

### **Ottoman Baroque: A New Look for A New World**

The Ottoman Baroque refers to a fusion style of architecture that developed in the 18th and 19th centuries, which merged Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical elements with pre-existing Ottoman forms (Figure 1). The term is also used as a broad classification for a period of modernization of the Ottoman Empire's social and political structure. Due to historical and political context, this period has not been widely studied even in Turkish art and architectural history. Ottoman Baroque architecture has suffered academic neglect due to long-standing nationalistic beliefs about the period in which it was created.

The Narrative of Ottoman architecture has mirrored broader trends in Ottoman historical study.<sup>1</sup> The empire has traditionally been defined by terms such as peak and decline, and invariably adjectives used to describe the state of the empire have been superimposed onto the art made contemporaneously. The later Ottoman periods, as the precursor to the end of the empire, have been mostly ignored.<sup>2</sup> Turkish nationalist art historical scholars, either skip the majority of the 18th and 19th centuries in their writings or delegate the centuries as footnotes in the larger story of the empire.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this quote from one of the earliest Turkish art historical writings from 1909 summarises the prevalent attitudes that have surrounded the Ottoman Baroque period:

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<sup>1</sup> Sajdi, *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee*.

<sup>2</sup> RÜSTEM, *Ottoman Baroque*.

<sup>3</sup> Hamadeh, "Westernization, Decadence, and the Turkish Baroque."

“French engineers called in by Mahmud I [r. 1730-54] to work on the water system brought along with them sculptors, decorators, and draftsmen who introduced the Louis XV and Baroque styles to the capital. They thus laid the groundwork for the degeneration of the Ottoman style. Gradually, Ottoman artists began to adopt these fashionable European decorative idioms, which were vulgarly called "a la franka." It took no time before they forgot the principles of Ottoman [architecture]. Ignoring even the fundamentals of this art, builders mixed all the styles, bringing about nothing but ugly and disparate [monuments]. Such is the Nuruosmaniye Mosque...such is also the Laleli Mosque: both of them belong to this period of decadence.”<sup>4</sup>

Decadence and decline, often incorrectly used interchangeably, are not new associations with the Baroque, having been used extensively to describe the periods that culminated in large scale cultural and political restructuring.<sup>5</sup> The Roman, French, and Russian Empires are all described as decadent in decline just before their revolutions. Terms such as decline are aspects of grand narrative history writing, where civilizations follow a life cycle like a living organism.<sup>6</sup> Grand history narratives lead to undervaluation for everything associated with “decline” periods, including art and architecture. Often during “unstable” periods, artistic output can become extraordinarily productive and creative by not being constrained by a dictating canon. The decline narrative also removes agency from Ottoman architects and artisans, as if stylistic importation also removes all artistic decision making, and that the architecture is just a

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<sup>4</sup> Arseven, *Constantinople, de Byzance à Stamboul* /.

<sup>5</sup> FLINT, “Fin De Siecle.”

<sup>6</sup> Morley, “Decadence as a Theory of History.”

consequence of the flow of history. As seen throughout art history, art and architecture are almost never made due to a “forgotten” skill, but rather a purposeful creative choice that deviates from the later prescribed “ideal.”

In the past few decades, academics studying Ottoman history have attempted to restructure this narrative.<sup>7</sup> Yes, the empire was shrinking and would never again reach the territorial extent nor have the global power it once had. Still, architecture is not value defined by the political situation in which it was created. Architecture reflects the conditions under which it was made, but the effectiveness and quality of architecture exists outside of its historical context. Although the empire itself was in a diminished state, the creative output of the period should not be brushed aside as just another symptom of imperial decay.

The scholastic push against the decline narrative has also extended to art historical study.<sup>8</sup> Unver Rustem wrote the first art history book on the topic of Ottoman Baroque architecture in 2019. Alongside being an invaluable source for this paper, the book is the start of a new body of scholarship that will hopefully continue to be written on this long-ignored subject.

## **Global Change**

The 18th and 19th centuries were marked by rapid global change. The Industrial Revolution reorganized the economy and society of the Western world including the movement of large numbers of people from the countryside to urban production centers.<sup>9</sup> Western European powers developed technology, including sea capabilities, which aided international trade, wars,

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<sup>7</sup> Sajdi, *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee*.

<sup>8</sup> RÜSTEM, *Ottoman Baroque*.

<sup>9</sup> “The Industrial Revolution.”

and imperial expansion. Empires were established and grew, beginning the era of globalism.<sup>10</sup>

The enlightenment and other philosophical movements inspired revolutions, including the French, Russian, and American. In a time of shifting global power dynamics, the Ottomans had to find what their identity would be as a modern empire with pre-modern roots.

Ottoman history is complicated, crossing from the late medieval world into the modern era. As one of the “gunpowder empires,” the Ottomans symbolized the global transition of power, imperialism, and technology in the 15th century.<sup>11</sup> Beginning as Turkic tribal people originally from the Russian Steppe region, the Ottomans were able to consolidate power because of the weakened state the Byzantine empire and the simultaneous destruction of the Seljuk empire by the Mongols.<sup>12</sup> Osman, the establisher of the Ottoman dynasty, quickly conquered territory. His descendants eventually conquered Constantinople in 1453.<sup>13</sup> In the proceeding centuries, the Ottomans were able to dominate Southeastern Europe, the Levant, Syria, and Egypt through economic and military advantage.

The Ottoman economic system had always been insular, with a limited amount of exported goods. The majority of revenue and all excess product was taken by the central government, limiting the amount of wealth individuals could accumulate.<sup>14</sup> Mercantilism, the economic system the European powers had at the time, was not implemented in the empire, again limiting revenue. These systematic economic issues eventually led to a devaluation of the Ottoman currency.<sup>15</sup> A loss of trade wealth contributed to the downfall of the Ottomans as a

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<sup>10</sup> “A Brief History of Globalization.”

<sup>11</sup> Kia, *The Ottoman Empire*.

<sup>12</sup> “Ottoman Empire | Facts, History, & Map.”

<sup>13</sup> Kia, *The Ottoman Empire*.

<sup>14</sup> Geyikdagi, *Foreign Investment in the Ottoman Empire*.

<sup>15</sup> Geyikdagi.

domino effect. With the loss of trade, the Ottomans could not support an imperial military, which contributed to a loss of territory. As the empire's borders collapsed further inward, it lost even more wealth and power, a cycle that continued until the dissolution of the empire in the 20th century. European colonialism was a growing threat signaled by the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 and the seizure of Algeria in 1832.<sup>16</sup> Great Britain was consolidating power in South Asia. In 1822 Greece declared independence from the Ottomans, and in the following war, the Ottomans lost their fleet in battle with European Navies.<sup>17</sup> Conflict with Imperial Russia also strained military and economic resources. In the final era, the empire was notably referred to as the "Sick Man of Europe,"<sup>18</sup> a massive shift in reputation in a short amount of time from a formidable enemy to a pitiful economic mess.

The last centuries of the empire were marked by corruption, economic troubles, and social unrest.<sup>19</sup> Interior political scheming at court between antagonistic factions within the harem and administration lessened the effectiveness of the government as a whole and weakened the Sultan's control.<sup>20</sup> European control of trade and an influx of precious metals from the New World colonies weakened the Ottoman economy.<sup>21</sup> Growing population numbers paired with a smaller food production ability induced provincial rebellions, which, although never genuinely threatening the empire, added to general societal unrest. The government was further weakened by the rise of rural nobles who ruled their own territories in a similar fashion to European feudalism, limiting the authority of the central government and again hindering the economy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*.

<sup>17</sup> Kia, *The Ottoman Empire*.

<sup>18</sup> Frierson, "ASLI ÇIRAKMAN, From the 'Terror of the World' to the 'Sick Man of Europe.'"

<sup>19</sup> Pamuk, "Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800."

<sup>20</sup> Çirakman, "FROM TYRANNY TO DESPOTISM."

<sup>21</sup> Pamuk, "THE PRICE REVOLUTION IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE RECONSIDERED."

<sup>22</sup> Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*.

At the turn of the 18th century, the empire was in a political crisis with increasing external and internal threats.

The people within the empire had to find a modern identity as the conditions of the world changed. Many feared that by adopting modernism from the West, they would inherently lose their own culture.<sup>23</sup> But, as international contact increased, reformers beginning in the Tulip Period would embrace European ideas, technology, and aesthetics in an attempt to modernize and even save the empire such as Muhammad Ali in Cairo and Sultans Mahmud II and Abdiilmecid.<sup>24</sup> During this time of integration of European political and social ideas, European art such as oil painting and architecture were also introduced, establishing the Ottoman Baroque style.

### **Classical Period**

Contemporaneous with the golden age of Ottoman power, a ‘ peak’ artistic and architectural style developed labeled as the Classical period. Mimar Sinan, a Janissary who lived between 1490 and 1588, was the predominant innovator and architect of the Classical Era, working for three Sultans and living to be almost a hundred years old.<sup>25</sup> His technique and buildings are regarded as the highest form of Ottoman architecture. If the Renaissance is thought of as the zenith of Western Art, the Classical Era Ottoman work is described in the same manner as the peak of Ottoman creation due to the “ perfection” of the style in conjunction with the height of Ottoman Global power. Since power and quality of art have been historically correlated,

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<sup>23</sup> Worringer, “‘SICK MAN OF EUROPE’ OR ‘JAPAN OF THE NEAR EAST’?”

<sup>24</sup> RÜSTEM, *Ottoman Baroque*.

<sup>25</sup> “Sinan | Ottoman Architect | Britannica.”

Classical Era architecture has been the standard by which all following architecture has been judged by art historians, later deviation always regarded as inferior.<sup>26</sup>

Classical Era Ottoman architecture is characterized by a variety of performative elements, a mixture of poetry, geometry, and music.<sup>27</sup> Ideally, all the arts would operate in harmony through architecture. Mathematical logic and all-encompassing performance were both idealized. Domes historically were used to represent a “Dome of Heaven,” also seen in Byzantine and Greek Orthodox structures.<sup>28</sup> In an Ottoman context, the dome also symbolized a perfected form through symmetry and geometry, a motif in a majority of Mosque design.<sup>29</sup> Light and contrast were also instrumental, and when used in conjunction with domes, creating an airy, floating effect. A mystical atmosphere, created through architectural form and light was vital in Ottoman mosque architecture. In Sinan’s writings, the importance of metaphor and poetry are evident (Figure 2):

“The domes of the mosque were like waves that decorate the top of the open sea. The large domes resembled a picture that was drawn on the sky in gold . . . Its coloured and decorated glasses, changed colour in every light, like the wings of the Archangel, and offered every moment the beauty of spring gardens. These glasses that were adorned with the colours of the rainbow left everyone in admiration like the colours of the chameleon which change with the rays of the sun.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hamadeh, “Westernization, Decadence, and the Turkish Baroque.”

<sup>27</sup> Morkoç, “Reading Architecture from the Text.”

<sup>28</sup> Erarslan, “An Essay on Byzantine Architectural Influence on the Spatial Organization of the Architect Sinan’s Square Baldachin Single-Domed Mosques.”

<sup>29</sup> Erzen, “AESTHETICS AND AISTHESIS IN OTTOMAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE.”

<sup>30</sup> Erzen.

## Style

Traditionally in art history, stylistic periods are intrinsically connected to a preceding period. Eras are reactions, rejections, or developments of earlier artistic and architectural foundations. The Renaissance was considered to be a spark of logic and philosophy, reflected in the art and architecture of the time. Renaissance work is characterized as stoic and cerebral with an emphasis on symmetry, geometry, and classical thought.<sup>31</sup> The following Baroque era, in response to the Renaissance, instead focused on emotion and drama marked by organic and billowing forms. Curves and breaking out of the frame were the goals of Baroque work. The Neoclassical era, in a rejection of the Baroque, emphasized masculine classicism.<sup>32</sup> All of these periods are defined by their divergence or continuation from their predecessors as much as their principles, so Neoclassicism can be defined as post-Baroque, which itself could be considered post-Renaissance. Ideological and formal meaning is derived from layers of time and artistic history which interact and become a larger historical narrative.

With this background, the question arises as to what then can art historians make of Ottoman Baroque architecture? It has a number of identifiable elements, but what do these forms mean in a context without the Renaissance? The Ottomans had their own “golden age” comparable to the Renaissance with a separate set of meanings and traditional forms that had an emphasis on logic but also had the performative aspect, which became so integral to the Baroque. The Ottoman Baroque style must have had a unique symbolic function from the original Western usage considering the time and background of its creation.

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<sup>31</sup> “Renaissance Aesthetics | | Mt. San Antonio College.”

<sup>32</sup> Gontar, “Neoclassicism | Essay | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art.”



Because of the importation of Baroque architecture, many modern Turkish Scholars surmised that the style must be symptomatic of Ottoman decline and Western political superiority.<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, this point of view is reductive. It fails to take into account global trends which paint a more complex picture of the international political context reflected in the architecture of the time. The 18th and 19th centuries experienced an explosion of foreign cultural exchange. For example, Chinoiserie became all the rage in France and England, and Japanese prints were starting to filter into Europe.<sup>34</sup> Ottoman Baroque architecture was created during this period, based on an adaptation of the French Empire, a combination of Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical elements in a theatrical style.<sup>35</sup> In a similar way to Chinoiserie, people throughout the middle east were interested in European decor, architecture, and objects. Charles Séchan, the most celebrated French interior decorator of the time made over 4 million francs working in Istanbul for the Sultan and court (Figure 3).<sup>36</sup> Europe was experiencing an era of orientalism and fascination with the east while the east was adopting everything European; for example, Persian carpets had a larger western European market than a local middle eastern one.<sup>37</sup> Along with architecture, the empire began sponsoring European scientists to help with the modernization efforts; German engineers were brought to help establish the Ottoman railways.<sup>38</sup> International interest and adaptation became widespread, and the Ottomans were part of this global trend.

Although the Ottoman Baroque had a specific meaning, it is helpful to examine the international Baroque phenomenon. The style was prevalent in western Europe but the appeared

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<sup>33</sup> Hamadeh, "Westernization, Decadence, and the Turkish Baroque."

<sup>34</sup> Oshinsky, "Exoticism in the Decorative Arts | Essay | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art."

<sup>35</sup> Blair and Bloom, "20. The Legacies of Later Islamic Art."

<sup>36</sup> Hitzel, "CHARLES SÉCHAN (1803—1874)."

<sup>37</sup> Blair and Bloom, "20. The Legacies of Later Islamic Art."

<sup>38</sup> Christensen, *Germany and the Ottoman Railways*.

globally, including France, Italy, Spain, England, and Portugal.<sup>39</sup> Baroque architecture was used in independent countries and imperial systems, such as Imperial Russia, Imperial Japan, and China, for example. The style also appears in colonies such as Mexico, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. If the Ottoman Baroque were a unique circumstance, perhaps the old argument that it was a symptom of decline would be more convincing, but the Ottomans were not alone in the adoption of the style. Therefore, there must have been symbolic meaning of the Baroque beyond its aesthetic creation in Western Europe, which made it internationally attractive.

As a contemporary parallel, the current cityscape is associated with glass and metal skyscrapers. Cities are internationally judged by this standard, which at its roots is a western conception, but has been adapted as a universal symbol of modernity. In the same way, the Baroque did have its origins in Western Europe but became an international standard for modernity and power. Baroque ornamentation might have been equivalent to a skyscraper in the 18th and 19th centuries in terms of demonstrating civility and relevance. So although the Ottomans had lost the political power to set the tone of the stylistic program, the use of Baroque was not an indicator of encroaching western imperialism or degeneracy, but rather a symbol of international participation in cosmopolitan globalism (Figure 4).

## **Conclusion**

Through this paper, I aimed to construct a framework that I could use to understand the Ottoman Baroque outside of the passé attitude that has been used to regard the style. Since the

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<sup>39</sup> Snodin et al., *Baroque, 1620-1800*.

ideological shift on the topic has happened only recently, I wanted to familiarize myself with the relevant historical and political context, which I am going to continue researching.

A large portion of my thesis will be focused on the formal analysis of specific architectural sites. How different is the mosque version of the Ottoman Baroque when compared to palatial or secular architecture? Did Islamic religious constraints affect how the Baroque manifested in mosques? In a longer-term thesis project, I will be able to look at numerous sites throughout the empire to gather more information and data.

Another question I have been considering is if Baroque became an international calling card, a symbol of an elegant metropolitan elite, then is that the cause of why it was so firmly rejected in the majority of places it was implemented? In colonial projects, it was associated with oppressive colonial rule. In European countries, like France and Russia, it was also immediately discarded after the overthrow of the rulers who utilized the style. The Ottomans themselves had a Neoclassical movement, where buildings were designed to replicate the more sober Classical Era ideal.

The Ottoman Baroque, although understudied, generates many provocative questions about architecture, globalism, and how the modern world took its current form, which I will explore in my thesis next year.



Figure 1: Detail of the minbar (pulpit) of the Eyüp Sultan Mosque, 1798-1800, Istanbul

[https://smithsonianassociates.org/ticketing/tickets/ottoman-baroque-how-cross-cultural-architecture-rebranded-18th-century-istanbul?utm\\_source=RAad&utm\\_content=FEauto&utm\\_campaign=featevent](https://smithsonianassociates.org/ticketing/tickets/ottoman-baroque-how-cross-cultural-architecture-rebranded-18th-century-istanbul?utm_source=RAad&utm_content=FEauto&utm_campaign=featevent)

Figure 2: Mimar Sinan, Mosque of Selim II, Edirne 1568 and 1574

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/charlesfred/2964915562/>





Figure 3: Armchair, Claude-Louis Burgat, 1760, an example of French furniture that could have been imported to Istanbul

<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1982.60.89/>



Figure 4:  
Dolmabahçe  
Palace, Istanbul  
Turkey

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/60509750@N08/14152937545>

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