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184 Three Anonymous Istanbul Views from the Early Nineteenth Century

K. Mehmet Kentel

In 2018, three anonymous and hitherto unpublished, unexhibited drawings of Istanbul by the same hand, previously part of Dr. Müfid Ekdal's collection, were donated to the Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation by his son Oral Ekdal, upon Dr. Ekdal's passing. One of them, a 360-degree, three-and-a-half-meter-long panorama, inspired researchers and curators working at the Istanbul Research Institute and Pera Museum to work on an exhibition on the history of Istanbul panoramas. Four years after preparations began, *On the Spot: Panoramic Gaze on Istanbul, a History*, curated by Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, K. Mehmet Kentel, and M. Baha Tanman, opened on October 26, 2023, at the Pera Museum, and greets its visitors with the aforementioned panorama. While the exhibition and its accompanying catalog explore various facets of Istanbul's panoramic imaginaries through the centuries and firmly locate Istanbul as a crucial *spot* within the global history of panoramas,¹ this short piece aims to briefly introduce these three recent

additions to the Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation collections to the scholarly community.²

The most striking of the three donated works is undoubtedly the panorama drafted from the Galata Tower (fig. 1). According to Ekdal's note posted on the back of the painting's frame (fig. 2), the work was drawn by one of the French engineers whom Selim III (r. 1761–1808) had invited to Istanbul. It then traveled to the Vatican in the hands of a cardinal, and from there to the seaside mansion of Mahmud Nedim Pasha, a late Ottoman statesman, in Vaniköy, from where it was acquired by Ekdal.

The genealogy of the work given by Ekdal is difficult to prove, except the dating he suggests. The built environment visible in the picture allows us, as M. Baha Tanman has shown in his detailed analysis for the exhibition,³ to date it to the time of Selim III. However, the precise date should be after 1805, and not 1793–1795 as stated by Ekdal in the note, as the Üsküdar Selimiye Mosque, which was completed in 1805, is shown in the painting, while the dome of Arslanhane, demolished in 1804 and located to the east of Hagia Sophia, is not.

The rest of the provenance provided by Ekdal also seems to be based on conjecture rather than on actual archival information, as far as we have been able to corroborate. The fact that Ekdal did not publish anything about the work(s), perhaps dictated by the condition imposed by the previous owner not to photograph the paintings, makes it virtually impossible to verify his short text posted on the back of the frame.

The panorama accurately portrays the city's prominent landmarks, but the residential structures are mostly represented with standard depictions without much differentiation. The structures closest to the vantage point of the Galata Tower are an exception, as they are drawn in much more detail.⁴ On the right and left lower edges of the painting, parts of the Yazıcı Mehmed Efendi (Müeyyezade) Bathhouse are depicted, which present the most vivid embodiment of the panorama character of the drawing, two sides of which could follow each other seamlessly in an imagined cylindrical surface.

Almost contemporaneous with Henry Aston Barker's Panorama of Constantinople, the first known 360-degree panorama of Istanbul, it is not known whether Ekdal's panorama was a pre-

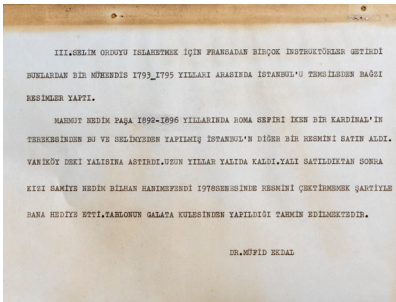


Figure 1: Istanbul panorama from the Galata Tower. Anonymous. After 1805. Ink and watercolor on paper, 40 x 350 cm. Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation Orientalist Paintings Collection, inv. 280.

Figure 2: Note by Müfid Ekdal posted on the back of fig. 1: "Selim III brought many instructors from France to reform the army. An engineer from this group made some paintings of Istanbul in 1793–1795.

While serving as the Ottoman ambassador in Rome, Mahmud Nedim Pasha bought this painting along with another view of Istanbul made from Selimiye, from a cardinal's estate. He hung it in his seaside mansion in Vaniköy. It remained there for a long period. When the mansion was sold, his daughter Mrs. Samiye Nedim Bilhan gifted the painting to me in 1978, on the sole condition that I would not take a picture of it. It is believed that the painting was made from the Galata Tower."

1 Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, K. Mehmet Kentel, M. Baha Tanman, eds., *Tam Yerinden: İstanbul'a Panoramik Bakışın Tarihi / On the Spot: Panoramic Gaze on Istanbul, a History* (Istanbul: Pera Müzesi, 2023).

2 Observations shared in this short piece are a result of the collaboration among the curators and the rest of the exhibition team. All the errors are my own.

3 For a detailed and comparative analysis of the built environment displayed in this anonymous panorama and Barker's *Panorama of Constantinople*, see M. Baha Tanman, "III. Selim Dönemine Ait İki Panoramada İstanbul'un Şehir Dokusu ve Mimari Detayları / Istanbul's Urban Fabric and Architecture in Two Panoramas Dating to the Reign of Selim III," in *Tam Yerinden / On the Spot*, 102–168.

4 Tanman, "Istanbul's Urban Fabric and Architecture," 155.



Figure 3: Panoramic view of Istanbul from the ridges of Kanlıca. Anonymous. Early nineteenth century. Ink and watercolor on paper, 31.5 x 142 cm. Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation Orientalist Paintings Collection, inv. 281.



Figure 4: Panoramic view of Istanbul from Üsküdar. Anonymous. Early nineteenth century. Ink and watercolor on paper, 31.5 x 138.5 cm. Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation Orientalist Paintings Collection, inv. 282.

liminary sketch for a work that was to be reproduced on a giant scale and exhibited in a European capital, as was the case with Barker's work.

While not panoramas in the strict sense, two other drawings presented here could also be treated as part of Istanbul's panoramic visual history, as they employ a wider angle to depict the landscape. The first (fig. 3) appears to have been drawn from the ridges of Kanlıca, locating the two Ottoman castles (Rumeli Hisarı and Anadolu Hisarı) on either side. It shows the strait from north to south, with a mostly barren and scarcely settled landscape. The second is painted from the vantage point of Üsküdar and places the walled city at the center of the background, while displaying a much expansive and much more densely built landscape, from the Rumeli Hisarı on the left to Tophane on the right (fig. 4). In the foreground, Istanbulites are shown engaging in recreational activities by the Üsküdar seaside. These are the most vividly displayed humans in all three paintings. The ox-drawn wagon (*koçu arabası*) carrying seven elite Ottoman women located at the very center was a frequently copied motif in orientalist representations of Istanbul's social and topographical scenery from the eighteenth century onwards.

All three works present a draft quality too, which invites further research into connections with other, perhaps more famous and/or finished paintings of Istanbul's landscape in the nineteenth century.

Before being put on display for the *On the Spot* exhibition, the panorama and the two other views went under careful restoration, which also revealed new information regarding their materiality. These findings suggest that the sheets of paper that make up the panorama's panel were specially combined with fine workmanship. Pinholes at the four corners of the work indicate that it was attached to a surface during or after its construction. Microscopic examination reveals that at least three tones of gray ink or watercolor were used in this and the other landscape paintings in the series; that the colors were applied with a brush by darkening the painted area layer by layer; that there is paint accumulation on the roof hatchings; and that the contours were drawn with a pointed pen. The examination of the other two views parallels these findings and provides further proof that they were made by the same artist.

We hope that this brief description of the three views from the early nineteenth century, together with the

Pera Museum exhibition *On the Spot* where they are currently on display until March 26, 2024, will motivate other researchers to explore them in more detail. Their material history, uncertain origins, and built and natural environments of Istanbul that they represent, as well as their place within the city's visual history, offer numerous research topics for investigation.

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