

A BULGARIAN EXAMPLE IN CREATING NATIONAL ART AFTER THE BALKAN WAR: HÜSEYİN ARIF’S WRITINGS

БЪЛГАРСКИ ПРИМЕР ЗА СЪЗДАВАНЕ НА НАЦИОНАЛНО ИЗКУСТВО СЛЕД БАЛКАНСКАТА ВОЙНА – ТЕКСТОВЕТЕ НА ХЮСЕИН АРИФ

From the end of the 19th century till the beginning of the 20th century, all social events and wars led to increased feelings of nationalism within the Ottoman society. Painters and authors in their writings about Turkish art made comparisons with European art and stressed the necessity and importance of adding national spirit to the pictorial art. Among the works of these authors, eight articles by Hüseyin Arif, which were published in Şehbal Magazine, have attracted our attention. According to Hüseyin Arif and other intellectuals, besides the sadness brought by the defeat of the Ottoman Empire by Bulgaria in the Balkan War, it should be evaluated as an event to be learned from. The importance of Bulgarian nationalist spirit and its effects on the national art were common examples for these intellectuals.

Keywords: nationalist art, nationalism, Hüseyin Arif, Bulgaria.

Ziya Gökalp, who approached in a systematic way to Islamism, Westernism and Turkism in the constitutional monarchy period proposed that for the continuity of the empire, there was a need to strengthen Turkism, to evoke national conscience as well as to realize the necessity to become civilized. According to him, all of these three trends must be accepted to form a contemporaneous Islamic Turkism (Öndin 2003: 46-47). Both Gökalp and later Atatürk believed in the necessity of researching the national spirit and keeping the national conscience alive; in Gökalp’s opinion the national spirit demonstrates itself in the language and art (Duben 2007: 249). What needed to be done then was to teach children the basics of Turkish ethnography, geography, history and the heroic deeds in order to form a national habitat (Köroğlu 2004: 144). As the painter Sami (Yetik), who lived in this period, has pointed out “*Now we are in a new world. We are living in an era where there is a need for common efforts to prove our national presence with material and moral works, and demonstrate our devotion to our nation and our aspiration to improvements.*” (Sami 1327: 67)

For this reason, especially the enlightened people of that era tried to find the causes for the defeat and made criticisms. Hüseyin Arif, being one of the enlightened people, but unfortunately for whose personality we failed to obtain more information about, had published eight articles in one of the most important magazines of the era called Şehbal. All of these articles were about Bulgaria and it is clear that Hüseyin Arif had visited Sophia.

In the article, in which he describes the Bulgarian School of Fine Arts, he talks about how the Bulgarians tried hard to arouse their national feelings and tried to keep them alive, how they struggled to produce pieces of art to maintain the heritage of Bulgarian history, nationalism, and the past and even they had named their academy “Bulgarian National School of Fine Arts”. Having exhibitions at the school, bringing in artworks from outside, paying the

tuition fees of the poor students, sending a lot of students to foreign countries for studying or travelling purposes, the King's personal appearance at the cinema and conferences held at the school in Mrkvička's directorate period increased public interest with the open sessions for the public, and as a result increased the number of students candidates to apply, also by constructing new building premises to meet the increased need; all these were positive actions.

On the other hand, the Bulgarian Academy, which participated in miscellaneous exhibitions in order to introduce its artworks, prepared albums for its 10th anniversary and presented them to the visitors of the school. This is of importance for being reputable outside the country as well. It is of significance to see that how the author finishes his words with the following remarks: "*It is so unfortunate that even though we have a School of Fine Arts, we have arts and artists, each having their history and past, monuments, and none of them are any less than those of the Bulgarians, how many exhibitions that we had participated in, how many albums or articles had we produced not only for the foreigners, but for our own use can we reveal?*" (Arif 1330a: 416).

The departments at the Academy were painting, sculpturing, carving, tile making, and embroidering. Male and female students studied together, female students were especially common in embroidery classes. There was a big competition among all the students and being aware of the importance of their art, all of them took their work very seriously. Hüseyin Arif noted that even in front of the model posing nude they kept their seriousness and quiescence, and remarked how he was affected by the education, sophistication and good manners of the female students and felt sorry about the Turkish girls when compared to them. Hüseyin Arif also noted that all types of handbags, cushion covers, laces, blouses, etc. prepared in the embroidery division, as well as all the decorations made in the tile making department carried the characteristics forms and colours of the Bulgarian art; he also stated that the Bulgarians had the desire and intention of adding a national connotation to everything. The main purpose of having an embroidery department in the academy was to create products to serve at the internal market, to prove that good quality items could be produced in this class. According to Hüseyin Arif for example, the two vases reflecting the Bulgarian taste, presented to the Paris Mayor as a gift during his visit to Sophia, if exhibited in a general public area in Paris would publicize the Bulgarian art and identity (Arif 1330b: 412-416).

Hüseyin Arif narrates that even though I. Mrkvička was of Czech origin, he was considered a national Bulgarian painter who had worked all around the country and had produced artworks in various art branches, being inspired by the Bulgarian history, way of life and traditions, and praises the artist by giving examples of his master works (Arif 1329b: 328-330). Travelling around the country, he made many sketches, giving importance to the national clothes, portraits, daily living and picturesque scenes. It is also noted that the painter had painted the portraits of the most important people in the Bulgarian history, such as Paissii, Cyril and Methodius, Tsar Ferdinand, Tsaritsa Eleonore, Princess Marie Louise, etc. Every painting by I. Mrkvička was an indication of how much he had been integrated in the Bulgarian nation. And the last words of Hüseyin Arif about this subject are: "[These] *I hope to give us the ideas about the importance and value of the Academy of Fine Arts and its artists in Bulgaria in terms of their awakenings.*" (Arif 1329b: 328-330).

In another article, Hüseyin Arif praises the Bulgarian painter Anton Mitov as much as he has praised I. Mrkvička mentioning their friendship and their work together, giving examples of Mitov's paintings (Arif 1329c: 352-354). Both painters had exerted a lot of efforts to improve Bulgarian art trying to get the public to appreciate their paintings and improving them. For this purpose, they held conferences and exhibitions. Tsar Ferdinand was an art-lover and especially the support he gave to Mitov and Mrkvička was very influential in all these efforts not being in vain. Hüseyin Arif describes Mitov as the painter of the common people, specifying that in his pictures he had depicted Bulgarian lifestyle, painting landscapes and portraits. What Hüseyin Arif appreciates in Mitov's past, which is different compared to Mrkvička's past, is that Mitov joined the army during the Bulgarian-Serbian war and was presented with a medal of valour, and thus his artist identity was built. And he finishes his article with the following words: "*I am hoping that the life of this young artist who is very popular in Bulgaria will not be a bad example for our young, but tired artists in order to give the will to fight and the will to progress.*" (Arif 1329c: 352-354).

In the other article, Hüseyin Arif mentions about the education of Jaroslav Věšín, who painted military pictures, narrating about his success in such paintings and how he had glorified the Bulgarians, and comparing the Ottoman history painters and their paintings with his works (Arif 1330c: 450-452). Hüseyin Arif points out that there are artists in each nation in the world who have been trained in terms of military aspects and that there are thousands of military paintings. After Věšín had shown the plain and simple lives of the Bulgarian people, he attracted the attention of the high officials in the Bulgarian army and was appointed to work for them. Working and living together with the soldiers in the army, he was able to depict really difficult scenes by observing and working hard for many years. He painted the Bulgarian army realistically from every aspect without a need for any imitations or copies. In this way, he became the tsar's painter and was honoured with many medals. According to Hüseyin Arif, such painters have two kinds of duties: to show the army and the improvements in the army to the public and to arouse the national emotions of both the public and the soldiers, and to raise their awareness. Emphasising once again the necessity of the paintings, the author explains the need to paint and distribute paintings with scenes of old wars, victories, defences, devotions, and even defeats. The author thinks that in this way, the national emotions will be aroused and lessons will be earned. He also notes that we have military artists but none of them are on the level of Věšín in Bulgaria, because none of them has been protected by anyone or provided with incentives and they haven't tried hard to get them anyway (Arif 1330c: 450-452). On the other hand, when beautiful Edirne (Adrianople) was conquered by the Bulgarians, Hüseyin Arif was disturbed a lot and said that a nation could be tied to their country by their past and their memories (Arif 1329a: 264-265).

According to Hüseyin Arif, in the history of a nation there are many events which must not be forgotten and should be remembered, lessons must be taken and the most important tools to pass these from generation to generation are the language and literature. The Bulgarian language, which had been ignored for a long period was revived by two brothers, Cyril and Methodius and the new Bulgarian alphabet which could be easily read and written by all was created. The Bulgarian monk Paisiy, mentioned by Hüseyin Arif, sought to built

up an independent Bulgaria and found the remedy in putting together a “national history”. In the research he had conducted, he ended up with writing the history of the Slav-Bulgarian nation, its tsars and priests. Even though the book had some insufficiencies when published in 1902, it aroused patriotic emotions all over the country. The main reason for the book to be read and spread all over was the language used by Paisiy because it was understandable by everyone. The other factors were how he had set forth the subject in an order and published it in the correct time (Arif 1330d: 7-9).

If we study other art writings of the time parallel to Hüseyin Arif’s articles, especially the statements of artists, we will have to mention the nine articles by the painter Nazmi Ziya (Güran), published in the magazines Şehbal and Yeni Mecmua, in which he discusses his worries about creating national art¹. Nazmi Ziya could not accept to be defeated by the Bulgarians and attributed the reason for this to the loss of power of the Ottomans and to the lack of national discipline and good manners. Pointing out that all the artists should work hard to arouse the national feelings, he states that some of the artists who have participated in the war have perpetrated that and that’s why new orders should be given to such artists about war scenes and he gives examples with artworks available in Europe. In Europe there are “millions” of war paintings available, and even more, many plays, novels and songs have been produced as well. He also talks about the majority of the sculptures of Napoleon in Paris, Nelson in England and Bismarck in Germany and in this way these heroes still live in public (Nazmi Ziya 1329: 118-120). He proposes that the artists should get to know the public and reflect their thoughts and feelings, a local and national way will be found in this way (Nazmi Ziya 1917: 149-152). He notes that as long as art does not follow a national purpose, it is impossible to make progress in other directions and that the development in Europe was accomplished in this way. Nazmi Ziya says: *“As long as we imitate the Europeans, they will be laughing at us rightfully and our people will not be showing interest to our paintings. That is the current situation right now. [...] Art is the key to the civilizations, and at least we are obliged to do this key ourselves.”* (Nazmi Ziya 1937: 5).

When Nazmi Ziya mentions “some of the painters who participated in the war” he must have Mehmet Sami Yetik and Mehmet Ali Laga in mind. Both of these artists have been imprisoned in Sophia for a year during the Balkan War when Edirne (Adrianople) was conquered by the Bulgarians². In one of the articles of Sami Yetik published in Ottoman Artists Association Journal (Sami 1330: 205-206), the person that he mentions as his friend must be Mehmet Ali Laga. According to this, Mehmet Ali like Hüseyin Arif knew the Academy in Sophia, and the examples of the Bulgarian paintings, and he points out that artists such as I. Mrkvička and A. Mitov are not to be found in our country: *“Please can you show me one tenth of the artworks similar to one of the greatest instructors (Mrkvička)? What did they do? How many tablets of imprints did they set forth concerning our national libertinism? This is not the way to raise artists, national artists.”* (Sami 1330: 205-206).

In his writings from the period, Muallim Vahyi (Ölmez) mentions about nationalism in art as follows: *“In our schools of fine arts and universities, it is not taken into consideration that they are Islamic, and especially Turkish institutions, and if for the literature and fine arts, sensitiveness and fictitiousness of the nationally borne prosperousness identifiable*

in education is not followed, it will be a shame. However, as far as we heard, in our school of fine arts, in the first year of education they are still using Neron's as their models" ... "Wouldn't it be necessary to build up sculptures of the greatest sultans such as Fatih, Yavuz, Kanuni, Selim III, Mahmud II? For the honourable staff of the School of Fine Arts there are two options, either to revive their Turkism, or to resign from their teaching posts. [...] The Seljuk and Ottoman Turkish civilizations abandoned fine arts which comprise the Islamic civilizations stage of future life accounts, the embroidery styles, the old towel heads, waistband tops, girth edges and corners, [...] even all the old and new artistic handmade staff which symbolize the Eastern taste to an extent must be examined." (Vahyi 1330: 289, 291).

The 1914-generation of artists (Çallı Generation) and especially those from the period after the proclamation of the Republic (1923) turned their attention to national themes such as the Turkish War of Independence, revolutions, Atatürk, peasants and farmers, harvest, crops, threshing, tractors, farmer families. However, it is possible to say that the works produced were not in sufficient amount or quality. For this reason, the artists and authors of the period still continued criticizing the formation of the national art in their articles³.

On the other hand, even what "national art" or "national character" means is not fully understood and it could cause discussions as for the making of military paintings, which were to be part of the national art, two important initiatives were undertaken: the first one was an organized trip of intellectuals (Heyet-i Edebiyye) to the Dardanelles during the war (1915), which had a significant importance for the Turkish history because such a visit to the frontiers has not been realized ever since. The second one was "Şişli Atölyesi" (Şişli Atelier 1917): the assembled painters were charged with the duty of painting pictures about war and heroism. These paintings were exhibited in Vienna, which also is important being the first Exhibition of Turkish artists in Europe.

As a result, it is possible to make a connection between nationalism and literacy, accordingly with education. Children of school age not only learned how to read and write, but got educated in geography, literature and history as well (Köroğlu 2004: 43-44). When the First World War began, literacy and primary education rates of the participant countries were almost at the level of 100%. When Bulgaria entered the war on the side of Germany towards the end of 1915, the literacy rate among the soldiers in its army was as high as 89.9% (Köroğlu 2004: 44). When the Ottoman community is studied we do not see very strong data as to the literacy rates, but the ratio is thought to have been around 10% in the period between 1914–1918 (Köroğlu 2004: 78). Those who were blamed and criticized for the lack of war literature and national art, etc. in our country, were mostly the artists, the writers and the philosophers; they were mostly blamed for not being nationalists, for not keeping connection with the public, and for being selfish. Even if the criticism was fair to some extent, the main reason was the retarded progress of the art of painting when compared to its development in Europe, due to the importance given to the art of painting and its training. But actually, it was not perceived or it was not wanted to be perceived that there was the role of the administrators in the formation of national art in Europe (Köroğlu 2004: 56). The propaganda studies which started at the beginning of the First World War became a programmed and wide spectrum study organized by the nations (Köroğlu 2004: 416). Though somewhat late, there

could be traced some national themes reflected in Turkish paintings. For all this it has to be emphasized the role of the writings by the artists from the period of transition from constitutional monarchy to republic, especially the role of Hüseyin Arif.

NOTES

¹ E. Topallı, “Ressam Nazmi Ziya Güran’ın (1881-1937) Yazıları: Sanatın Vazgeçilmezliği Üzerine Toplum Bilinçlendirme Çabaları”, Uluslararası Ahmet Yesevi’den Günümüze Türk Büyükleri Sempozyumu, 3-7 Şubat 2008, Romania – Constanza, Ankara 2009, pp. 203-207; E. Topallı, “Heyet-i Edebiyye’de İki Ressam: Nazmi Ziya ve Çallı İbrahim”, XIII. Ortaçağ ve Türk Dönemi Kazıları ve Sanat Tarihi Araştırmaları Sempozyumu Bildirileri, 14-16 October 2009, Denizli, 2010, pp. 631-638; E. Topallı, “Assembling of Turkish Painters by the state: Creation of National art”, History of Art History in Central-Eastern and Southern-Eastern Europe, Torun – Poland, 14-16 September 2010, pp. 259-264.

² E. Topallı, “Esir Asker Ressam Mehmet Ali Laga’nın Fırçasından 1913 Sofya’sı”, I. Mübadele ve Balkan Türk Kültürü Araştırmaları Kongresi, 8-9 December 2007, Samsun 2008, pp. 161-172; E. Topallı, “Turkish prisoner of war in 1913’s Sofia: Military Artist Mehmet Ali Laga (1878-1947)”, Second International Conference “The Balkans – Languages, History, Culture”, 22-23 October 2009, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, 2009, pp. 228-238.

³ The various articles of Nurullah Berk and Yakup Kadri can be given as examples of this.

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