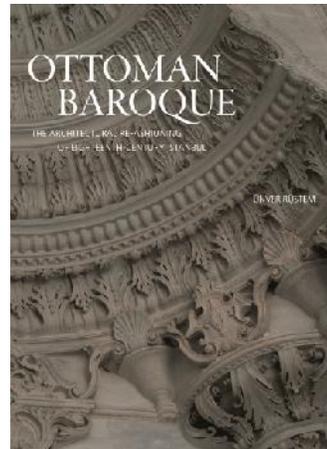


Book Reviews

Ünver Rüstem. *Ottoman Baroque: The Architectural Refashioning of Eighteenth-Century Istanbul*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xii+324. Illustrated with 204 colour and 44 monochrome images. Hardbound. ISBN: 9780691190549. Price: \$65/£50.

The Ottoman Empire was founded at the end of the thirteenth century in north-western Anatolia, the westernmost extension of Asia, by a Turkish tribal leader named Osman Ghazi (also called Osman I, to differentiate him from other homonymous sultans), hence the name. After extinguishing the Byzantine Empire in the region in 1453 by conquering Istanbul (Constantinople), and other victories, Ottomans extended their rule over much of Southeast Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa, which continued up to early twentieth century. The reign of its tenth sultan Suleiman I (r. 1520–1566) is considered the golden age of the Empire. Like their contemporary Safavid and Mughal rulers, Ottoman sultans too patronised all forms of art, including architecture. As Ottoman Empire was situated nearer to the European continent than the other two, and having for centuries been a part of the Roman Empire, the European influence on its arts was inescapable.

In the period between fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, influenced by the study of the ancient Roman and Greek art, all European art forms including architecture achieved new heights. Architects like Donato Bramante (1444–1514), and Andrea Palladio (1508–1580), designed great buildings marked by harmonious proportions, symmetry, and simplicity. However, the architectural monuments that were built between the period 1600 and 1750—as exemplified by the buildings like the Tempietto (1510) of San Pietro



(Montorio) and the Palazzo Chiericati Palace (Vicenza)—in contrast appeared asymmetrical, contorted, complex, and weird. Art historians named the latter style with the derisive label “Baroque,” a word variously considered to have been of French, Portuguese, Spanish or Italian origin, literally meaning “pearls that are imperfectly round” in the first two languages. In the words of the author Ünver Rüstem, the monuments of the period were “characterised by spirited architectural traditions, often showy, and sometimes un-canonical use of classically derived forms” (p. 157). So, in the beginning, the word had a little scornful connotation, as it was in the case of the label “Gothic.” Despite this, the Baroque became the first architectural style to go global. Like Renaissance, the centre of Baroque architecture too was Rome, the supreme seat of the Catholic Christianity, where it found patronage of the Papacy, desirous of making Rome the most stunning city in the Christian world. The style also influenced the arts in Germany, France, England, and of course in the neighbouring Ottoman Empire.

The tradition of writing art history is not very old. Particularly in Asian countries, it was begun by their colonial masters. Giving order to the wildly scattered material was not an easy job. And the masters did it with great enthusiasm and knowledge. They organised the information in proper order, placed them in correct historical perspective, and demarcated various styles. The attempt being the first, was bound to have some imperfections too. But later historians, at least for a century, continued to follow the established patterns. Now a change in approach to the subject is taking place. For example, taking the case of Indian miniature painting, for long Mughal and Rajput schools were invariably dealt with separately. But the American art historian Milo Cleveland Beach in his book *Mughal and Rajput Painting*¹ has broken the mould and combined the two schools as they developed together and with mutual give-and-take. Similarly, so far the eighteenth century in India was considered a period of decline in all arts. But the book *Princes and Painters in Mughal Delhi, 1707–1857*² re-assesses the period and brings forward its achievements. Such examples can be multiplied.

In the studies of the Ottoman Empire, so far the focus has been on the period before 1600, which is usually considered the Ottoman classical age. But the more conspicuous Western influence during the later period induced the British-American Historian Bernard Lewis (1916–2018) to propound that “when a foreign influence appears in something as central to a culture as an

¹ Milo Cleveland Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

² William Dalrymple and Yuthika Sharma, eds., *Princes and Painters in Mughal Delhi, 1707–1857* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press in association with Asia Society Museum, 2012).

imperial foundation or a cathedral-mosque, there is clearly some faltering of cultural self-confidence.” The book under review *Ottoman Baroque* by the young scholar Ünver Rüstem, Assistant Professor of Islamic Art at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore (USA), successfully falsifies this interpretation. The present study thoughtfully shows how between 1740 and 1800, the Ottoman sultans—Mahmud I (r. 1730–1754), Osman III (r. 1754–1757), Mustafa III (r. 1757–1774), Abdulhamid I (r. 1774–1789), and Selim III (r. 1789–1807)—consciously co-opted European forms to craft a new, politically charged, and globally reverberating image for their empire’s capital, Istanbul. It may be noted that the Ottoman Baroque was from the outset associated with an elite culture of patronage, spearheaded by the sultan.

In fact, geographical location of Istanbul, on the mouth of the Bosphorus, from where it could control the passage between the Black Sea on the north, and the Sea of Marmara in the south, and finally connecting it to the Mediterranean sea, had demarcated it to play a momentous role not only in the history of the region, but also in the history of the world. Here, the East literally meets the West. It formed the centre of interactions between the two worlds.

The author Ünver Rüstem has used the term “Ottoman Baroque” in all seriousness and respect, and not like the Indian architectural scholar and practising architect Gautam Bhatia (b. 1952), who about a quarter century back, had satirically coined labels such as “Punjabi Baroque,” “Bania Gothic,” “Early Halwai,” “Marwari Mannerism,” and “Sindhi Hacienda” etc.

In this book, Rüstem studies in detail half a dozen of royal mosque complexes, all situated at Istanbul. Each complex besides having a large prayer hall, often also included a tomb, a *madrasah*, a library, a public kitchen, a royal pavilion, and a fountain. However, the mosque formed the nucleus of the ensemble.

The text of the book is organised in five chapters, each focusing on “a different aspect of the overall topic.” It is preceded by a lengthy introduction in which the author assesses the approach of the previous major art historians of the subject, like Celal Esad Arseven (1876–1971), Doğan Kuban (b. 1926), Godfrey Goodwin (1921–2005), Tülay Artan, and Shirine Hamadeh.

The first chapter—“Setting the Scene: The Return to Istanbul”—begins the story with the Edirne Incident (1703), a rebellion led by the household troops of the erstwhile sultan Mustafa II, replacing him with his brother Ahmed III. One major outcome of the incident was shifting the seat of government from Edirne back to Istanbul. As no art form other than magnificent architecture impresses upon public mind the might of a ruler, the sultan began the adornment of the capital with the erection of a new palace—Sa’dābād (the

Abode of Felicity)—in 1722, now known only through paintings and engravings. Made largely of wood, it was considered to have been inspired from the French Palace of Versailles. Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, in their magisterial study *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250–1800*, trace the influence to the “Enthusiastic dispatches describing life in France by Mehmed Yirmisekiz Çelebi Efendi (d. 1732) ambassador to the court of Louis XV.” The Safavid influence too cannot be overlooked.

Besides building this palace, “the sultan encouraged his courtiers to build their own pavilions nearby, which turned the surrounding landscape into a popular suburban recreational ground for the city’s inhabitants” (p. 26). The comment sounds like an echo of what is reported by the Mughal court historian Abū ’l-Faḍl (1551–1602) when Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) had shifted the imperial headquarters from Delhi to Agra: “Abodes [*manāzil*] were distributed to the grandees. . . . On either side [of the river Jamuna] the servants of fortune’s threshold [i.e., the court] erected pleasant homes and made charming gardens.”³ It also accentuates the fact that although politically, the history of Turkey appears bound more with the Western world, but the activities of its rulers were not different from those of their contemporary Safavid or Mughal counterparts.

Two major surviving specimens of the period are the library of Ahmed III, built in 1719, and his fountain, dated 1728. These buildings had begun to show the impact of European Baroque elements on the classical Islamic decorative motifs. Although some religious buildings were also erected during the reign of Ahmed III, they are not of much consequence. The erection of religious buildings became central under the reigns of his successors.

In 1730, Ahmed III was succeeded by his nephew Mahmud I who ruled the empire up to 1754. He also took a keen interest in architecture and continued to adorn his capital Istanbul with handsome buildings as he also was aware of the importance of spectacle in asserting the ruler’s legitimacy in the eyes of his subjects. He turned the practical need of supplying water to Galata, a neighbourhood opposite Istanbul, to erect some forty splendid fountains. It was during his reign that Ottoman Baroque made its appearance more conspicuously. This forms the subject matter of the second chapter entitled “Pleasing Times and Their ‘Pleasing New Style’.”

Two sub-topics—“Non-Muslim Artists and Their Networks” and “Muslim Patrons and Elite Aesthetics”—are also discussed in this chapter. On the basis of the books and drawings in the Topkapy Palace Library, the author opines that the Ottoman Baroque was introduced mainly by the *dhimmīs* (non-Muslim Greeks and Armenians), who had considerable influence at the

³ H. Beveridge, trans., *The Akbar Nāma of Abu-l-Fazl* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1907), 2:117–18.

court. Throughout the eighteenth century, the world was not divided into water-tight compartments, and was easily traversable, facilitating the cross-cultural interaction. The author himself clarifies that the role of the Greeks and Armenians as the originators and essential shapers of Ottoman architecture may not be over-stressed. Ottoman architects themselves also played an equal role in fostering the change.

It must be noted that in Ottoman monuments, the Baroque elements did not appear in their original form. Rather the borrowers reworked and modified them. The most helpful factor behind all these projects was the readiness of the Ottoman sponsors because a change cannot be effected by the will of the artists alone if the patrons are not prepared to accept it. The sultan himself served as the fountainhead of change and the elite class emulated him. Such gradual acceptance of the Western arts and styles later made possible the radical changes by Kamal Pasha (1881–1938) after the First World War.

Pompous ceremonious displays of splendour and piety by rulers were a common phenomenon all over the world. So it was with the Ottoman sultans. The construction of magnificent mosques served the dual purpose very effectively. The third chapter “A Tradition Reborn: The Nuruosmaniye Mosque and Its Audiences” outlines how this mosque helped in staging the Sultan Mahmud’s presence and marked the consolidation of his power. Keeping this purpose in view, he ordered the construction of a grand complex of which the mosque formed the core building. However, he was not destined to witness its completion. After his death in December 1754, his younger brother ascended the throne under the title of Osman III. He took the credit for building the mosque and surrounding buildings. The dominant influence on the sanctuary was that of Hagia Sophia, originally built in 537 CE as the Greek Orthodox Christian patriarchal cathedral, later converted into the imperial mosque, and then into a museum. In the graceful new style of the mosque localised Baroque elements appear in the shapes of column capitals, pilasters, arches, and mouldings.

After the brief interregnum of sultan Osman III’s reign (1754–57), Mustafa III took the reins of the empire in his hands and made a notable mark on the architectural scene during his reign (1757–74). The fourth chapter “The Old, the New and the In-Between: Stylistic Consciousness and the Establishment of Tradition” covers monuments erected under his patronage. The reign saw the erection of two grand new royal mosques—The Ayazma in Uskudar (1758–61) and Laleli (1760–64)—and the reconstruction of the Fatih Mosque (originally built between 1460 and 1463, but destroyed in 1766 by an earthquake). All the three mosques show a dexterous collocation of traditional and Baroque features. The Ayazma has been dubbed as a miniature of

Nuruosmaniye. In fact, the landmark Nuruosmaniye served as a model for all Turkish mosques in future. Soon, the vibrations of the style were felt even outside Istanbul.

An interesting episode of the period was reported in an Ottoman journal. After Mustafa's short-lived victory at Khotyn, when the sultan attended Friday prayer at the Hagia Sophia in February 1771 and was hailed as a "*ghāzī*" during the sermon, two members of the congregation shouted, "It is a lie! He is no *ghāzī*!"

The fifth chapter "At the Sultan's Threshold: The Architecture of Engagement as New Imperial Paradigm" discusses the architectural contribution of Abdulhamid I, the successor to Mustafa III. The sultan began with making additions to the Yeni Camii (The New Mosque, completed between 1660 and 1665), in the form of a public kitchen, a *sabil* [fountain], a *madrassah*, a library, and a tomb. Here, Baroque exhibitionism reached a new level bordering upon "Rococo," characterised by extraordinarily decorative and theatrical style of ornament, consisting of scrolling curves, gilding, sculpted mouldings, all creating the illusion of movement and drama.

Abdulhamid's successor, just 28 years old Selim III, like his predecessors, continued the use of architecture for promotion of his image. He rebuilt Eyüp Sultan's Mosque (originally founded in 1458 by Mehmet II), which had Baroque features like Ionic type scroll capitals.

The mosque complex called the Selimiye, in Uskudar, was built between 1801 and 1805. It was also a bigger complex consisting of the central mosque, a primary school, a timekeeper's office, a bathhouse, fountains, ninety-seven shops, a printing house, a bakery, shoreline amenities for owners and porters, a variety of factories and workshops for the manufacturing of items ranging from candles to textiles, and a lodge for Sufis of the Naqshbandi order. The builders tried to use a combination of the best elements of all earlier models. Its light and airy prayer hall, exhibiting impeccable workmanship, created a monument of exemplary beauty.

One notable aspect of the mosque complexes of the period is that the Ottoman sultans often dedicated their mosque complexes to the royal women which can be considered a sign of great influence wielded by the gender, like their counterparts in Mughal India.

In "Conclusion," the author not only mentions the limitations of his study, but also points out issues for future research. Notes are stacked at the end of the text.

As the building activity does not happen in vacuum, alongside the architectural patronage by the sultans, the text of the book also presents a lively picture of their times. Fighting battles with their rival countries, playing

one group of nobles against the other at their own court, and facing the ever-present fear of assassination by their own close relatives, all went on hand in hand with the building activities. The author successfully paints a wide canvas with fine details. It became possible by a thorough study of the contemporary or near-contemporary sources like travel-accounts, weekly payrolls, written protocols of their inauguration ceremonies, and numerous other documents.

The lucid text of the book is supplemented by a bibliography and index, indispensable parts of any scholarly work. Printed on thick glossy acid-free paper, and lavishly illustrated with 204 colour and 44 black and white excellent pictures, the book is also a feast to the eyes. It is a landmark study of the subject.

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