

ADALYA



SUNA-İNAN KIRAÇ AKDENİZ MEDENİYETLERİ ARAŞTIRMA ENSTİTÜSÜ
SUNA & İNAN KIRAÇ RESEARCH INSTITUTE ON MEDITERRANEAN CIVILIZATIONS

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Naturalistic Painting and Drawing From Life in 13th Century Rum Seljuk Anatolia

Terrance M.P. DUGGAN*

This paper discusses some of the literary references to figurative painting, drawing from life and naturalistic representational painting in 13th century Rum Seljuk Anatolia. Although the works themselves have not survived, the contemporary literary evidence provides us with a clear picture of the status of representational painters at the Rum Seljuk court and the references cited in the paper provide us with an idea of the quantity and quality of this type of artistic output in the Rum Seljuk Sultanate. The frequent occurrence, not only of passing remarks on the lifelike-representational art of the period, but also the use of the imagery of “painter-portrait” as a metaphor for God and Creation in 13th century poetry, provide us with evidence of another face of artistic activity in the Sultanate which has received scant attention due to the loss of this representational art in the course of the ensuing centuries. This literary evidence is conclusive as to the prevalence of these works of drawing from life and painting, not only in respect of eyewitness accounts but also because in terms of poetry, there is no point in a poet using imagery in verse which the audience is not familiar with, thus the parallels drawn between painter, brush and painted work of art and its creator would have no resonance if the audience was not also familiar with life drawing, wall painting, artists and the practice of representational art.

The paper uses one firsthand account by Muhyil-Din ibn Arabi, one second hand account by Shemsed-Din Ahmet Dede Aflaki and quotes from Mevlana Celalad-Din Rumi’s “Mesnevi” to show that realistic representational painting and drawing from life were carried out in 13th century Konya by artists of record and were an accepted and common feature of city life in 13th century Anatolia. So common in fact that Rumi frequently uses the analogy between God and painter, Created world and painted picture in his poetry, for example Mathnawi Book 1, verse 3035, “What else (but good) should the picture think of the painter, since he bestowed thought and knowledge upon it?”¹ Book 1, verse 611, “Before the painter and the brush the picture is helpless like a child in the womb”² Book 2, verse 2537, “A painter made two kinds of pictures - beautiful pictures and pictures

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¹ R.A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawi of Jalalud'din Rumi* 1 (1934) 165.

² *Ibid.* 35.

devoid of beauty. He painted Joseph and fair-formed houris, he painted afreets and devils. Both kinds of pictures are (evidence of) his mastery: those (ugly ones) are not (evidence of) his ugliness, they are (evidence of) his bounty. He made the ugly of extreme ugliness -it is invested with all (possible) ugliness. In order that the perfection of his skill may be displayed, (and that) the denier of his mastery may be put to shame. And if he cannot make the ugly, he is deficient (in skill); hence He (God) is the Creator of (both) the infidel and the sincere (faithful)"³.

In "Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya" or "The Meccan Revelations" of ibn Arabi, he records his encounter with a Byzantine painter in Seljuk Konya in 1210. Ibn Arabi visited Konya, Sivas and Malatya in a series of visits between 1205 and 1222⁴, each of these cities was both a palace city where the Sultan at times resided and from where the Sultanate was at times ruled from and a center for the Nakkashane or design studios of the Sultanate. The following passage not only shows that naturalistic painting of high quality was practised in Konya but also shows the impact of figures such as ibn Arabi on the artistic community, in respect not of skills but in the matter of the proper artistic imagination to be employed in Rum Seljuk art.

This passage reads⁵: "It is from the Divine Name, The Creator... that there derives the inspiration to painters in bringing beauty and proper balance to their pictures. In this connection I witnessed an amazing thing in Konya in the land of the Rum. There was a certain painter whom we proved and assisted in his art in respect of a proper artistic imagination which he lacked. One day he painted a picture of a partridge and concealed in it was an imperceptible fault. He then brought it to me to test my artistic acumen. He had painted it on a large board, so that its size was true to life. There was in the house a falcon which, when it saw the painting, attacked it, thinking it to be a real partridge with its plumage in full colour. Indeed all present were amazed at the beauty of the picture. The painter, having taken the others into his confidence, asked my opinion on his work. I told him I thought the picture was perfect, but for one small defect. When he asked what it was, I told him that the length of its legs were out of proportion very slightly. Then he came and kissed my hand."

This passage shows the degree of naturalistic realism practised by painters in 13th century Konya. The verbal image of the falcon attacking the painted partridge, if it is a verbal image similar to the Greek and Roman texts describing birds pecking at painted grapes, rather than a factual description of the event, only reinforces the utter verisimilitude with which this painter in Konya practised his art. This pictorial realism is emphasised by the deliberate flaw in the length of the legs of the painted partridge, which not only shows the ability of the painter to make a deliberate flaw as a test piece for ibn Arabi, but also hints at a level of representational skill practised by the artist and a level of pictorial appreciation by the cultured of Konya of a high order. The only way to develop this level of appreciation is by seeing many paintings and comparing them with each other and with the real object.

³ Ibid. 352.

⁴ C. Addas, *The quest for Red Sulphur-the life of ibn Arabi* (1993) 304-307.

⁵ M. Ibn Arabi, *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* 2 (Hicra 1329) 424 quoted by R.W.J. Austin, *Sufis of Andalusia* (1970) 40, 41.

The second example, which concerns life drawing, is presented by Shemsed-Din Ahmed Dede Aflaki (died 1360) in his book "Menakib al Arifin", begun in 1318 at the command of Rumi's grandson Çelibi Amir 'Arif, son of Baha'ud-Din Sultan Weled and completed in 1353, which compiles first hand and second hand accounts pertaining to Mevlana Celalad-Din Rumi and mentioning other 13th century personages together with much background information on the later part of the 13th century. The following passage contains a remarkable account of portraiture and drawing from life in Konya in the second half of the 13th century. The life drawing was carried out by what seems to have been a professional portrait painter, perhaps a court painter and well enough known in court circles for him to be known as the "Aynu'l Devla of Rum". The life drawing was carried out on behalf of the Georgian Princess Tamara, daughter of Queen Rusudan of Georgia (1223-47). Princess Tamara had been married to the Seljuk Sultan Giyathsed-Din Keyhusrev II and was the mother of Sultan Alaad-Din Keykubat II. After Sultan Giyathsed-Din Keyhusrev II's death in 1246 she became the wife of the Regent of Anatolia, Pervane Mu'i-nud-Din Suleyman in 1266.

Aflaki writes⁶: In those days there lived a painter as famous as Mani (the famous painter and founder of Manichaeism (216-77) whose name was often used by Moslem writers as a synonym for a great artist), he would claim that even Mani would fail in competition with his paintings. He was called the Aynu'l Devla of Rum. The lady (Princess Tamara) gave him presents and ordered him to draw a picture of Rumi. She told him that the picture should be as lifelike as possible, so that she might take it with her on her journey (to Kayseri). Aynu'l Devla in the company of some officers went to Rumi and wanted to tell him about the situation, but before he could open his mouth, Rumi said, "If you can draw my picture, it will be a great achievement". The painter brought some paper and turned his face towards Rumi who was standing. The painter, casting a glance at his face, began to draw Rumi's picture and looked at Rumi again but found his face changed. Upon this he drew another picture. When he had finished it he found Rumi's face changed again. He drew 20 pictures one after another, and each time Rumi's face was different. He became astonished, broke his pen, and shouting and crying he bowed down in front of Rumi. Then Rumi uttered the following verses:

Alas I am so colourless and traceless,
 How can I see myself as I am?
 You tell me to reveal my secrets,
 But where is the space and where am I?
 How can my soul settle down?
 When I dwell in such a mobile spirit,
 My sea too has drowned within myself,
 Strange to say what an edgeless sea am I.

⁶ A.S.D. Aflaki, *Menakib al Arifin*, 3/374 quoted by E. Türkmen, *The Essence of Rumi's Mesnevi* (1992) 26, 27.

Aynu'l Devla came out shedding tears. People took the papers (drawings) to the Georgian lady. She took them all and put them in her box. Whenever she desired to see Rumi's face and would try to look at these pictures, Rumi's actual face would appear in front of her and she would feel happy.

From this account recorded by Aflaki it is clear that life drawing was not only practised in 13th century Anatolia but also that its practitioners were skilled and could produce 20 drawings in a single session, showing a remarkable level of concentration. The fact that Aflaki makes no comment on the practise of portrait drawing shows that this was not of itself a remarkable event but rather the inability of the artist to provide an accurate representation for his patron was worth recording. The passage also shows that a portrait painter was so well known or famous at court for his skill in representation that he was known by the nisba "Aynu'l Devla".

Celalad-Din Rumi in his writings draws attention to the danger of mistaking the painting for what is real and by drawing attention to this point shows us that the quality of representational painting was high in 13th century Anatolia. For example, Mathnawi Book 1 verse 1020, "The painting on the wall is like Adam; see from the pictured form what thing is wanting"⁷ Book 1, verse 2766, "If you depict the portrait on the paper as sorrowful, it has no lesson (learns nothing) of sorrow or joy. Its appearance is sorrowful, but it is free of that (sorrow), or its appearance is smiling, but it has no (inward) impression of that joy"⁸ Book 1, verse 2765, "To the picture of a fish, what is the difference between sea and land?"⁹ Book 5, verse 1502, "You were adverting your face from the Painter of the face (God), since you were gaining heart's delight from a (mere) picture"¹⁰.

Other passages in the Mesnevi draw attention to paintings and pictures in houses in Konya, for example, Book 4, verse 2562, "I saw (beautiful) pictures and paintings in the house"¹¹. He also draws attention to some of the motives which lay behind these 13th century naturalistic paintings, Book 4, verse 2881, "Does any painter paint a beautiful picture for the sake of the picture itself, without hope of conferring benefit? Nay, (he paints it) for the sake of guests and young people who by diverting themselves (with it) may be relieved from cares. From his picture (arises) the joy of children and the remembering of departed friends by their friends"¹². Interestingly this "remembering of departed friends by their friends" is precisely the same reason Dede Aflaki gives for Princess Tamara to commission Aynu'l Devla to draw Rumi's portrait. The clear implication is that in 13th century Seljuk Anatolia there were, perhaps many, collections of portrait paintings and drawings¹³.

⁷ Nicholson op. cit. (supra n.1) 57.

⁸ Ibid. 151.

⁹ Ibid. 150.

¹⁰ R.A. Nicholson *The Mathnawi of Jalalud'din Rumi* 3 (1934) 91.

¹¹ R.A. Nicholson *The Mathnawi of Jalalud'din Rumi* 2 (1934) 413.

¹² Nicholson op. cit. (supra n.11) 431.

¹³ Yrd.Doç.Dr. O. Eravşar of Selçuk University Konya has kindly drawn my attention to İbn Bibi's remarks that Princess Tamara was presented with commissioned portraits of 13 marriageable men of the Seljuk court, including 11 members of the Seljuk family to choose a husband from. Once again the accuracy of portraiture in Rum Seljuk Anatolia is shown, as there is no doubt that these 13 portraits were accurate, rather than symbolic portraits and it was upon this basis of looking at portraits that Princess Tamara made her choice of husband.

Conclusions

The subsequent loss of these drawings, panel paintings and wall paintings, (with the exception of the fragments in the bath house at Alara castle and some contemporary Christian wall paintings in Cappadocia), alongside the surviving visual evidence of both paintings on ceramics and manuscript illuminations which employ a non-realistic style for different and valid reasons, should not blind us to the fact that life drawing and naturalistic painting were practised in 13th century Rum Seljuk Anatolia.

The literary evidence is clear, there were numbers of realistic representational painters and artists who painted and drew from life in 13th century Anatolia and their work was widely known amongst the educated and formed an integral part of city life, in the bath house as well as in the home. Portrait drawings were commissioned, collected and kept in safety and a picture of a solitary partridge painted on panel formed a work of art. This predates a realistic painted panel picture of a single bird in western European art by at least 250 years.

The importance of this literary evidence of realistic painting and portraiture in the Rum Seljuk Sultanate for the student of the history of art is clear. At the same time as Cimabue 1240-1302 and his pupil the Florentine Giotto 1276-1337 were laying the foundations of the Italian Renaissance by initial attempts at naturalistic painting, a similar, if not more advanced level of realistic painting and drawing had been reached in 13th century Rum Seljuk Anatolia. Given the trade links between Italy and Seljuk Anatolia, trade treaties with Venice signed in 1207, with Pisa in 1229, with Florence in 1240 and with the Genovese in 1253, and with regular exports including alum, an essential mordant for dyeing cloth unavailable in western Europe and exported from the Sultanate via the port of Antalya, it is even possible that a part of the impetus towards realism in Italian painting came from examples of realistic Seljuk art brought to Italy during the 13th century.

Given the troubles in late 13th century after 1277, and in early 14th century Anatolia under Mongol control, loss of life through famine, wars and rebellions and the loss of wealth, stability and continuity in court life. It is not surprising that this burst of naturalistic art in 13th century Rum Seljuk Anatolia died, but what matters is that it happened. What is perhaps as interesting is that these works of naturalistic painting and drawing preceded the naturalism of the early Italian Renaissance and may have influenced the initial stages of the Italian Renaissance, through works of Seljuk drawing and painting reaching Italy by way of the well established trade links between Rum Seljuk Anatolia and the city states of 13th century Italy.

Özet

13. yüzyıl Rum Selçuklu Anadolu'sunda Naturalist Resim Sanatı

Çalışmada, 13. yüzyıl Rum Selçuklu portre ve naturalist resim sanatıyla ilgili kaynaklara dikkat çekilmektedir. Bu stilde yapılmış resimler günümüze kadar ulaşmadığı için yazar, 13. yüzyılda Konya'daki Selçuklu sarayının portrelerini ve naturalist resimlerini anlatan edebi kaynaklardan yararlanarak konuya açıklık getirmeye çalışmaktadır. Selçuklu sanatının ilgi çekici özelliklerinin yanısıra makalede, Venedik, Floransa, Pisa ve Cenova'yla ticaret ilişkilerinden doğan kültürel etkiden bahsedilmekte; Selçuklu sanatının, Rönesans'ın oluşumuna ve Cimabue (1240-1302), Giotto (1276-1337) gibi Rönesans sanatçılarına katkıda bulunmuş olabileceği öne sürülmektedir.