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Contemporary Miniature Paintings**

**Filiz Adıgüzel Toprak
Assistant Professor
Department of Traditional Turkish Arts
Faculty of Fine Arts
Dokuz Eylül University
Turkey**

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Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr URL:
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Continuity of Tradition in Taner Alakuş's Contemporary Miniature Paintings

Filiz Adigüzel Toprak
Assistant Professor
Department of Traditional Turkish Arts
Faculty of Fine Arts
Dokuz Eylül University
Turkey

Abstract

The art of Ottoman miniature painting, which is the art of book illustration, has a rooted artistic tradition approved within the Islamic art. Ottoman miniature paintings, which visualize the text they are involved, were typically produced for the ruling elite. Throughout its history, different artistic genres were flourished among court artists and therefore a unique taste had been developed identifying a distinctive character.

Today's Turkish miniature paintings exhibit diverse and individual styles, but the traditional artistic canons are still valid. Inspired by contemporary materials and techniques, artists continue to follow the elements of stylistic vocabulary of traditional Ottoman art. However, the demands of the art market/collectors and the popular Western artistic modes are critical factors that impose on the production of artists. It is difficult preserving the traditional artistic canons as well as producing original artworks. In this sense, Taner Alakuş, a renowned contemporary miniature painting artist, is one of the representatives of young generation in Turkey. His artworks reflect a genre that combines tradition and individuality.

In this paper, it is intended to introduce the works of Taner Alakuş through a certain classification. Thus, the influence of traditional artistic canons and the ways he reinterprets them are aimed to be contextualized.

Keywords: Taner Alakuş, Ottoman, Miniature Painting, Traditional Arts.

Introduction: A Brief History of Ottoman Miniature Painting

Miniature painting was an art form in the Ottoman Empire, which was a part of Ottoman book arts, together with illumination (*tezhip*), calligraphy (*hat*), marbling paper (*ebru*), and bookbinding (*cild*). In Ottoman Turkish, the words *taswir* or *nakish* were used to define the art of miniature painting. The ateliers that the artists (*nakkash*) worked in were called as *Nakkashane*. The miniature paintings were not created entirely by one person, the head painter designed the composition and the whole book was illustrated collectively by a group of *nakkashes*. The art of Ottoman miniature painting, which is the art of book illustration, has a rooted artistic tradition in the Islamic world. Ottoman miniature paintings, which visualize the text they are involved, were typically produced for the ruling elite. Throughout its history, different artistic genres were flourished among court artists and therefore a unique taste had been developed identifying a distinctive character.

The art of Ottoman miniature painting is broadly categorized under the titles of “Early Period, Classical Period and Westernization Period”. The art patronage by the sultans and the production of illustrated manuscripts by Ottoman artists began in the years following the conquest of Istanbul in 1453. It is only after the second half of 15th century. under the reign of Sultan Mehmed II, the art of book illustration gained importance. During the early period, considerable amount of manuscripts were illustrated with the works of miniature painters from Shiraz and Baghdad employed at the court ateliers. However, few number of paintings displayed a search for a unique Ottoman style in themes and artistic forms. In this period, Mehmed II was a cultured man of wide interests and he invited European artists to his court in Istanbul. Nakkas Sinan Bey and Siblizade Ahmed, the painters who were influenced by the European artists worked at the court during Mehmed II’s reign, emerged as the representatives of the newly flourishing genres.¹

During the reigns of the following sultans and the first two decades of the reign of Sultan Süleyman I (1520-1566), popular literary works were frequently illustrated. Through this period of progress, Matrakci Nasuh, one of the most important artists of 16th century, was charged by Süleyman I to write historical works illustrated with city views and landscapes². His miniature paintings were a completely new Ottoman innovation with no precedent in the Islamic world. He never included human figures in his paintings as he used a unique perception and put forward the topographic details of a landscape.³ The reigns of Sultan Selim II (1566-1574) and Sultan Murad III (1574-1595) are

¹ Cagman, F. 2003. Ottoman Miniature Painting. In *Ottoman Civilization 2*, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture, Istanbul. p. 893; And, M. 2004. *Osmanlı Tasvir Sanatları-1 (Ottoman Depiction Art-1)*. Türkiye İş Bankası Yayınları, İstanbul, pp. 34-59.

² For detailed information about Matrakçı Nasuh’s artworks: Yurdaydın, H. G. 1976. *Matrakçı, Nasuhü’s Silahi Beyan-ı Menazil -i Sefer-i Irakeyn (Matrakçı, Nasuhü’s Weapons Declaration Menazil-i-Sefer-i Irakeyn)*. Türk Tarih Kurumu Yay., Ankara; Atasoy, N. 2015. *Matrakçı Nasuh ve Menazilnamesi (Fenestration and Menaziln AMAS)*. Masa, İstanbul.

³ Cagman, Ottoman Miniature Painting, p. 897.

known as the high point of miniature painting art which was initially marked by the work of painter Nakkaş Osman. The artistic features of his time such as the composition setting, figures, colours and etc. represent the formulation of the classical period in Ottoman miniature painting. The naive depictions show that the atelier of Nakkaş Osman did not attempt to emphasize depth and/or dimensions of nature and architectural space.⁴

The end of 16th and the beginning of 17th century indicates a fruitful period for manuscript illustration with the original works of the painter Nakkaş Nakşi. In his paintings, evocation of the sense of spatial depth, use of perspective and deformation of human figures' proportions were the most significant features.⁵ The reign of Sultan Ahmed III (1703-1730), which later came to be known as the Tulip Era, was the time of the painter Nakkaş Levni. The new style created by Levni within the miniature painting tradition at a time when the westernisation of Ottoman art was beginning, reflect changing perceptions in the royal court and imperial capital. At Nakkaş Levni's time, colour, perspective and naturalistic elements were added to the stylistic vocabulary of art Ottoman miniature painting. Other renowned artists such as Abdullah Buhari and his contemporaries could not resist the strong influences coming from the West and so that the traditional miniature painting entered a new period.⁶ The traditional modes and expressions used in Ottoman miniature paintings were replaced with landscape paintings used in architecture. This period is known as the gate opening to the European painting in respect of modality, materials and western techniques.

Following the time of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the art of miniature painting, which was almost disappeared, was revived with essential individual endeavours of Prof. Dr. Suheyl Ünver and his atelier.⁷ Identification of the stylistic features, techniques and materials of Ottoman miniature paintings was achieved by reproductions. Throughout the time that all these reviving activities were made, the art of contemporary Turkish miniature painting has reached a stage where certain individual styles are visible. Today, as though they do not follow a uniform syllabus, fine art faculties, private art ateliers and etc. are the education and production centres of miniature paintings. Nevertheless, this does not mean that each artistic event and/or artistic production related with contemporary Turkish miniature painting is accurate in terms of traditional style and its aesthetics. Certainly, there are successful miniature painting artists whom intend to continue traditional artistic canons with a new way of looking. Inspired by contemporary materials and techniques, these artists still follow the elements of stylistic vocabulary of

⁴ Mahir, B. 2005. *Osmanlı Minyatür Sanatı (Ottoman miniature art)*. Kabalıcı, İstanbul. p. 117.

⁵ Bağcı, S., Çağman, F., Renda, G., and Tanındı, Z. 2006. *Osmanlı Resim Sanatı (Ottoman Painting)*. T. C. Kültür Bak. Yay., İstanbul. pp. 208-210.

⁶ İrepoğlu, G. 1999. *Levni Nakış Şiir Renk (Levni Embroidery Color Poetry)*. Kültür Bak. Yay., İstanbul. pp. 15-20.

⁷ For detailed information about Prof. Dr. A. Süheyl Ünver's works and contribution to Turkish arts: Mesara, G. Ü., and İrteş, S. 2016. *Türk Tezyini Sanatlarında A. Süheyl Ünver ve Yeni Terkipleri (Turkish Decorative Arts in Suhayl Ünver and new compositions of A.)*. Nakkaş Tezyini Sanatlar Merkezi, İstanbul. pp. 11-25.

traditional Ottoman art. In this sense, Taner Alakuş, a renowned contemporary miniature painting artist, is one of the representatives of young generation in Turkey. His artworks reflect a genre that combines tradition and individuality. Experimenting new materials, themes and application techniques, he focuses on the search for authenticity and strives to find new ways to represent continuity in traditional miniature painting art. In this paper, it is intended to introduce the works of the miniature painting artist Taner Alakuş, through a certain chronology and classification. Thus, the influence of traditional artistic canons and the ways he reinterprets them are aimed to be contextualized.

Taner Alakuş's Short Biography

He was born in 1966 in Ankara, capital of Turkey. Because his father was a soldier, he lived in several cities of Turkey. In 1987, he is graduated from Istanbul Mimar Sinan University, Fine Arts Faculty, Department of Traditional Turkish Arts, Major of Manuscript Illumination and he completed his master's degree at the same faculty. During his university education, he took the courses of manuscript illumination from Dr. Tahsin Aykutağ, and miniature painting courses from Yakup Cem who were both academic artists. During his postgraduate study, he increasingly grew more interest in the art of miniature painting, and after that he continued his researches and artistic practices in the field of miniature painting. In the recent years, he is spending most of his time for education and lecturing as he still conducts miniature painting courses at Mimar Sinan University of Fine Arts and Istanbul Fatih Sultan Mehmed University; and at major art centers of Istanbul such as The Grand National Assembly of Turkey's Classical Turkish Arts Center and ISMEK (Istanbul Municipality Center for Lifelong Learning). Besides, he is the art consultant of Classical Turkish Arts Foundation. Since 2010, he is actively working at his own atelier next to Kariye Museum in Edirnekapi, Istanbul. With his professional artists team Berrin Çakin Güç, Dilek Yerlikaya and Yasemin Akyol, he is teaching miniature painting techniques to groups of students at different levels. "Taner Alakuş Miniature Painting Atelier" is a place where they teach, produce, exhibit and sell works of art (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Taner Alakuş at his atelier in Kariye, İstanbul. (Photograph is used by courtesy of the artist).*



Since his first exhibiton in 1995, he has participated in many mixed exhibitions and opened solo exhibitions. In 1995, 2003 and 2005, he received the first prize in the Art of Miniature Painting at the Turkish Arts Competition organized by the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture. With Ms. Ceylan Harmanci, his art consultant and curator, they organize art events at the atelier such as artists' gatherings and open international miniature painting exhibitons in the name of "Taner Alakus Miniature Painting Atelier".

In Taner Alakuş's view, miniature paintings are not just part of history as documentary paintings placed in manuscripts. He thinks that the tradition of miniature painting must be preserved both in theory and practice whereas new and individual styles are being experienced in a free workshop atmosphere.

The Relationship of Tradition and Individuality in Taner Alakuş's Miniature Paintings

In pursuit of individuality, Taner Alakuş blends the classical essence of traditional arts with his new and alternative ways of seeing the world he depicts. His ideas about the visual narration (subject/theme), the composition, the form of human and animal figures, the use of colour and materials totally represent the ingredients for his unique style. As Taner Alakuş's university education was based on the composition and application of traditional techniques and themes, it is natural to see the classical composition settings and the tendency for ultimate elaboration. His miniature paintings can be classified in three groups: "Portraits and Single Figures"; "Narrative Paintings"; "Landscapes and Cityscapes".

In his portraits and single figures, he reforms the anatomy and poses of traditional Ottoman figures while adding new visual practices. In the classical Ottoman portraiture tradition, there are certain types of anatomy/poses and ways of sitting that are repeated as prototypes inherited from ancient Turkic

civilizations.⁸ Besides, the garments and headgears of the sultans are depicted realistically in respect of their shapes, colours and designs. All the sultans were depicted in $\frac{3}{4}$ profiles and they were rarely portrayed in bust format.⁹ In Taner Alakuş's sultan portraits, there is the feeling of a source of light that is shed on the figure to make it more visible; indeed he uses the bust format unlike the traditional ones (Figure 2). One of the most distinguishing feature of his portraits is his experimentation with the dimensions. In its historical context, a miniature painting is typically designed to be placed in a book. Therefore, despite some exceptions, a miniature painting's dimensions have always been small. On the contrary, Taner Alakuş applies his portraits and single figures on larger dimensions. Especially in his single figures, he uses the background in an unusual way: He places landscapes and city silhouettes within a far perspective and sometimes he collaborates with another watercolour artist for the coloring of the background (Figure 3). His connection with the Ottoman painting tradition in his portraits and single figures can be explained with his adaptation of traditional characters, garments and poses. Even his paintings reflect his unique style, it is possible to see the classical Ottoman figure types. Thus, he still follows the traditional formats, but interprets their usual context.

Figure 2. *From Konstantiniyye to İstanbul, gold, watercolour and acrylic on paper. Watercolour by Kubilay Şenses, 36x27 cm., 2011. (Photograph is used by courtesy of the artist).*



⁸ Özkeçeci, İ. 2006. *Doğu Işığı, VI.-XIII. Yüzyıllarda İslam Sanatı (East Light, VI.-XII. Islamic Art in the Century)*. SanatDizisi, İstanbul. pp. 317-328.

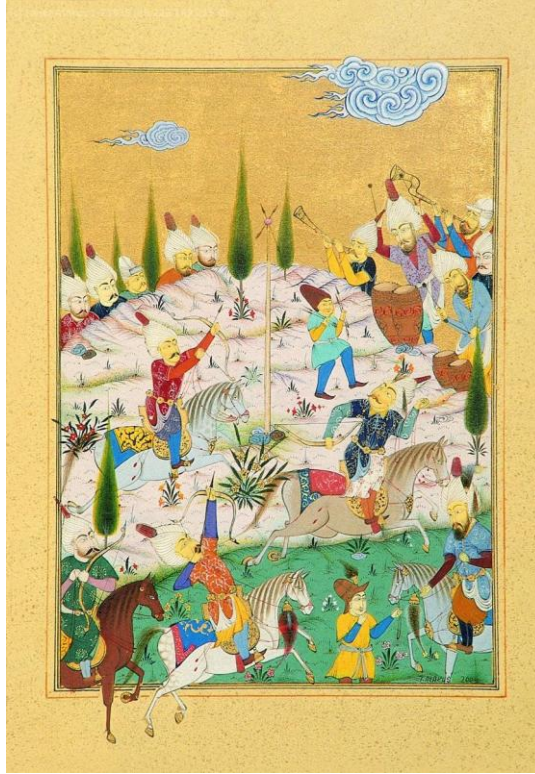
⁹ For more information about the Ottoman portraiture tradition: Çağman, F. 2000. Padişah Portreciliğinin Zirvesi: III. Murad (Summit III portraits of the sultan. Murad), In *Padişahın Portresi (Portrait of Sultan)*. T. İş Bank. Kül. Yay., İstanbul. pp. 208-216.

Figure 3. *The Elderly Janissary*, gold, watercolour and acrylic on paper. Watercolour by Kubilay Şenses, 36x27 cm., 2006. (Photograph is used by courtesy of the artist).



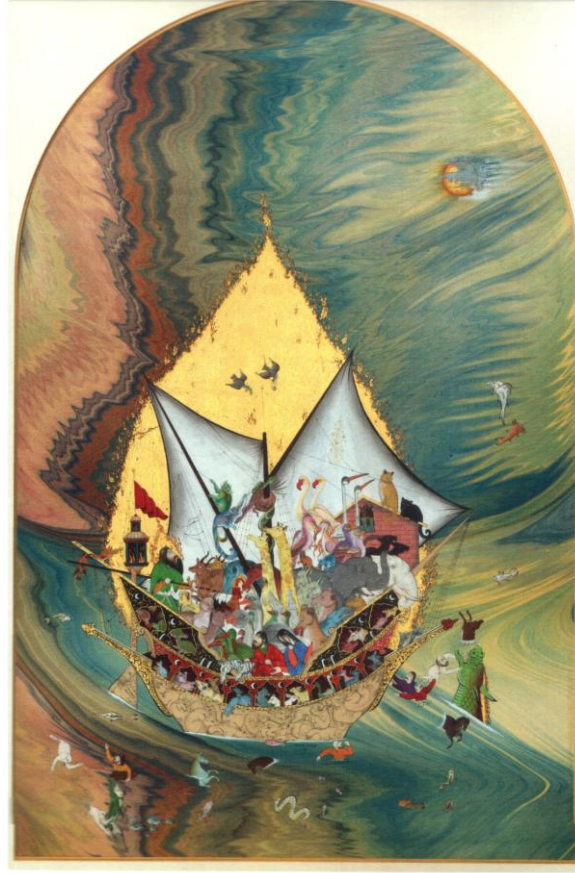
In Taner Alakuş's narrative miniature paintings, one can easily perceive his connection with the traditional styles. His themes are about the daily life of the sultans, the court ceremonies and entertainment scenes at the Ottoman Palace, etc. He usually uses the painting's surface in vertical format as if designing the page of a manuscript which is the traditional way of preparing miniature paintings. In his narrative compositions, the overall hierarchy in organizing the exterior and/or interior spaces can be considered as his connection with traditional styles. In this respect, he tries to equalize the amount of space between the figures, the natural and architectural elements that cover the surface of the painting. He keeps the two-dimensionality of the space and refrains from depicting forms with depth (Figure 4). He also depicts well known subjects such as the *Ship of the Noah*, and uses *ebru* as the background (Figure 5).

Figure 4. *Practice of shooting arrows, gold, watercolour and acrylic on paper, 30x20 cm., 2000. (Photograph is used by courtesy of the artist).*



Unlike the use of central perspective technique that provides the painter to illustrate a theme or depict a landscape in a single determined way, the Ottoman painters used the multiple point of view which gave the painter the opportunity to depict the text in a more detailed way. This is one of the most unique features that Ottoman miniature paintings display in the world of Islamic book arts. Taner Alakuş benefits from this style, and illustrate his narrative paintings with multiple points of view that helps the theme to be comprehensible. In this way it is easy for the audience to comment on what they see and ascribe a meaning.

Figure 5. *The Ship of Noah* gold, watercolour and acrylic on ebru paper. Ebru: Hikmet Barutçugil, 25x214 cm., 1997. (Photograph is used by courtesy of the artist).



Another theme that Taner Alakuş frequently uses is the city of İstanbul, its distinctive religious and historical places. One of them is the Hagia Sophia which is a former Greek Orthodox [Christian patriarchal church](#), later an imperial [mosque](#), and now a museum (Hagia Sophia Museum) in [İstanbul](#). Galata Tower (*Galata Kulesi*) and Maiden's Tower (*Kız Kulesi*) are also his favorite cityscapes (Figure 6). When drawing landscapes or cityscapes, he prefers to compose the painting with several different points of view, which is the most prominent feature of Ottoman miniature painting innovated by Matrakçı Nasuh in 16th century. This is one of his significant attributions to traditional styles and ways of looking. Piling depth planes on top of each other, eliminating three-dimensionality and rendering size independently of distance can be interpreted as the proof of his relation with the traditional visual expression within classical Ottoman miniature painting.

Figure 6. *Galata*, gold, watercolour and acrylic on paper, 40x30 cm., 2009. (Photograph is used by courtesy of the artist).



Conclusion

In many non-Western cultures, to be original with following the paths of traditional forms and styles would be through knowing the tradition itself. Such movements may create new approaches in artistic practice. In the light of a limited number of Taner Alakuş's paintings introduced in this paper, show that the artist's tendency of seeking unique and alternative styles is evident.

Even his themes may differ, the vividness of colours that he uses as the background or on the elements of the composition are typical. His experimentation on sizes of his figures or the size of the entire painting shows his willingness for innovation within limits of traditional modes. In almost every painting he repeatedly composes his joyful and dynamic human figures with elaborate garment and headgear details. On one hand, he uses and benefits from the traditional forms such as the use of natural elements (trees, rocks, clouds, sea waves, etc.); he follows the colour scale and design principles of Ottoman miniature paintings. However, he interprets traditional styles and techniques with an individual approach. While the tradition forms a background for his miniature paintings, he aims to blend the traditional modes with contemporary visual practices without making reproductions. In this

regard, he emerges as an artist who endeavours to maintain the style of Ottoman classical miniature painting, and also intends to improve this art.

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