, calligraphy alone does not have a traditional appearance, architectural plans, city walls,

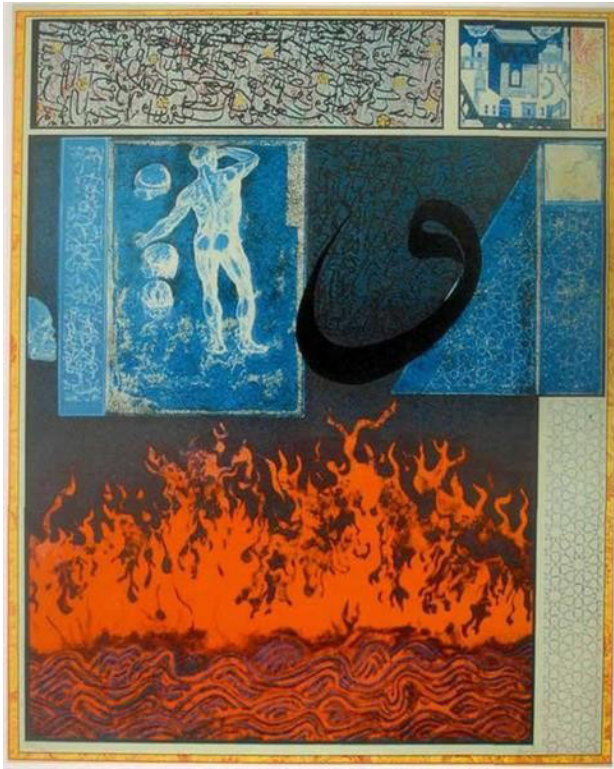


Fig. 4. Erol Akyavaş, Ascension, cm 65x55, 1987.

Source: <https://galerinev.art>.

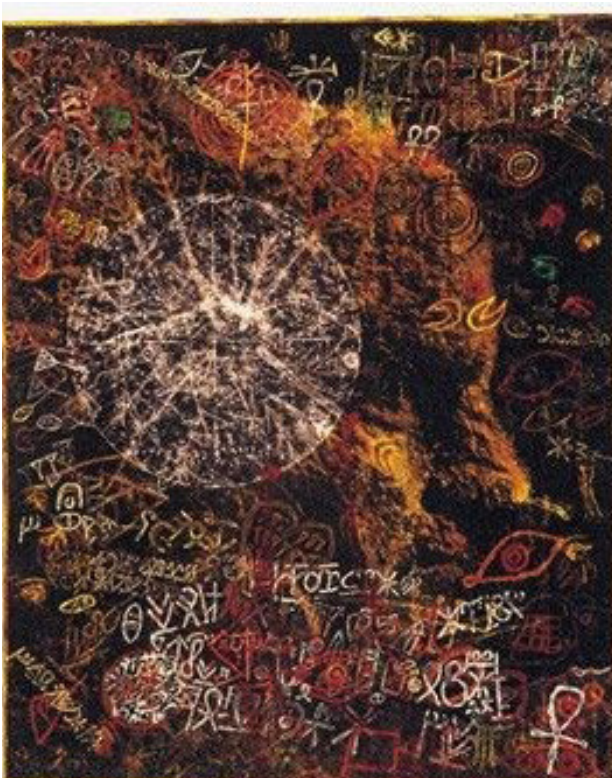


Fig. 5. Errol Akyavaş, Iconoclasts, 1993.

Source: <https://www.galerinovistanbul.com/>

castles, and holy places that have miniature artworks are also included, traditional images in Akyavaş's paintings have a chain relationship with each other. According to Ali Arton, "Akyavaş's art finds meaning in a place between theology and aesthetics." With the beginning of the Ascension, the artist achieved a rich iconography, which takes the viewer to a "sacred" and "beautiful" unity in the past and investigates the complex history of this union, which also surrounds his mind". In another assessment by Ali Arton, "Akyavaş's modernity does not show itself as disassembling, reconstructing, expressing and encoding original narratives and images in conflicting contexts to protest against modernity. His association with iconography, mysticism, and Islamic tradition is in contrast to modernism's interest in mind or postmodernism's interest in ethnicity. This link is not established in the framework of audit or negotiation with the past. Akyavaş, like every front in which modernity is questioned, departs from the order of representation that is conditional on seeing/knowing people for an era. In addition, "reason and imagination" make this order problematic in the case of the East. But not by examining the truth of logic there; Using willpower in pursuit of another truth, another aesthetic. Beyond seeing and creating, there is aesthetics, the aesthetics of love. This is life in the form of spirituality" (*ibid.*, 106).

Errol Akyavaş's own statement about his art is as follows: "As a person from a certain environment, I consider myself the owner of the accumulated values in that environment... I am very interested in the inner aspect of painting." "Inner Content". Let me try to explain it this way: the statue of Jesus coming down from the cross has "plastic value" only for a non-Christian, a Taoist. It can be said that this is important and correct, "the value of plastic". But the same statue of Christ, for example, besides its "plastic value" for the Pope, also has an "intrinsic taste" that a Taoist cannot enjoy. I also use "local elements" in my paintings to achieve this "inherent taste". According

to Berkman, Akyavaş states: “I have been interested in Sufism and mysticism for a long time, I have been curious and love it for a long time. It is very natural that this love and interest is reflected in my work... Calling it Islamism means simplifying the issue away from reality and error. It’s even easier to add current political interpretations to it and limit it to the 80s as a common practice. Linking the concept of God to the whims of any politician is terrifying. Reducing the concept of eternity, which, is difficult to understand and includes from eternity to eternity and all times, to current politics, is a great sin, shame, and ugliness. Akyavaş states that he approaches traditional art in two ways. At first, he evaluates his work as a formal approach. In other words, it considers traditional symbols only as forms. But in his later works, traditional forms and symbols have a deep meaning. The relationship between form and content is in a semantic pattern that includes mysticism and mysticism (ibid., 107).

Discussion and Analysis of Findings

• Investigating the historical course of Akyavaş’s calligraphic works in the cultural context of modern Turkey

- Decade 1950

After the Second World War, the feeling of need for an Islamic institution among Turkish elites decreased with the expansion of the multi-party system and the influx of Western values and views. The Democratic Party also came to power in this decade (Tahayi, 2008, 137). They were on the border between secularism and laicism (Ibid, 138). This space is provided for the activity of Nursi², the founder of the Noor movement. Nursi, who was from the group of Young Turks, used the Quran as his guide and mentor until Sufism became the most powerful dimension in the development of his ideas and personality (Falahat Pisheh & Valdebigi, 2012, 94). He concluded that the renewal of Islamic consciousness should be done not at the government level but the individual level (ibid., 95). In this political and social environment of Turkey, Akyavaş, with

the influence of Fernand Léger and Andre Lotte in France, produces works with abstract geometric post-cubist characters and abstract expressionism coloring. With the importance they give to the unconscious mind, both movements are followed in his subsequent artistic periods (En-el Hak, n.d.). In 1951, he made a series of lithographs related to Yunus Amre’s³ poems (Star, n.d.). This collection of calligraphy applications appeared in his works in the following years (Erol Akyavaş - Retrospektif, n.d.). His fascination with built space can be attributed to this time. The colored pages in Akyavaş’s canvases turn into a mass of letters and symbols that are vaguely reminiscent of Islamic calligraphy in the second stage, which starts in the mid-1950s and ends around the 1960s (Artist Erol Akyavas, n.d.), although universal and subtly pictorial. Collecting non-specific oriental calligraphy and combining it with the international language of contemporary art is of special importance for Akyavaş (Bisar, Dostoglu & Haldun, 2007). Akyavaş used the abstract visual features of calligraphy in the first period of this decade, to reveal abstract understanding in his works. As a result of this artist’s effort in 1959 in New York, the work of the glory of the kings is available to the MOMA collection, which is considered a turning point and a turning point for him (Erol Akyavaş: Aşkın Yolu Üzerinde Bir Eşsiz Sır, n.d.). Henning explained uncontinuous changes in Akyavaş’s painting as follows: “Triumph of the Sultans” was the beginning of his relationship with the art of calligraphy. Akyavaş, who has always been interested in the letter that symbolizes the transformation of a word into shape, has also been closely interested in “letterism” in this context. The numerical values of the letters of the alphabet and the meanings attributed to them are the basis of letterism, and one of the other characteristics of this belief is its inwardness. Akyavaş believes that esoteric behavior has profound effects on Islamic thought (Yetgin, 2013, 54). Akyavaş travels all over the world and identifies different cultures as an architect (Erol Akyavaş: Aşkın Yolu Üzerinde Bir Eşsiz Sır, n.d.). His attachment to

the spatial idea of Western Cubism remains through the layering of his shapes and symbols, which are differentiated based on size. In a way that the layers appear to be superimposed, at the same time there is an awareness of the image as a surface to be embellished, as in Paul Kelly's works (Artist Erol Akyavas, n.d.). He investigated the influence of neolithic and Stone Age paintings and sexuality in his works in the years 1958-1959, and since 1959, he has used more oriental images in his works. In this period, what is important is the use of traditional forms (Bisar & Dostoglu & Haldun, 2007). His early works are lyrical explorations in which calligraphy as a symbolic element is linked to the Tachystic understanding of color (Erol Akyavas retrospective opens at Istanbul Modern, n.d.). The paintings he created during this period are in harmony with Western traditions (Süreyya, 2013). He is looking for a uniquely expressive language in a variety of organic abstracts. . He is in search of a combination that stems from his interest in Islamic tradition, Sufism, and Eastern arts, as well as small paintings that he used in the post-cubist style with an academic pattern in the early 1950s (Erol Akyavas - Retrospektif, n.d.).

- Decade 1960

In the 1960s, various political parties and movements, including Islamist movements, emerged in Turkish society (Falah, 2011, 118). Fethullah Gülen's⁴ Islamist movement was also one of the most important examples of liberal Islamist thinking in the Middle East. In general, Gülen's line of thought and practical behavior (Hizmet movement) can be summarized in four components: 1- Preservation and maintenance of Islam in the new world 2- Integration of Islam and Turkish nationalism 3- Precedence of ethics and education over politics 4- Islamized pragmatism (Ekhteyari Miyab & Hashemi, 2017, 175). Akyavas, being aware of this social atmosphere and life in New York, created random, intuitive, and colorless combinations in his works. These paintings are neither completely abstract nor figurative, but a synthesis in which the artist creates his language (En-el Hak, n.d.).

This interaction brings together the themes of social memory and cultural accumulation in his paintings (İslam Estetiğinin Görkemli Dili, n.d.). He used the female body as an aesthetic element in the first half of the 1960s, and he also tended toward the coins of Eastern art. He started working as an architect with the architect and designer Eero Saarinen in the United States of America, New York in the early 1960s. But in the same years, he abandoned architecture and completed his life as a painter. "Women, rooms, brothels" works of the 1960s are his violent attempts to express figuratively (Erol Akyavas, n.d.). In this decade, abstract and figurative elements began to stand out. In his paintings, he has put the themes of social memory interaction and cultural heritage together. His paintings are influenced by existential philosophy and use religion and sexuality not as opposite elements, but as metaphors (Erol Akyavas retrospective opens at Istanbul Modern, n.d.). Akyavas created works that brought together various images in a series of collages containing figurative images in the second half of the 1960s. These works are included in Akyavas's collection called "Memories" (Fig. 6) and what remains in his memory and subconscious is depicted (Süreyya, 2013). In this collection, he added animal bones and seashells to his elements. Both materials with their color fields turn into an abstract human head or human body. In his works, Akyavas refers to the subconscious mind and refers to surrealism. The memoir highlights his interest in the mysterious and unseen aspects of life (Erol Akyavas - Retrospektif, n.d.). In the collected collection of Akyavas's calligraphic works, the writer has not recorded a work belonging to this decade, but he has alternately used his experiences in this period in the calligraphic works of the following periods.

- Decade 1970

The starting point of the Hizmet (service) movement is considered to be the unrest of 1970 (Ekhteyari Miyab & Hashemi, 2017, 178). According to Thomas Michel, the former head of the department group (relations between Islam and Christianity of the Vatican),

Gülen's effort to reconcile tradition and modernity, as well as to recreate the relationship between the state and religion and emphasize democracy, is rooted in Sufism, which has been running in the historical context of Turkey (and of course a large part of the Islamic world) (*ibid.*, 182). Akyavaş's real connection with Sufism also started in this decade. He worked on geometric paintings with the influence of his architectural knowledge, in which figures and architecture were used, and extraordinary architectural perspectives can be seen. The painting of castles with a bird's eye view, figures, pyramid landscapes, interior spaces made of bricks and tiles, series of walls are parts of the paintings of this period (*En-el Hak*, n.d.). The artist has placed geometric shapes such as pyramids, cones, and cubes next to objects such as tables and chairs in the interior spaces of the castles, which are built with bricks or tiles, all of which are in a strange landscape (*Erol Akyavas*, n.d.). He exaggerated the perspective in his collection of rooms, divided the canvases into geometric areas, and introduced brick walls, cubes, pyramids, and other objects. The aerial view of the geometrical castles is reminiscent of Ottoman art, especially of the 16th century (*Bisar, Dostoglu & Haldun*, 2007). Erol Akyavaş based some of his works on miniatures attributed to Matrakchi Nasuh⁴ in the 16th

century. Using modern geometric language, Akyavaş recreates the stylized realism of Ottoman miniatures and transforms urban constructions into a labyrinth using different perspectives, and reinterprets Nusuh miniatures with a fresh and original insight (*A Selection from the Collection*, n.d.). The arc of the architectural background enabled him to master the relational aspects of the space and create a visual space in a surreal space (*Erol Akyavas*, n.d.). Castles, surrounded by walls, are a symbol of the transition between the part and the whole, the soul and the outside world. The units and their components correspond to the deep and inner meaning of existence (*Erol Akyavas: Aşkın Yolu Üzerinde Bir Eşsiz Sır*,

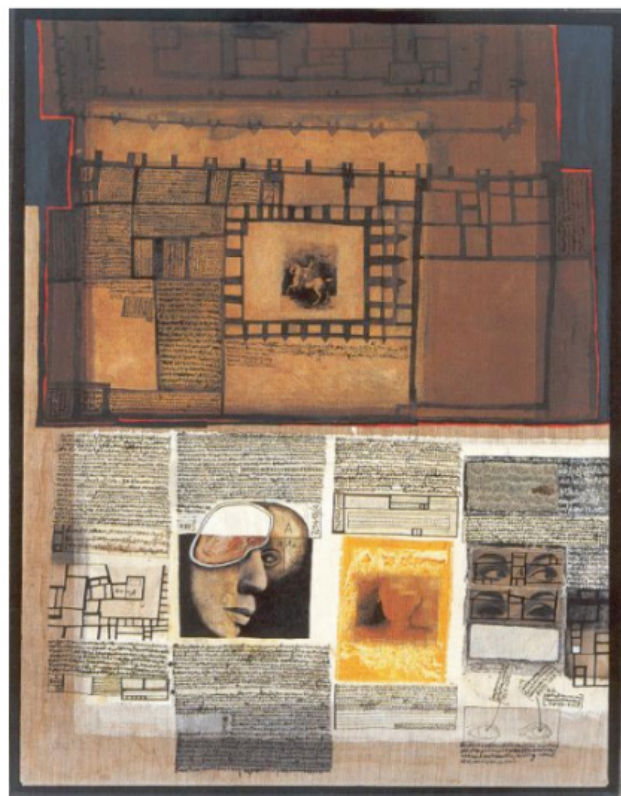


Fig. 6. Erol Akyavaş, the memories. 1966. Acrylic on canvas. 20 x 90 m. Source: ALAKUŞ, 2011, 414.

n.d.). He creates a desirable spatial geometry to show a structure from different views simultaneously, that extends from one circle to another (*Digler & Soyulu*, 2020, 101). The unity of each stage is his concern for the essence of things. This is why the elements in his paintings appear as symbols - Platonic and not descriptive. These symbols or motifs are often adapted from Ottoman art, especially Ottoman calligraphy and miniatures. In 1979, he used abstract calligraphy with the help of architecture in his paintings, and his interest in the history of Islam appeared in his works in an abstract form (*Bisar, Dostoglu & Haldun*, 2007, 12). Akyavaş states in one of his interviews: I believe the way to becoming global is through being local. There is no tree without roots. To progress, one should avoid stereotypes that do not lead to results. The artist should not be stuck between formalist patterns; I don't have any problem with creating (*Durgun*, 2000, 225). In the two paintings, "Sandali Aql" and "Zandan Zehn" which contain symbols and inscriptions made in 1972

and 1974, his unconscious findings and his relationship with surrealism are continued. It can also be said that Akyavaş's interest in miniature art began from these paintings (Süreyya, 2013). At the end of the 1970s, geometric surfaces with metaphysical references appear in his paintings, which are similar to labyrinths. The labyrinth, both as a form and as a concept, is embedded in his works and has diversified over time. Labyrinths of the early 1970s architectural lines tend inwards (Istanbul modern, n.d.). He produced severed heads in the 1970s and 1980s, in some cases facing each other, which often protruded alone from the right or left side of the canvas. These heads, in which bones and teeth are replaced by skin, create a strange atmosphere (Erol Akyavaş - Retrospektif, n.d.). "Bird's Eye Castle", which Akyavaş started in the 70s, is in a way the beginning of his return to his roots. In this collection, the character of the architecture is mixed with the wall paintings of the 16th century. Castles reappear in a very different form after the 1980s (Inankur, 2007). In this decade as well, in the collection of Akyavaş's calligraphic works, there is no registered calligraphic work, and as in the previous periods, he periodically used the visual experiences of this decade in calligraphic works.

- Decade 1980

The Welfare Party which formed between 1983-1996 decades was among the other Turkish political parties that emerged from the national movement. This party, which intended to expand its social base beyond the Islamic masses, decided to support the ideology of secularism with a different interpretation from Kemalism (Falah, 2011, 118). In these social and political conditions, in the 1980s, Erol Akyavaş turned to legendary stories that had not been seen in Turkish painting until that day and made the history of Islam the main subject of his painting. Historical stories, which Erol Akyavaş visualized on large canvases in this decade, take an abstract form that requires the use of a broad and universal language behind these works. Individual and cultural participation begins by

seeing historical and legendary stories, there is a desire to achieve deep meanings, feelings and beliefs, and universal unity. In this context by freeing from facts, we no longer see castle walls, body parts, instruments of terror and power, but we understand words, sounds, and signs.

A few scratches, traces, tangles, folds in a space of eternity expressed by a letter or a few colors in a colorful space that determines the world's time and made it very abstract and simple (Erol Akyavaş: Aşkın Yolu Üzerinde Bir Eşsiz Sır, n.d.). He uses symbols, signs, and writings belonging to religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the designs of the late 1980s with an emphasis on science and belief, which is completely bold in terms of technique and understanding (En-el Hak, n.d.). His paintings before the 1980s have something in common with Francis Bacon, albeit with a very different understanding of form and spatial arrangement. The space in the works of Francis Bacon somehow reveals the desire and terror of the body in its tension, with a very different understanding of form and spatial arrangement.

In the same way, in Erol Akyavaş's works, space and body are the places where the flow of history is encoded. Even if the space is empty, with body movements, desires and fears are formed in our perception (Antikalar, n.d.). Some of the works in this decade are printed on marble and handmade papers. He interprets and draws the symbols of Islamic religion in the works of "Miraj Nameh", "Mansoor Hallaj", "W", "L and A" (Fig. 7), and "Kaaba" and even makes his compositions based on these symbols (Erol Akyavaş: Aşkın Yolu Üzerinde Bir Eşsiz Sır, n.d.).

In this decade, Akiwash broke away from the implementation of hard geometry to show the same structure from different perspectives while simultaneously focusing on the fluidity of space-time. The background is often filled with topographical elements of buildings and cities, architectural elements, fingerprints, hand prints, and broken bones (Digler & Soylu, 2020, 104). In this decade, there is

no insistence on correct writing in the way that was used in traditional calligraphy, and calligraphy is accompanied by an abstract and symbolic style along with old lines. Color drops and spots that continue the abstract expressionism style are placed in the spaces of some works. Islamic geometric motifs; Iranian Islamic architectural patterns are placed as textures and patterns in a part of the context in addition to preserving their decorative use. Akyavaş uses his unique religious interpretation with modern painting technique and texture with a different combination, which we can call both expressionist and tachist (Erol Akyavaş: *Aşkın Yolu Üzerinde Bir Eşsiz Sır*, n.d.). Akyavaş's complete orientation towards Islamic and mystical values and his acceptance of the arts, which are the heritage of tradition, determined the development of his paintings, especially after 1980. However, Akyavaş's relationship with Islamic arts has existed since the beginning of his artistic life. The main motivation that strengthens and develops Akyavaş's connection with Islamic arts and directs his use of these arts is his deep-rooted relationship with mysticism (Süreyya, 2013). Akyavaş revealed the sensitivity of Muslims more decisively and placed



Fig. 7. Erol Akyavaş, L. A, acrylic on canvas, 152x127 cm, 1992. Source: Yetgin, 2013, 100.

himself in the main center of identity and tradition in relation to Turkish painting at the end of the 80s (Izleri, 2000). Mansoor Hallaj's collection, which started in 1987, is the most interesting collection of Akyavaş. The tragic execution of Hallaj in AH is the main subject of this collection. In this collection, three-dimensional surfaces like prisms before the 1980s have been transformed into simple two-dimensional surfaces, and he makes more use of the circle shape that he used in his previous works. It can be said that the points and circles used by the artist in this collection have found their plastic effect with the explanations of Hallaj. According to Hallaj: Know that all the letters of the word are in the word. The letters in the word are the letters in the alphabet and the alphabet is in the dot. The point is above all these. The point exists by itself, the letters are all sciences, and all are based on it. This definition of the point gives us information about the uniqueness and power of the point. He interprets the circle as a source of pure knowledge (Yetgin, 2013, 67). He creates a new context of form and meaning in this collection of calligraphy forms and signs taken from religious books. In the center of the works of this collection, which are executed both on canvas and paper, is the letter "Wow" which is the symbol of God. Old lines and religious symbols are combined with masses of color that have appeared in Akyavaş's paintings since the 1970s. They take geometric shapes such as circles, squares, and rectangles (Erol Akyavaş - *Retrospektif*, n.d.). The sun, heat, blood, spiral lines and illegible signs, fear, and eternity, follow the story of Hallaj's life and the narration of his faith. In Islamic mysticism, the letter W (Vav) symbolizes the relationship between the creator and the created. In the story of Hallaj, unity and plurality are questioned. The concepts of inside-out side, existence-nonexistence, and as a result, the symbols of the Sufi world in which the artist lives, are reflected in this collection (A Selection from the Collection, n.d.). Akyavaş turned to abstraction again with the "Kaaba" series, which he presented the first examples of in 1989. He has

collected images of miniatures and religious books in the “Farman” collection. He engraves various signs on these works and puts them together. Since the 1990s, the engraving technique appears on the surface of many of this artist’s works. Akyavaş created a series of lithographs about the Ascension event, which is interpreted as the ascension of the Prophet to the heavens, in 1987 in Michel Kasse’s workshop in Paris (Erol Akyavaş - Retrospektif, n.d.). In terms of subject matter, this collection is the most meaningful work after the Karbala series. For him, ascension is a wonderful event and can be done for a lifetime. There are a total of eight works in this collection. Six of them contain figurative images, while the other two contain subjects and symbols that are devoid of figures and create a sense of emptiness in the viewer. The works of this collection have an eclectic structure that brings together many symbols and collages that have been transferred from miniature art, according to the events that happened in the ascension of the Prophet (Yetgin, 2013, 70) (Fig. 8). Akyavaş has carved symbols on plexiglass panels in the work “Fey Ma Fey” which was part of the second Istanbul Biennial in 1989 as part of the 2nd Istanbul Biennial under the title of contemporary art in a traditional environment that refers to the history of Aya Irene, which represents three monotheistic religions. Akyavaş points to religious and cultural unity by putting these symbols together in a single place. The fourth tablet located in front of these three tablets and with the word God on makes a person think that by melting in the presence of God, according to the Sufi belief, he reached the essence and with love for God reaches the divine truth. This work takes its name from Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi’s “Fieh Ma Fieh”, he gives light and surface with the phrase “what is inside” while referring to the issue of reaching the essence (Erol Akyavaş - Retrospektif, n.d.). The letters in these works seek to attract attention and point to symbolic values and meanings instead of merely physical attention to the shape of existing elements.

- Decade 1990

In this decade, the Gülen movement has gained a special place in the situation in Turkey, the goal and position of this movement are to join the modern world by reconciling modern and traditional values, which believe that the Turkish political system put too much on secularism and modernization with Western style, not modernization based on the model of modern Islam (Nawakhti Moghadam, 2016). Akyavaş’s paintings in this period remained free from representational content and went towards light and color (En-el Hak, n.d.). He questions and interprets the concept of “being” in his paintings. Existence and unity are now calligraphy for him. In his works are depicted images such as Indian Gods, magical symbols carved by Peruvian natives on rocks, Kabbalistic¹ symbols of Jews, works from Spain’s Alhambra Palace, which represents Islamic-Moorish² art, and the labyrinth of Amiens Cathedral in France (Erol Akyavaş: Aşkın Yolu Üzerinde Bir Eşsiz Sır, n.d.). Symbolism in the paintings of this decade reveals the position and uniqueness of the person in the context of space with a lyrical expression and expresses the problem of existence with images that have become abstract spirituality without place and time (Fig.9) (Erol Akyavaş - Retrospektif, n.d.).

1. Kabbalah;

2. Moors: Moors or Moros in Spanish were called Spanish Muslims who had an Arab-Spanish-Berber race and today live mainly in Northwest Africa.



Fig. 8. Erol Akyavaş, Fey Ma Fey, bright transparent blocks on an iron base, gold, plexiglass, 130x100x60 cm, 1986. Source: Yetgin, 2013, 71.

Akyavaş assembles and reinterprets every image and sign that he has brought to the painting surface, dividing the painting surface into parts, burying miniature paintings and images collected from religious books under the paint plastered on the canvas. He uses in his works the pure color masses, which are reminiscent of the works he did in the early 1950s. There is a simple use of images, patterns, and colors (Erol Akyavaş - Retrospektif, n.d.). The images in Akyavaş's paintings in the last years of his life are much simpler and monochromatic, the writings are reduced, and labyrinth and circular shapes appear. It seems that these paintings are the last points of his inner adventure, most completely. However, it is impossible not to see the connection between Akyavaş's first works and his last works. As he said, from the beginning, there has not been much difference in the main attitude in his artistic life. There are certain periods in his art, when a new concern, a new problem begins. These may differ from each other in form, but their content and resources do not differ. All these paintings became the sphere in which his inner world was formed and where he analyzed and answered the questions he asked himself throughout his life, which originated in his Islamic tradition, art, and culture (Inankur, 2007). Akyavaş created a series of paintings that were directly related to writing between 1990 and 1992. Like L A (Fig. 7). Akiyawash's trend for calligraphy has much in common with contemporary artists Georges Mathieu, Clifford Steele, Mark Tobey, and Cy-Twombly. The intertwined letters in this collection show the most symbolic expression of desire in painting. The letters that bend over their masses, complement each other and they leave significant effects on the surface with this integration. Although they do not say anything, strongly reflect the movement of love (Yetgin, 2013, 99). Different combinations of Piramoz Kufi script and Tholt in Big dong inside different geometric spaces on handmade paper or marble along with lines written in small dang such as Nastaliq, Tholt, Naskh, and calligraphy in an abstract and symbolic style

are visible in the works of this decade. The lines are written even reversed and mirrored in a tiny dong in different directions.

Conclusion

Akyavaş, as an artist of a country where East and West live in the same geography, presents a valuable perspective of 40 years in his works. It uses wide cultural accumulations, from calligraphy to various religious arts, to reach different compositions. His works show that although he was formed under the influence of modern Western art, he also benefited from local culture and traditions, the social and political situation prevailing in Turkey, and the simultaneous experience of East and West by interpreting visual elements with a wide variety, has done without trying to combine it. The result of secular thought and the increase of western views in Turkey in the 1950s are depicted in Akyavaş's works as universal symbols and letters. The way non-specific oriental calligraphy is mixed with international language and combines western and eastern art and concepts with its unique imaginary elements and brings abstract art to Turkish art. The body-oriented expression of women is recorded in his works in the 1960s, and the idea that the female body is the source of life continues as an unchanging metaphor in Akyavaş's paintings. Castles with a bird's eye view, figures, pyramid views, and interior spaces made of bricks and tiles and a series of walls fill the space of his works in the 1970s. The understanding of western perceptions and passing over the art of the



Fig. 9. Erol Akyavaş, Untitled, acrylic on canvas, 1996, 91x121.5 cm. /Source: <https://www.galerinevistanbul.com>

past can be seen in Akyavaş's works of this decade. The social movement that Turkey is affected by in this decade is the re-creation of the relationship between the state and religion and the emphasis on democracy and Sufism, which is ongoing in the historical context of Turkey as a huge part of the Islamic world. The trend toward light and color along with a variety of Arabic lines in the dongs and different directions along with images such as Indian Gods, the magical signs carved by Peruvian natives on the rocks, and Labyrinth of Amiens Cathedral, France, and other visual elements of the different decades are depicted in the artistic experiences of Akiyawash in the 1990s. Although Akyavaş was influenced by the forms of calligraphy, he was more interested in the meanings attributed to letters, words, and the numerical values of the letters that make up these words, and he used them to emphasize the esoteric aspect of his painting. In the use of letters in painting, he was not bound by the principles of orthography, but the line element is still clear and legible in his works, and the proportions are respected, and it can be recovered from the modern appearance of the mystical concepts that originate from the Sufi artist's attention. The deep philosophy of his works makes Akyavaş unique, as in his well-written paintings, not only Islamic art but also his thought can be felt. Considering the social and political developments of Turkey and his contemporaneity with Gülen, his thought can be considered influenced by the Hizmat movement as it is in the direction of reconciling tradition and modernity as well as re-creating the relationship between the West and Islam and Sufism, which is ongoing in Turkey's historical context. The movement that we are facing in the 1980s is not only the reconciliation of tradition, modernity, dialogue between religions, Sufism and looking at the "other", Western thought and Turkey's confrontation with the West since the time of the Ottoman Empire has caused the influence of these thoughts. Akyavaş began to produce influential Sufi paintings in this decade and

refers to Islam, especially the philosophy of Sufism. From this period, he adapted the images and symbols of mysticism to contemporary art and used the events of Islamic history and Islamic concepts in an abstract form in his paintings. Akyavaş's painting emphasizes behind the scenes by using symbols of Sufism. It can be said that the works of each period of the artist are a reflection of the culture ruling modern Turkish society by looking at Akyavaş's collection of works.

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Endnote

1. A title that was generally applied to any anti-Ottoman anti-tyranny political movement in the 19th century, and especially to the movement of the opponents of Sultan Abdul Hamid II inside and outside the territory of the Ottoman Empire. This intellectual movement, with the motto and goal of reforming the administrative structure, defending freedom and equality, and dismantling tyranny, has influenced the political, social, and cultural life of the Ottoman government for more than half a century (1860-1919) with ups and downs, and it has played an important role in its developments - both positive and negative
2. Said Nursî (born 1876 - died 1960) is one of the pioneers of modern Islamic thought.
3. Yunus Emre (?- 848) was considered one of the Boli people, one of the mystics, and one of the people of God in Anatolia. Yunus uses the simple Turkish language of the people, even though he was illiterate, he has Sufi prayers and mystical theology.
4. Fethullah Gülen: speaker, writer, and teacher of moral sciences and theology from Turkey.
5. Nasuh Matrakçı is during the reign of Sultan Selim and Sultan Suleiman. He has been known as a mathematician, historian, and writer who also had a long experience in calligraphy and painting. Nusuh Effendi (Mutaraqchi) was one of Sultan Suleiman's companions on his journey to the western part of Iran (Azerbaijan and Ajam Iraq) and Arab Iraq in the 16th century. While presenting a report of this campaign, he depicted most of the houses along the path of the Ottoman army. His work is the description of the travel destinations of the Iraqi sultan Suleiman Khan, which Mataraqchi presented in the form of a part of his book entitled Suleimanneh, a book about the events of the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent.

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