
Picturing History at the Ottoman Court

Emine Fetvacı

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Emine Fetvacı's field of interest is book arts in the Islamic world; in addition, she has an interest in Ottoman, Mughal and Safavid art and architecture. The work entitled *Picturing History at the Ottoman Court*, originated as a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Harvard in 2005.

In *Picturing History at the Ottoman Court* Fetvacı examines the role played by illustrated histories in the formation of Ottoman identity and the shaping of social hierarchies in the court during the 16th century. Fetvacı illuminates the nature of Ottoman illustrated history books, examining their production process with a specific reference to patronage, uses, purposes as well as the message that these works sent. She focuses on the second half of the 16th century, a period when the Ottoman court produced an unprecedented number of illustrated history manuscripts. The manuscripts not only comment

on contemporary events, but they also promote the political agendas of the members of the court and of the sultan, characterizing their patrons and creators in particular ways.

Moreover, manuscript illustrations in the second half of the 16th century increasingly reveal the Ottoman visual idiom, which at this time was moving away from the Persianate aesthetic. As highlighted by Fetvacı, the divergence of the two painting traditions is directly related to the nature of the texts being illustrated. The Ottoman manuscripts focus on contemporary history, whereas in the case of Safavids, the most famous illustrated texts were literary works, including epics and romances. This century also coincides with the bureaucratization of history, as court historians were increasingly selected from bureaucrats rather than poets.

In this period, manuscript patronage became an “image making” act that was utilized by diverse group of individuals, including the bureaucratic-military class and imperial household servants; thus identity was presented through a demonstration of culture, wealth and prestige. Interpretations of state structure and court hierarchy through illustrated histories changed in parallel with the changing patrons and political discourse. Accordingly, during the century, the representation of the ideal sultan and his relationship with the state and court in the illustrations also underwent changes.

Picturing History at the Ottoman Court consists of six chapters, an introduction, conclusion and index. After the introduction, the first chapter defines the particular audience for the manuscripts, while the second explains the process of making books at the Ottoman court. The next four chapters focus on four patrons and the books they supported, demonstrating the complex decision-making process in the course of production and the complex ways in which books interacted with their surroundings to produce meaning.

The introduction not only introduces the theme of the book, but also summarizes the historical and cultural context which gave rise to the illustrated histories and the complex community that was the court. Furthermore, in this section Fetvacı locates herself among a group of scholars which include Serpil Bağcı, Filiz Çağman and Zeren Tanındı, all of whom concentrate on issues of royal and non-royal patronage, production and image formation.

In the first chapter the process of producing manuscripts is illustrated with an emphasis on the idea that illustrated manuscripts were carefully constructed to shape and legitimize social hierarchies in the Ottoman court. In the following chapter the author provides details about book culture in the Ottoman court during the 16th century as well as about the sultans and their book preferences.

Chapter three focuses on the grand vizier, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha (d. 1579) and the court historian *şehnameci* Lokman who codified Ottoman historical records during the 1570s. As the focus of politics gradually shifted from the sultan's personality to the existing government and its institutions during the reigns of Süleyman I and Selim II, the grand vizier began to hold a more significant position. Sokollu's reign and patronage coincided with this power shift in the Ottoman court.

The *Futuhât-i Jamila*, a description of the 1551 Ottoman conquest of the castle of Timisoara, Pecs and Lipva, is the earliest manuscript that emphasizes Sokollu's involvement in military victories. *Nüzhetü'l-Ahbar der Sefer-i Sigetvar* (Chronicle of the Szigetvar Campaign), completed in 1569, is another manuscript eulogizing Sokollu's military and administrative skills. In this book he is depicted as a key figure in the success of the campaign as well as being instrumental in the smooth transfer of power from Süleyman I to his son Selim II. The *Nüzhet* is not the only work to emphasize the importance of the Szigetvar campaign and Sokollu's involvement. The *Zafarname* (1579), also known as *Tarikh-i Sultan Süleymân*, was written by the *şehnameci* Lokman, whose most direct and distinguished patron was Sokollu.

Based on her analysis of the manuscripts associated with Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, Fetvacı argues that the manuscripts we view today as "descriptive" were actually of a more prescriptive nature, showing the way history ought to have taken place according to the authors, or presenting the past in the most advantageous way to be remembered" (p. 145). She also claims that Sokollu's reputation as an excellent grand vizier is dependent upon the image presented in the illustrated history books produced during his tenure.

After Sokollu's death new court actors began to be involved in the ideological representation of the Ottoman court. Kapıcı Kara Mehmed Agha (d. 1590), the chief black eunuch, is one of these new actors. The image of the sultan in manuscripts, including the *Zübdetü't-tevarih* (The Quintessence of Histories), the *Sûrnâme-i humâyûn* (Imperial Festival Book, ca. 1588), the *Shâhanshâhnâme* (Book of the King of Kings), and the *Gencîne-i feth-i Gence* (The Treasury of the Conquest of Ganja), supported by Mehmed Agha, present a new imperial iconography that emphasizes the sultan's divinely ordained rule, as well as his lineage, generosity and his role as the leader of the Islamic community. These manuscripts attest to the new balances of power which endowed privileges to the extended imperial household.

The fifth chapter analyzes the artistic patronage of Sinan Pasha (d. 1596), an ambitious military figure, in relation to *gazânâme* manuscripts, including the

Nusretname (Book of Victory), the *Gencine-i feth-i Gence*, the *Şecâatname* (Book of Valor) and the *Gürcistân Seferi* (Georgian Campaign), produced during the late 16th century. Sinan Pasha was also involved in the production of *Tarih-i feth-i Yemen*, written by Rumuzi in 1594. This book eulogizes Sinan Pasha, who is represented as the most important military leader for the conquest of Yemen, and omits the successes of Osman Pasha who had indeed been instrumental in the conquest of the first few castles before Sinan Pasha arrived in Yemen.

In the final chapter the artistic patronage of Gazanfer Agha (d. 1603), the chief white eunuch, is analyzed. According to the author, the *Nusretname* strengthened Gazanfer Agha's circle of influence in an increasingly factionalized court. Agha cultivates the "literary courtier" image to blend in with Mehmed III's other companions. Although the rest of his artistic patronage was not overtly political, all such efforts reveal significant details about him and the court. Gazanfer Agha commissioned translations of the *Miftâh-ı cifrül-câmi* (The Key to Esoteric Knowledge), the *Destân-ı Ferruh ve Hümâ* (Story of Ferruh and Hüma) and the *Bahâristân* (Abode of Spring) into Ottoman Turkish.

Fetvacı argues that as the manuscript patronage shifted from the auspices of the harem to the privy chamber, the content and appearance of the manuscripts also changed from the political to the personal in artistic creation. To demonstrate this transformation she compares the *Süleymanname* (Book of Süleyman, 1558) and the *Hünername* (Book of Skill, ca. 1567-88) in the conclusion. The *Süleymanname* emphasizes Süleyman's military skills and justice, representing him as a lawgiver, whereas the *Hünername* illustrates Süleyman as a saint-like leader guided by intuition and morality.

The anecdote of the chronicler Mustafa Âli regarding Koca Sinan Pasha's commission of the *Tarih-i feth-i Yemen* is given at the beginning of the conclusion. Based on this anecdote Fetvacı argues that, "he (Mustafa Âli) clearly thinks books have the power to change the course of one's life, mediate in politics, and shape social relations". This claim is also in line with her argument that the political discourse of the 16th-century Ottoman court was integrated into the illustrated histories with its full complexity.

The significance of *Picturing History at the Ottoman Court* lies in its being one of the limited number of studies dealing with illustrated histories of the 16th century and the role they play in the political dynamics of the Ottoman court. The author, like a few other revisionist art historians, focuses on issues such as patronage, image making, balance of power and formation of imperial identity; these have not been examined by many Ottoman art historians. Thus, Fetvacı's attempt to demonstrate the complexity of 16th-century

Ottoman court and illustrated historiography should be appreciated. The author's treatment of the content, which offers many clues about court politics, instead of solely examining the technical characteristics of illustrations is quite enlightening.

Despite the political discourse embedded in the works, the illustrations are still artistic products created by an artist with a specific artistic style that characterizes both the artist and the trends of the era. Thus, the discursive aspect of illustrations should not overshadow the artistic quality or vice versa. At some points, Fetvacı illuminates readers about the technical features of the paintings, but in the final analysis she considers stylistic transformation to be an indicator of the shifting political discourse in the Ottoman court.

However, in order to prove her argument that illustrated books are influential in the careers of the court elite, Fetvacı overstates some cases. For instance, she directly relates the appointment of Ferhat Pasha to the position of grand vizier to the production of the *Gencîne-i feth-i Gence*. The book's contribution to Ferhat Pasha's appointment is well articulated in Fetvacı's analysis. However, underestimating other possible factors produces a mono-causal explanation, which could lead to a misinterpretation of Ottoman history in general.

There are some other cases in which Fetvacı overemphasizes the significance of illustrations in Ottoman history. She claims that Sokollu's reputation as an outstanding grand vizier depends entirely on his image presented in the illustrated history books produced during his tenure. This claim about the importance of illustrated manuscripts is not sufficiently substantiated in Fetvacı's work. Explaining the reputation of a political and military figure with mere positive image takes away from the complexity of the political dynamics in the Ottoman court and gives too much credit to illustrated histories.

Furthermore, the author does not share the methods or techniques by which she interpreted the paintings. Hence, it is difficult for the reader to fully comprehend and be convinced by the claims the author makes in her analysis. For a book that originated as a PhD thesis, methodological discussion should be the backbone of the research. However, except for one instance in the introduction, where the author refers to Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson to demonstrate her stance regarding the active agency of objects and art works, there is no reference to theorists who provide guidelines for interpreting artistic materials.

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