

The Muse of the Museum: An Allegoric Story of a Non Existent Photography Museum in Turkey

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Apollo and the Muses, Simon Vouet, 1640

Purpose of this paper is to uncover the layers of a non-existent photography museum. Museums offer material conditions of existence and indications that constitute a sound basis of culture. Therefore studying the existence of museums can tell us a lot about the cultural state of a society. As a photography student studying visual arts in Turkey, I have developed a keen interest on how art and photography is appreciated in Turkish society. This interest urged me to compare the worldwide museum practices. This comparison led me to a conclusion that the history of Turkish museums was far more ephemeral than the world famous ones, the purpose of their existence was to form a cultural and historical unity among its citizens. Therefore they were mostly regarded as collectors of archives and the importance of artistic appreciation always had a secondary place. Photography has also taken its share from this approach and always been treated as a witness to history rather than an art form. Therefore no priority was given to a photography museum for decades and Turkey is still in need of one.

THE MUSE OF THE MUSEUM: AN ALLEGORIC STORY OF A NON EXISTENT PHOTOGRAPHY MUSEUM IN TURKEY

Known as the source of inspiration to all artists, especially poets, philosophers and musicians, the nine daughters of Zeus (god of sky and weather, law, order and fate) and Mnemosyne (goddess of memory) presided over arts and sciences in ancient times. The Odyssey of Homer mentioned their name in the very first sentence:

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course, once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy.
(Robert Fagles translation, 1996)

Music, museum, mosaic were all derived from their names and it was not a coincidence that the shrine of artistic creations would be named after the source of their inspirations.

The first museums in history were the gardens, temples, even some books and festivals that were devoted to the Muses. However, the roots of today's modern museum goes back to Alexandria, the main harbor of Ancient Egypt on the Mediterranean.

Ptolemy I (Soter), one of Alexander the Great's favourite generals and an educated man who enjoyed the company of artists, philosophers, poets and other writers, established the Museum and Library in Alexandria around 290 BC. Ptolemy decreed that copies be made of all the books of the world and the writings of all the nations.

Ptolemy II improved upon the example of his father, inviting famous poets, critics, scientists, philosophers and artists to Alexandria. He made the capital beautiful with architecture in the Greek style and, during his reign, Alexandria became the literary and scientific capital of the Mediterranean.

Building an institute of higher learning called the Mouseion, or Temple of the Muses, in Alexandria, the Ptolemies not only created a great centre of literature and science but also rooted the seeds of first collections.

In ancient times, sculpture and painting were not valued as an art form, rather they were seen as an artifice or a technique lacking the intellect that poetry, philosophy or music required. Therefore, they were not valued to be welcomed to the Temple of the Muses.

Though the Mouseion at Alexandria did not have a collection of sculpture and painting presented as works of art, as was assembled by the Ptolemies' rival Attalus at Pergamon, it did have a room devoted to the study of anatomy and an installation for astronomical observations. Rather than simply a museum in the sense that has developed since the Renaissance, it was an institution that brought together some of the best scholars of the Hellenistic world. This original Mouseion or Institution of the Muses was the source for the modern usage of the word museum that made a collection out of scholars under one roof. They were the centers of speculation and research, the places where Plato, Aristotle, and Ptolemy engaged their students in learning about the natural world.

THE MODERN MUSEUM

Museums explicitly and often unintentionally offer material conditions of existence, representations that produce meanings along with modes of production and indications that constitute a sound basis of culture. Each museum site is a cultural artifact and genuinely a palimpsest to be thoroughly studied. As a general category or as a specific site, they depict several layers with traces of earlier institutions, aesthetics, hierarchies of values and ideologies. When we remove the latest and most visible layer of its existence, an entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions, cultural policies, educational systems and communicative practices appear in stage.

When we look at the history of modern museum, we could say that it was developed as a space for displaying and expressing architecturally the values and power of the bourgeoisie

that dominated the economy, politics and cultural life in the nineteenth century Europe, especially after the French Revolution.¹ Seen more as a store-house with its goals of educating the public as well as refining its tastes and interests, the museum carried out its civilizing mission as 'evidence of political virtue' and 'an indication of government that provided the right things for its people.'²

In nineteenth century, the idea of progress seemed evident in advances in all areas of society - in transport, communication, industrial technologies and new consumer goods. Museums were thus ideally placed to represent these advances to the 'masses', convincing them of the advantages of industry and capital.

As Michael J. Ettema³ argues, the nineteenth-century museum can be understood as the embodiment of a view of history as a material progress. Put simply, this was the view that those civilizations which had the most complex objects were the most advanced. In displaying the objects of various cultures, museums taught a hierarchical understanding of cultural development and instilled the values of materialism. They linked objects to a system of values which supported the ideas of technological progress, individualism and aesthetics. These values were perceived as the basis for modern civilization.⁴

Since their invention in late eighteenth-century, museums have become among the most complex, powerful, and successful of modern sociopolitical institutions in time.

The epoch of the rise of the nineteenth-century public museums gave way to a new era at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when museums started to see themselves as centers of learning once again. They have become more than repositories and were considered as places where collections are interpreted for the public through exhibits and related educational programs.

How museums interpret their collections changes over time with the emergence of new techniques, scholarship, and viewpoints. As a matter of fact, what and how museums collect, and what and how they exhibit, are matters of increasing controversy in a pluralistic society. If museums are to be on the frontier of public appreciation and learning about their subject matter, they will be involved in controversies arising from new discoveries, new creations, and new interpretations about which there will be conflicting and forcefully articulated views.⁵

The museum is no longer, if ever it was, an institution which can be understood in its own terms as innocently engaged in the processes of the collection, conservation, classification and display of objects.⁶ On the contrary, it is one among many components in a complex array of cultural and leisure industries⁷, no longer certain of its role, no longer secure in its identity, no longer isolated from political and economic pressures or from the explosion of images and

¹ Deniz Unsal, "Museum Establishments and Cultural Policy in Turkey," in *Introduction to Cultural Policy in Turkey*, eds. Serhan Ada and Ayca Ince, (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2009), 159–189.

² Carol Duncan, "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds Ivan Karp and Steven Levine, (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 88.

³ Micheal Ettema, "History museums and the culture of materialism" in *Past Meets Present: Essays about Historic Interpretation and Public Audiences*, ed. J. Blatti, (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 62-85.

⁴ Andrea Witcomb, "Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum," (New York: Routledge, 2003), 105.

⁵ Willard L. Boyd, Museums as Centers of Controversy, in *Daedalus*, Volume: 128. Issue: 3, 1999, p. 185.

⁶ See Roger Miles and Lauro Zavala, *Towards the Museum of the Future: New European Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 161.

⁷ See R.Lumley, (ed.) *The Museum Time Machine*, (London: Routledge, 1988) and R.Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*, (London: Methuen, 1987).

meanings which are, arguably, transforming our relationships in contemporary society to time, space and reality.⁸

Museums have been strongly affected by discourses around electronic technologies and a sensitivity to media has brought widespread changes and challenges to contemporary museum practices. One of the most notable effects has been on the status of objects within museums. Their authority to 'speak' within a hegemonic system of representation is increasingly being questioned.⁹ The inclusion of new media, particularly electronic media is now seen as breaking the association between museums and objects and, in the process, transforming an elitist museum culture into a more democratic and popular one.

THE TURKISH CASE

Turkish museums are far more ephemeral than the world famous ones in general and the purpose of their existence was to form a cultural and historical unity among its citizens. The role of the museum in the public sphere and its relationship with the state and society has been determined by the political and economic structures of the day from the Ottoman period to our time. From asserting the sovereignty of a disintegrating empire to putting down the cultural and historical roots of a newly established Republic, the museum has been a space embodying the relationship that the state forms with society.

As mentioned in the previous part, the museum was an instrument of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie in testifying to its cultural capital and legitimacy. Unlike the west, we cannot speak of the presence of a bourgeoisie in Turkey which supported or incorporated the public museums set up by the state and adopted it as a tool for reflecting its world view and economic values until the mid-twentieth century.

Instead, museums were seen as a requirement of Westernization and established directly, following the decisions of the political authorities, in the early years of the Republic under the rule of one party.

The Republican museums served both as an ideological tool for injecting an awareness of national history and culture and as a means of creating an image of a state that championed its history and culture, and believed in scientific research and progress.¹⁰ However, developments in museums did not receive priority in political discourse, plans or programmes after the early years, especially after the 1950s. Starting in the 1960s, museology became specialized and bureaucratized following the appointment of trained specialists. As a result of archeological excavations, an increasing number of museums were built but seldom visited, with tight budgets for the display of their artefacts. In this sense, the museum succeeded neither in propagating 'Republican discipline' nor instilling the notion of westernization in the masses or the raising new class, but by the political elite and was a product of the state itself. From this perspective, the intertwined relationship of the museum-bourgeoisie observed in the West cannot be observed in either the Ottoman or the Republican museum.¹¹

One other difference between Turkey and the West at the time was the appreciation of the arts. Art of the period was closely observed at the palace and the surroundings during the Ottoman era. Religious customs of Muslims and Jews forbidding human and animal figures were preventing the interest in the society. Another factor preventing Western art trends to open into the Turkish society was the public preference to work in the army or administrative

⁸ A.Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

⁹ Andrea Witcomb, "Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum," (New York: Routledge, 2003), 103.

¹⁰ Deniz Unsal, "Museum Establishments and Cultural Policy in Turkey," in *Introduction to Cultural Policy in Turkey*, eds. Serhan Ada and Ayca Ince, (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2009), 159–189.

¹¹ Ibid.

and religion related positions. Therefore, almost all careers of art, crafts and commerce were left to the minorities. Museums were mostly regarded as collectors of archives and the importance of artistic appreciation always had a secondary place.

Photography has also taken its share from this approach and always been treated as a witness to history rather than an art form. The invention of photography was announced in a newspaper in Istanbul on 28th of October 1839. A booklet explaining Daguerre's type was translated and edited in 1841 and studios began to open. Druggists and chemists who were usually Armenians easily adopted the new technique with the help of the experience they had in their profession. They were followed by the Greeks and Europeans settled in Istanbul. Many people started dealing with photography in the palace and mansions of pashas. The palace made use of the influence of the photography. Albums of photographed harbours, factories, schools, barlocks, military units, committees coming from abroad, ceremonies and even all sentences to be pardoned were presented to the Palace. Camera obscura was being used in the military schools since the beginning of the 19th century. Photography classes were scheduled together with the painting classes. First Turkish photographers were of military origin. However, they were taking photographs for the sake of documentation.¹²

The Ottoman territories and the life style attracted attention of the Europe at the time. Selling photographs to these travellers became an important income for the studios that were opened in Istanbul and some other cities. These photographers documented city sights, sceneries, leading names of the period and the social life.

With the establishment of the young Republic, the photographers who supplied publications that promoted the Republic were supported. Travelling in the Asia Minor became customary.

Arşivler	Archives
2.37 Vakıf taşınmaz kültür varlıkları belge arşivinde vakıfların taşınmaz kültür varlıkları ile ilgili belge sayısı, 2009	
Number of documents related to immovable cultural properties of foundations at the immovable cultural properties of the foundation's document archives, 2009	
Türü- Type	Adet-Number
Toplam-Total	422 050
A. Yazılı belgeler-Written documents	
Tescil fişi-Registration slips	12 000
Kitabe fişi-Inscription slips	1 500
Onarım fişi-Repair slips	2 000
Kurul kararı-Council decisions	10 000
Mülkiyet belgesi-Proofs of ownership	7 200
Rapor-Reports	6 500
Harita-Maps	2 500
Yazışma-Correspondences	10 000
Bilgi notu-Information notes	5 250
Teknik metin-Technical texts	1 300
B. Görsel belgeler-Visual proofs	
Fotoğraf-Photographs	350 000
C. Teknik-Technics	
Rölöve-Surveyings	8 450
Restitüsyon-Restitutions	1 025
Restorasyon projesi-Restoration projects	3 250
Elektrik tesisat, betonarme projeleri, vaziyet planı Electricity installations, reinforced concrete projects, plans of site	1 050

Fig.1 Photographs are still the dominating medium in the state archives related to immovable cultural properties of foundations

¹² Mehmet Bayhan, "Turkish Photography" <http://www.lesartsturcs.org> (accessed 16.5.2011)

After the 1930's, like all other art branches, photography perked up with the founding of the Public Centers. Courses, exhibitions and competitions were arranged until Public Centers were shut in 1952. The oldest existing photography association was founded in 1959.¹³ Photography studies have accelerated especially after 1970 but could not reach to its rivals. The first photography department in university education was founded in 1979, but could only reach to six in present for a country having 73 million population.

A comprehensive cultural policy covering public and private museums that can oversee the relationship between culture and citizenship within a democratic framework could not still be established.

The technology for local production of camera equipments and supplies could not be transferred, but studios were able to solve technical and aesthetic problems. Advanced laboratories and minilabs spread over the country. However, the refinement of arts and crafts declined even further in the monotony of the secure laboratories.

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¹³ Mehmet Bayhan, "Turkish Photography" <http://www.lesartsturcs.org> (accessed 16.5.2011).