

Fausto Zonaro

Court Painter of Sultan Abdul Hamid II

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The three works illustrated in this article are by Fausto Zonaro (1854–1922)

1 Fausto Zonaro, Painter of His Imperial Majesty the Sultan, photographed in 1909 wearing official Ottoman uniform

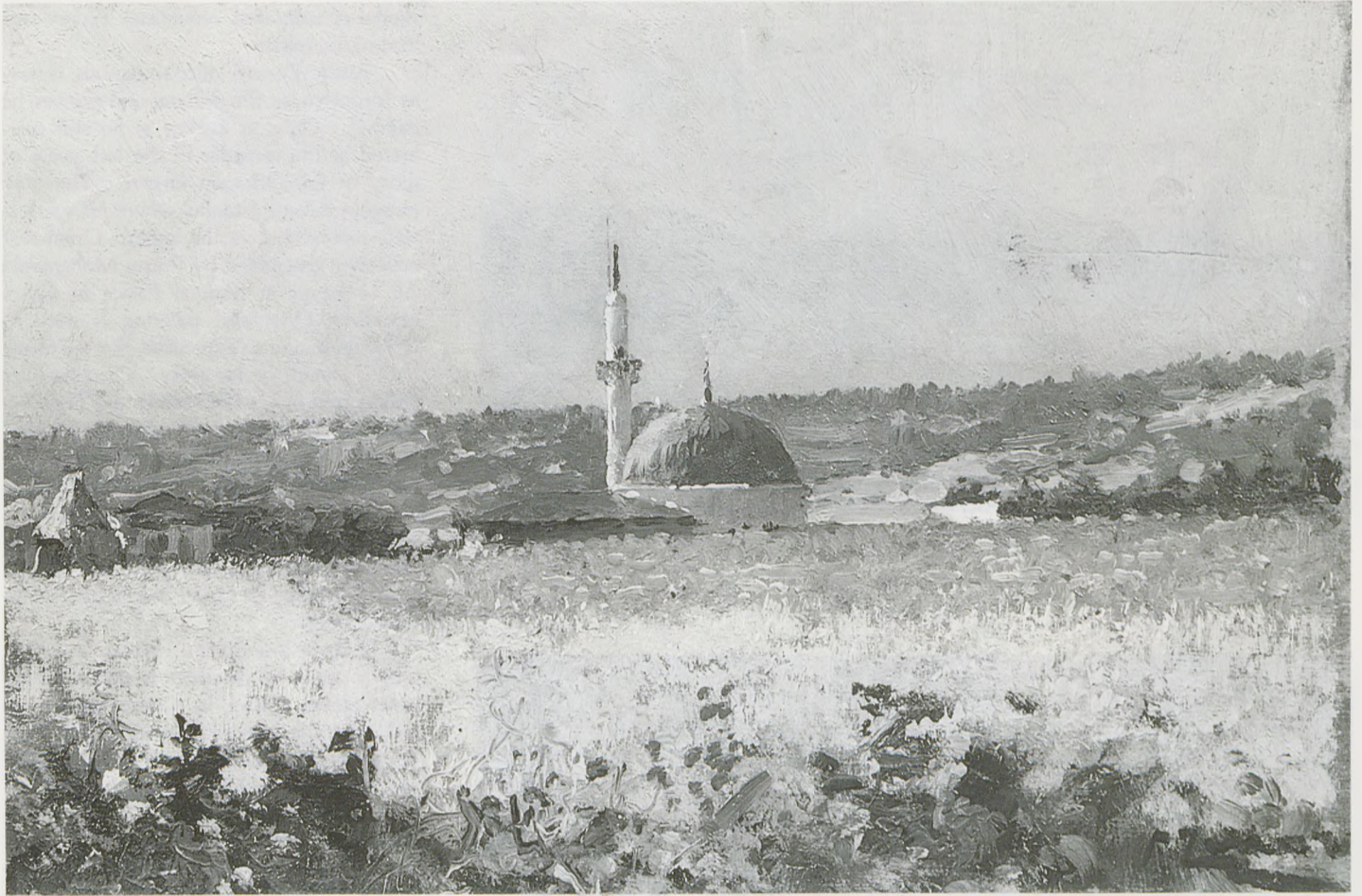
from Basra to Bosnia and from Tripoli to Trebizond. It was the political, commercial and intellectual centre of the Balkans and the Near East. With over 500,000 inhabitants, it was one of the largest and most cosmopolitan cities in the world, inhabited by Greeks, Italians and Armenians, as well as Turks, Kurds and Arabs. The latest fashions from Paris and Vienna could be seen beside the traditional costumes of the Caucasus and Albania. Half the Turkish population was dressed in the turbans and flowing robes of

the past. The others wore the fez and the *stambouline* (Fig. 1), the Ottoman frock-coat which was a symbol of modernization.² It was a mixture of past and present and East and West which every passing artist and writer had tried to record.

Indeed, some European artists were already established in the city. Sultan Abdul Aziz (1861–76) had employed the Pole Chlebowski and the Russian Aivazovski to record the splendour of his army and navy. In 1874 the French artist Guillemet had opened, with official help, an *Académie de Peinture*. The nephew of Abdul Aziz, Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909) was not only a ruthless autocrat determined to maintain the integrity of his empire: he was also an intelligent modernizer interested in every

Fausto Zonaro was the last of the long line of Italian artists, beginning with Gentile Bellini, who went to seek fame and fortune in the Ottoman Empire. Born near Padua in 1854, the child of poor parents, he trained in Verona and Paris. His style is a mixture of Realism and Impressionism typical of the last third of the nineteenth century. The pictures which made his name, such as *First Fruit*—a young couple with a baby—are extremely sentimental.

It is possible that he found it hard to make a living in Italy. Whatever the reason, his daughter Signora Mafalda Zonaro Mene-guzzer says that he arrived in Constantinople in 1891 with only a few hundred francs in his pocket.¹ At that time Constantinople was the capital of an empire which stretched



2 *The Mosque of Erekoý*, 1891. Oil on board, 18 × 22 cm. Private collection

aspect of European culture, from petroleum to Puccini. In 1883 he founded the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts. Its first President was a prolific Turkish Orientalist called Hamdy Bey.³

Therefore Zonaro arrived in Constantinople at the right time. At first he lived by giving lessons to the ladies of the diplomatic community. He was clearly a charming man: his self-portraits always show him with a smile on his face. He was also an accomplished courtier. In 1896 he presented the Sultan with a forceful, photographic picture of the crack Ertoghul regiment of the Imperial Guard crossing the Galata bridge. He was rewarded with the title Painter of His Imperial Majesty the Sultan. The same year another Italian, Raimondo d'Aronco, became the Sultan's official architect.⁴

Thereafter Zonaro was one of the most prominent men in the capital. He received orders, titles and a house near the palace of Dolmabahçe from the Sultan. He learnt Turkish and Greek, his work was hung at the Salon de Constantinople and he had a permanent exhibition of his paintings in his house, which could be visited every afternoon. His wife, also Italian, helped him with her food

and her photographs. Their Turkish friends liked to come to the house to taste good Italian cooking; and magazines throughout Europe published her photographs of her husband's works. He was a success. The pictures he gave the Sultan every year were hung in the gallery of Yildiz Palace, the extraordinary walled city from which Abdul Hamid emerged once a week to pray in a mosque. The King of Italy and the British Ambassador, Sir Nicholas O'Connor, were among Zonaro's clients.⁵

Zonaro was unusual in that, unlike most court painters, he painted the city as well. The great official canvases, such as *The Attack*, which shows Ottoman soldiers routing Greeks in the war of 1897, and the pictures of the conquest of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmet II in 1453, still hang in the palaces and museums of Istanbul. The pictures in which Zonaro recorded the daily life of the city, (Figs 2–4) however, belong to his daughter, Signora Zonaro Meneguzzer, who lives on the outskirts of Florence. The subjects of the pictures are as varied as the population of Constantinople itself.

In one a minaret soars above the Golden Horn. In another, Turkish ladies gather flowers in a meadow. In others a boat steams past the British summer embassy in Therapia; families picnic by a fountain; the moon gleams on the Bosphorus; a Turkish woman lifts a corner of her veil, in a gesture symbolizing the female emancipation which was beginning even before the reforms of Mustafa Kemal. The charm of these pictures comes in part from the fact that they depict Constantinople in the same light semi-Impressionist style used in innumerable views of London and Paris in 1900. They are a reminder that the capital of the Ottoman Empire also had an Art Nouveau period.

Sultan Abdul Hamid II, however, did not have the same style of government as the rulers of Paris and London, as they frequently complained. He was a tyrant who ruled through fear. (One of Zonaro's pictures shows the bodies of massacred Armenians laid out for burial.) In 1908–1909 Abdul Hamid was overthrown by the Young Turk revolution. Like many members of the Ottoman establishment, Zonaro at first supported the revolution. Its hero, the dashing young officer Enver Bey,



was a neighbour. Signora Zonaro Meneguzzer remembers: 'Papa gave a big reception in honour of Enver Bey and he posed for a very fine portrait. He was extremely elegant. *Molto bello! Bellissimo!* However, her father soon fell out with the Young Turks. 'When they deposed the Sultan, the Young Turks sequestered all the properties of the Imperial Civil List, including his house. They said, "We are sorry, Signor Zonaro, but we cannot make exceptions". Papa then reminded them that he had a homeland.' In 1910 he left with his family and his canvases (d'Aronco had left in 1908) and he eventually settled in San Remo, where he continued painting until his death in 1929.

Although he never returned to Constantinople he talked about it unceasingly. He wrote his memoirs, *Twenty Years of the*

3 *The Harbour, Constantinople, 1891-1910*. Oil on board, 65 × 37 cm. Private collection

4 *Muslim Cemetery, 1891/1910*. Oil on board. 28.5 × 17 cm. Private collection

Reign of Abdul Hamid, still unpublished, which must be a goldmine for insights into that paranoid but perceptive Sultan. By the time he died, the Constantinople he had known and painted had gone forever. Indeed one of his neighbours in San Remo was the last Ottoman Sultan, Mehmed VI Vahdeddine, who was sent into exile in 1922 by the new leader of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal. The last Ottoman Caliph, Abdul Medjid, who was also a talented, semi-Impressionist painter, went into exile in his turn in 1924. The fez was banned in 1925. Constantinople became Istanbul, and the

capital of truncated, republican Turkey was moved to Ankara.

Fausto Zonaro, once so famous, is now as forgotten as the Sultans and princes he painted. Only in Turkey is he still celebrated as the recorder of the last years of glory of the Ottoman Empire. The only museum outside Istanbul where his work is well represented is the superb Orientalist collection assembled by Prince Mohammed Ali of Egypt in Manly Palace in Cairo. However, Orientalist painting is now so fashionable, and so expensive, that a Zonaro revival cannot be far away. Caroline Juler praises him in *Les Orientalistes de l'Ecole Italienne* (1987) as 'a painter of uncomplicated warmth. Though some of his earliest pictures of Istanbul seem to have been almost photographically sharp, as he matured his style became more impressionistic. His views of the city are more informal than any of the paintings by earlier Italian artists who worked there.'

If there is a Zonaro revival, it will be largely due to his daughter, Mafalda Zonaro Meneguzzer. Born in Constantinople in 1903, she is an advocate for whom any artist would be grateful. She was herself an artist and organized exhibitions of her father's work in Milan and Florence in the 1940s. The most recent exhibition was at the Villa Simes-Contarini in the Veneto in 1979. Above all she has kept together an extraordinary collection of her father's pictures.

Zonaro was a prolific artist: it has been estimated that he painted 1,000 pictures when he was in Constantinople.⁶ In his daughter's house this figure seems perfectly plausible. There are so many pictures that they invade the bedrooms and bathrooms. Her grandson's toys are stacked between views of the Bosphorus. In addition there are albums of drawings, all Zonaro's press cuttings from 1880 to the present day, copies of the books he illustrated, photographs of Zonaro with his Turkish teacher, of Enver the day he seized power The house is a shrine to the reign of Abdul Hamid and the art of his official painter. It justifies Signora Zonaro Meneguzzer's claim to be 'one of the last surviving links with the art of the nineteenth century'.

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¹ Interview with Signora Mafalda Zonaro Meneguzzer, Florence, 26 September 1986. Paolo Stefano and Giuseppe Luigi Marini, *Fausto Zonaro, 1979* (unpaginated).

² Edmondo de Amicis, *Constantinople*, 1883, pp. 128-29. There are innumerable accounts of Constantinople under Abdul Hamid. Among the most vivid are: Anna Bowman Dodds, *In the Palaces of the Sultan*, 1904; Mrs Max Muller, *Letters from Constantinople*, 1897; Emine Foat Tuğay, *Three Centuries. Chronicles of Family Life in Turkey and Egypt*, 1960; and Sir Henry F Woods Pasha, *Spunyarn from the Strands of a Sailor's Life*, 2 vols, 1924.

³ Adolphe Thalasso, *L'Art Ottoman*, 1910, pp. 11, 15.

⁴ See the exhibition and catalogue of D'Aronco's architectural drawings of pashas' villas and buildings at Yildiz, held at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, in 1980.

⁵ Thalasso, *op. cit.*, p. 32; interview with Signora Mafalda Zonaro Meneguzzer, 26 September 1986.

⁶ Thalasso, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

