

ORIENTALISM REVISITED: AN ARTISTIC REDEFINITION OF THE ORIENTALIST IMAGERY. (CASE STUDY: ISTANBUL)

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ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century, the Orient – in my research the Orient is limited to Middle Eastern countries – attracted a considerable number of writers and painters, and eventually it became an immensely popular artistic destination. Several societal and cultural factors explain the attraction of Orientalism in this period. In the eyes of both the painters and their public, the Orient was a means to break loose from the rigid Western morality, an exciting escapism. Nowadays, however, the genre seems to have become completely obsolete as an artistic practice, due to some extent to Edward Said's publication of *Orientalism* in 1978. Even though his criticism of the Western image of the Orient has been toned down, it is difficult to dissociate Orientalism as an artistic movement from its pejorative connotation with Western imperialism. The contemporary Western art world is reluctant to consider the Orient as an artistic subject. Trying to dissociate Orientalism and its connotation with Western imperialism remains a difficult and delicate matter. Moreover, the current political instability and Western uneasiness towards Islamic culture only complicate the situation. In addition to these ideological reasons, formal elements are responsible for the decline of interest in Orientalist art as well. The iconography of the nineteenth-century Orientalist painters is characterised by exotic fantasies expressed in exuberant colours, resulting in stereotypical images. The power of the Orient as an artistic subject does not reside in creating a twenty-first century sequel to this imagery, but in representing the Orient through sensory impressions based on the perceptions of the artist. In my PhD research I redefine the exuberant Oriental imagery and restore the Orient as a source of inspiration for artistic experiment.

In this paper I will present both the general background of my PhD research as I mentioned above, and a specific case study of my artistic research. I am currently working on an artistic project in which I investigate to what extent Istanbul still has the power to enchant foreign artists like it did in the past. Firstly, I examined literary fragments from writers who visited Istanbul in the nineteenth century (Edmondo de Amicis, Gérard de Nerval, ...), and took a close look at artworks from Orientalist artists that drew inspiration from the city (Antoine Ignace Melling, Jean-Léon Gérôme, ...). Secondly, I lived in Istanbul for several months and collected my own Istanbul-archive, consisting of photos, drawings, textual fragments and videos. Finally, I engage in a dialogue between my own work and the texts and images from the past.

Keywords: Orientalism, Middle East, Istanbul, nineteenth century, art.

1. STATE OF THE ART/INTRODUCTION

In the nineteenth century, the Orient attracted a considerable number of writers and painters and eventually it became an immensely popular artistic destination. Several societal and cultural factors explain the attraction of Orientalism in this period. (Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 17–32) Numerous painters gained fame depicting the exotic fantasies of the Western bourgeoisie. Their paintings were often stereotypical representations of exotic landscapes and beautiful women (e.g. Jean- Léon Gerôme, Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant). In the eyes of both the painter and his public, the Orient was a means to break loose from the rigid Western morality, an exciting escapism.

Despite the fact that the Orient turned out to be a source of readymade exotic images as well as a place for artistic development, Orientalism started to lose its appeal at the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, the genre seems to have become completely obsolete as an artistic practice, due to some extent to Edward Said's publication of *Orientalism* in 1978. Even though his criticism of the Western image of the Orient has been toned down (e.g. Warraq, 2006), it is difficult to dissociate Orientalism as an artistic movement from its pejorative connotation with Western imperialism.

Collectors still treasure the paintings, but the contemporary Western artistic scene is rather reluctant to devote their artistic practice to Orientalism because of formal (1) as well as ideological (2) reasons.

(1) A key notion in the visual language of nineteenth-century Orientalists is excess; exotic fantasies rendered in exuberant colours. Orientalist paintings hardly surpass the stereotypical romanticised and eroticised burst of colours, which approaches kitsch. This image is still being kept alive by the movie industry a (e.g. with *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, 2010) and seems to be engraved in our collective memory. The close relationship with this iconography is one of the reasons that make the Orient an unpopular theme for Western artists.

(2) Westerners also encounter difficulties in representing the Orient because they are outsiders entering countries that still bear the painful memories of a colonial past. Moreover, their political instability complicates travelling to the Middle East and sheds a negative light on the area, feeding the Western uneasiness towards Islamic culture. In short, the balance between political and cultural entities in the Middle East is very precarious, which makes the Western perception of the region highly complex.

The historical genre's connotation with kitsch and excess on the one hand, and the current issues in the Middle East on the other, have eliminated the Orient as a topic in contemporary Western visual arts. Some documentary photography could be considered as art (e.g. Schuytser, 2012; Depoorter, 2012), but the photos' artistic intentions are always subordinated to their journalistic value. The artistic representation of the Orient is almost exclusively an activity of local artists. Several tendencies are at work here, but generally this is politically motivated art denouncing different aspects of the social and political life, rather than art that tries to translate sensory impressions into an artistic representation of a land(scape). Conceptual art, pop art, calligraphic minimalism, postmodern pastiches of the

nineteenth-century Orientalism: these are but a few of the artistic languages artists use to bring violence, war, globalisation, gender, belief and other issues to the public's attention (see Sloman, 2009).

Both Western and local artists seem to neglect art representing the Orient based on affects and sensory experiences. Even though it is far from self-evident for the Westerner to claim the land(scape) of other people for artistic representation, the attraction of the Orient as an artistic topic resides exactly in this position of the outsider. Independence might be a prerequisite for an artist to be able to see the artistic possibilities of his surroundings (e.g. Boehm, 2005, 140). In a foreign country, the artist is in a different way receptive to the environment, which enables him to open up freely to the light, to particular details, to the aesthetics of the ugly and the beauty of the unexpected.

2. ORIENTALISM REVISITED: GENERAL OBJECTIVE AND INTERPRETATION

In my PhD research I aim at a revision of the Orientalist imagery through a draughtsman's visual language, converting the impressions and experiences of the artist into visual images. By consistently starting from concrete sensory perceptions, I want to change the negative view of Orientalism caused by its connotation with stereotypical, exuberant imagery. This emphasis on sensory experiences implies that the landscape (natural and urban) plays a crucial role in the artistic experiments. Inevitably, representations of Oriental landscapes will remain ideologically charged (e.g. Delue & Elkins, 2008, 88-150). Poverty, religion, politics and tourism all leave their traces on the landscape and are subtly denounced through artistic representation. Yet this ideological aspect is not the main objective in the visual experiments, but an additional consequence that gives an extra dimension to the artworks.

Through the use of visual techniques that emphasize the artist's experiences, the exuberant Oriental iconography can be redefined and the Orient can be revalorized as a source of inspiration for artistic experiment, despite the tension that currently determines the relationship between the West and the Middle East.

My work is not bound to a specific technique, but I have a background as an illustrator. It is important that my images invoke sensory stimuli upon their audience, and there are different techniques fit for that goal.

Due to the convoluted subject, there will always be a certain tension in my work. This tension is perceptible on various levels:

(1) Firstly, the relation between form and content can be tense. Aesthetics guide me in my creation process. These days, however, the Orient – as mentioned above – suffers from war and many other problems. Including such problems in my artworks in a way that the images are visually attractive, creates a contradiction. As an artist, I enjoy seeking aesthetics in things that are unappealing to the eye.

(2) Another tension is distinguishable between realism and formalism. It is not my purpose to make a journalistic record of my travels in the Middle East. *“These photographs taken at random by a wandering camera do not in any way attempt to give a general picture*

of any of the countries in which that camera has been at large.” (Bresson, 1952) Even though I want to redefine Orientalist imagery, I don't claim or want to give an accurate and complete representation of the 'real' Orient. My work is not a direct representation of reality, at most it gives an image of my personal reality, which in no way is the 'real' or 'true' Orient.

Even though sensory perceptions are at the basis of the visual experiments, the artwork is not a direct representation of these impressions. Realism is not a prerequisite for this new draughtsman's imagery because an exact depiction of a place is not always representative for the impressions this place evokes. Selection, imagination and personal formalism – a formal stripping of redundancy which demonstrates a personal vision – are invoked in the attempt to redefine the Orient in an affective, artistic way.

Despite the theoretical background of this research, I want the creation process to be free, unrestricted and not laid out in advance.

(3) Orientalist imagery has a long tradition that seems impossible to avoid. By depicting evident things in an oriental landscape, like a palm tree, a camel, or by photographing a desert landscape, you engage yourself in this tradition. In my series of images, there is a tension between the Orientalist image tradition and between modernity: elements (architectural, human) that seem intruders in this vast tradition.

(4) There is also a tension between expectation and reality. Travelling generally consists of three stages: the anticipation, the journey itself and retrospection. Our expectation of the Orient is formed by news media, but to a large extent we still believe in the Hollywood Orient too: a place of exotic fantasies. These expectations are hardly lived up to in reality, and initially disillusion accompanies you. After some time, however, you start to admire things that you didn't expect to encounter, and the disappointment makes place for wonder.

My works move back and forth between these contradictions, which empower my artwork. It is not necessary to focus on finding the right balance between them, because this seems to happen naturally.

3. INSPIRATION

During my research I draw inspiration from everything that crosses my path, but there are some main sources that lead me in image making and writing. I don't use the following sources in a specific order.

3.1. LITERATURE

There is a great amount of marvellous travel literature written about the Orient through the ages. However, this literature is written by outsiders, and it is not always clear to what extent their diary is a recording of true events or mixed with creations of the mind, it offers an affective knowledge about the Orient. Authors as Gérard de Nerval are masters in ventilating the affects that go hand in hand with travelling. The Orient is a place that evokes melancholy, admiration, joy, but also disappointment and aversion. Although much of this literature is written in the past, these affects still sound very familiar to a

contemporary traveller.

When I read a travelogue after I visited the same place myself, I look for similarities and differences; I rediscover my own trip from a different viewpoint while reading the book. When you read it in advance, it creates certain expectations that are lived up to or not, and determine your sentiment regarding a place.

Literary descriptions offer a specific form of knowledge about the Orient; they are able to differentiate and deepen our view on the Middle East by focusing on the affective aspects of the experience of the Orient. As such, literature forms a subtle but necessary counterbalance for the explicit, stereotypical imagery of the Middle East that we see on the news, in Hollywood movies or in touristic brochures.

3.2. ORIENTALIST ART HISTORY

Although Orientalist art history is not the primary source of technical inspiration for my own work, it inspires me on a different level. The paintings bring alive light, colour and atmosphere of the Orient, and awaken a desire to be in another place than behind my computer.

Paintings, drawings and engravings compose your expectations in a similar way as travelogues. They give you an idea of how Orientalist artists perceived their environment and chose to depict it. Other than their written counterparts, they focus almost exclusively on the idyllic Orient, which presently you may find nearly untouched only on rare occasions. (Visiting a deserted Egyptian temple makes you still feel as if you are wandering through one of David Robert's watercolours for example.)

These artworks also make you understand how the Western image of the Orient developed, and how sometimes the current Orient tries to live up to that image wherever tourism finds its way.

The Orient that was never 'real' becomes thus reality in a very estranging manner.

Some modernist Orientalists who considered the Orient as a place for artistic development, do influence my visual experiments. They transformed visual perceptions into a more abstract, colourful, and personal reality. Henri Matisse was inspired by Islamic art when painting Orientalist patterns, Paul Klee united the view of the graphic artist and the painter in his representation of Arabic towns; an analysis of their works inspires me to reconsider my own representational questions.

3.3. TRAVEL

During this research project I try to spend time in the Orient as well, avoiding the tourist traps as much as possible. Only on the spot can you be inspired by the sunlight, the indefinite vastness of the desert and mountains, the subtlety and variety in colours, the capricious shapes of Islamic architecture (especially its domes and minarets), the vegetation, ruins, ever-growing cities, traffic, smells, noise, ...

3.4. VISUAL INSPIRATION

While travelling you have a chance to reflect on the travelogues you have read and artworks you have seen, you collect an archive with visual and written impressions that will form the basis of your own artistic work.

Every artist has his own image archive that he collected over the years with images he liked or found worth remembering. This archive is consulted mostly at the beginning and/or during a creation process. My own archive consists of many subdivisions, like (Asian) landscape art, Ottoman and Persian miniatures, old illustrated maps, old scientific drawings, Orientalism, modernists, old photos, some contemporary art as well, ...

I use these sometimes as technical inspiration (composition, material, colour...).

4. CASE-STUDY: ISTANBUL (AND TURKEY)

The past year my research focused on Istanbul (and Turkey) as a source of Orientalist inspiration. The city was an interesting workstation because it is literally a bridge between West and East. It is a place in which two different worlds collide, sometimes causing a mess by doing so.

In this case, I also based my work on literature, art history and my own experiences.

4.1. LITERATURE

Before I went living in Istanbul for a year, I became acquainted with the nineteenth-century Istanbul of Gerard de Nerval, a French romantic writer. His melancholic and depressive nature was temporarily cured in the city of two continents. He admired the picturesque streets, enjoyed the entertainment during the Ramadan nights (listening to storytellers in the cafés and watching the Karagöz shadow theatre), and was naively moved when the sultan looked him in the eye and they shared a moment of understanding. Istanbul appeared to him as a spectacle in which he forgot all that troubled his mind in France. Nevertheless, he had an eye for the steady Europeanization of the city, describing the streets of Beyoglu and their similarities to London and Paris. However, he didn't perceive Istanbul as a melancholic city (yet). De Nerval also praised the religious and ethnic tolerance in the city: "*quatre peuples différents qui vivent ensemble sans trop se haïr. Turcs, Arméniens, Grecs et Juifs, enfants du même sol et se supportant beaucoup mieux les uns les autres que ne le font, chez nous, les gens de diverses provinces ou de divers partis.*" (De Nerval, 1851, II-153)

I loved reading de Nerval because of his curious nature, his openness and acceptance of the Other and the fact that he was not, like many of his colleagues were, too arrogant to question his own European beliefs.

At the beginning of my stay in Istanbul, I read Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories and the city* (2005). Written from the position of a contemporary insider, it gives a totally different view on Istanbul than the one I became acquainted with. He speaks of *hüzün* – a collective melancholy – as the central feeling of Istanbul and its inhabitants, a feeling that slowly befell me as well the more I grew familiar with the city. The Oriental beauty is ingurgitated by modern constructions, eating away the soul of the city. Pamuk likes to dwell

through the backstreets of Istanbul, in search for ruins of the past.

Later on I also read some old travel accounts of the city, from Harrison Griswold Dwight (1915), Edmondo de Amicis (1877), Julia Pardoe (1838), Thomas Allom (1839) and (1911). Even though they generally marvelled at the beauty of the city, you may find some critical notes that seem to be indications of the present-day Istanbul.

"Often, while gazing at Constantinople from the bridge of the Sultan Validé, I would be confronted by the question, "What is to become of this city in one or two centuries, even if the Turks are not driven out of Europe?" Alas! There is but little doubt that the great Holocaust of beauty at the hands of civilization will have been already accomplished." (de Amicis, 1896, 172)

"Everything on earth has an end. We have been told so ever since we were children. On and on and on, and now the houses of Kaliji Oghlu grow fewer, woods begin to appear; there is but one more group of dwellings. Quickening our pace, we passed them by, and at last reached - Merciful Heavens! What did we reach? Nothing in the world but another suburb." (de Amicis, 1896, 115-116)

In short, the literature I read about the city before and during my stay in Istanbul, gave me an image of a two-faced city that is forced into a future in which it originally did not belong. The affects of the authors who spent time in Istanbul vary from melancholy and regret to adoration and bewilderment.

4.2. ORIENTALIST ART HISTORY

Istanbul was an evident stop for almost every Orientalist artist. Like I mentioned earlier, Orientalism in visual arts was more one-dimensional and idyllic, this also goes for the Istanbul-orientalism. Painters as Jean-Léon Gérôme painted harem scenes, slave markets, Turks with turbans smoking hookah, oriental girls visiting a hamam, ... This is exactly the kind of Orient that is responsible for the image of our current Hollywood-, or Disney-Orient. It is hard to say if this Istanbul was ever real. It may have been – it is not so hard to imagine similar scenes while visiting the Topkapi palace –, but even if it was, it shows a very selective part of the old Istanbul. (Fig.1)

A different tone can be found in the works of Antoine Ignace Melling, much admired by Orhan Pamuk. His engravings, though still very beautiful and idyllic, seem more real than the ones of contemporary colleagues, like Thomas Allom. His city and Bosphorus views are less dramatic and romantic, and feel very 'real'. He doesn't seem to be hiding or exaggerating parts for the sake of the exotic. Still this is a very majestic Istanbul, and reality will not always have been so alluring. (Fig.2)

The Orientalist Istanbul is here an intoxicating city of salacious dreams and exciting architecture, without the melancholic undertone we can find in the nineteenth-century Orientalist literature.

4.3. MY OWN EXPERIENCES

I have lived in Istanbul for ten months, and have had time to consider whether the current city lives up to the expectations created by its literature and art history. During this time I collected lots of photographs, notes, some sketches and even videos. My memories of Istanbul have similarities with those written in the old travelogues, but they are fundamentally different.

Istanbul is a city with two identities, on two continents. It does not seem to know which side to choose. The city became too much a Westernized metropolis to feel like a traveller in the Orient. It is a metropolis, but actually in ways that would not be possible in the West. The city already reached its bursting point, but new constructions keep sprouting everywhere, at the expense of its beautiful past. Heritage and aesthetics are very often ignored in the current urban planning, and I saw too many places that I liked being broken down in only this short time.

"These are nothing like the remains of great empires to be seen in Western cities, preserved like museums of history and proudly displayed. The people of Istanbul simply carry on with their lives amongst the ruins." (Orhan Pamuk, 2005, 91)

Sadly enough, this side of Istanbul is becoming more and more prominent and oppresses what is left of its magnificent past. Wandering through the city, I feel that melancholy is always present under the surface. In the depiction of Istanbul, the tension between the Orientalist image tradition and modernity is very present, but the latter takes precedence.

This magnificent past implies mostly the great mosks and palaces, which I much admire, but I feel that this beautiful side of the city fails to show its oriental soul as well. Tourists swarm around like ants, the monuments are surrounded by kitschy souvenir shops, bad kebab places and selfie sticks. You are forced in the role of a tourist and have a hard time keeping off pushy guides. With the little bit of your attention that is still available you can admire the majestically decorated domes in the Blue Mosque or the superb mosaics in the Aya Sofia, lost in flashes and screams. In the touristic neighbourhoods, it also becomes clear how locals want to respond to the Hollywood-image of the Orient: ice cream-sellers wearing traditional outfits, waiters wearing a fez (even in Ottoman times fezzes were only for rich city dwellers), over the top ornamental decoration... Some regions became almost like a small Disneyland.

However, this does not mean that the 'oriental soul' is totally gone in Istanbul. From time to time one stumbles upon it unexpectedly, in a local 'pazar' for example (a big open market with food, clothes, fabrics, and much more), in the old neighbourhoods with streets where they are selling just one specific thing in every building, and another in the next street, or when you see a street seller pushing a wooden chariot full of melons in the night with a tiny oil lamp, in big families having a party in the local parks or sometimes next to a highway, or in the always peaceful old cemeteries. The beautiful Eyüp cemetery, for example, makes me feel as if I am walking into art history, as it offers an almost unspoiled vision of the Ottoman times.

In this case, it also seems that disappointment makes place for wonder and liking of things that are unexpected, more subtle in their otherness, but also much more real.

Another thing that I experienced to be quite different from the Orient I imagined, was the weather. I always thought the Orient, and Istanbul, were warm places. Nothing could be further from the truth. I've faced a stronger winter in Istanbul than I can recall enduring in Belgium since many years. It was very cold and it snowed heavily from time to time.

Last but not least, the tolerance between the different ethnic groups De Nerval admired so much, is not so evident the present day. Most of the non-Turks were driven out of Istanbul in the nineteen fifties. The ones who are left, and the recent Syrian refugees, are not always receiving a warm welcome.

Although these remarks may sound rather negative, I think Istanbul still has a lot to offer to the artist. Sometimes you have to look at your surroundings without their loaded contexts; empty-minded. When you forget about the orientalist frame, the opposition between East and West, the threatening urban development projects, religion, death, the problematic future of the city, ..., you may experience things that strike you as an artist: the shapes of the minarets echoed in cypresses and the skyscrapers in the distance, the melon-shaped domes and beautifully sculptured Ottoman gravestones changing colour in harmony with the hour of day, the vibrantly lit shores of the Bosphorus and the thousands of lights of its first bridge flickering in many colours in the night, and so on. Although modernity has shown many of its worst features in Istanbul, the city still manages to enchant one's senses. These sensory experiences soften the troubled face of Istanbul and should be formulated before they vaporise, in words, drawings, photographs... as a means to extend the artist's visual archive. This visual archive shows that this piece of the Orient, stripped from its context, offers a sensory knowledge that makes you a more eloquent artist. For the spectator, these sensory impressions mean a welcome supplement to the stereotypical image of the Orient.

However, I still like to dwell on such impressions in my work and rather enjoy painting those tiny pieces of Golden Horn shore where trees still dominate the view, I have experienced that I slowly started to lose my status as an outsider. I said earlier that independence might be a prerequisite for an artist to be able to see the artistic possibilities of his surroundings (e.g. Boehm, 2005, 140); I am still in that position, but after some time I realised I got more involved. There are some things going on in Istanbul that I cannot and do not want to ignore. These aspects infiltrated my work as well.

4.4. MY WORK

The previous components form the basis of three art projects that synthesize my Istanbul-experience.

4.4.1. SALT

I printed a selection of my photos in the nineteenth-century photographic salt print technique. This technique in which the photos resemble paintings in sepia tones, is a reference to the Istanbul of the Orientalists. The subjects vary, and are a combination of

photos that represent my feelings towards modern-day Istanbul. This means that there are also images of the destruction of the immigrant neighbourhoods, as well as the lamps of the bazaar and chickens running down the street in Eminönü. Technique and content contradict each other, just like Istanbul contradicts itself in almost every street corner.

When I was working with salt to print my photos, it felt like the right technique for the Turks. Coming from Europe I realized each day how we have a sugar culture and Turkey a salty one. (Fig.3-4)

4.4.2. TURKEY'S CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS.

In series of images I draw objects that are typical for Istanbul (and Turkey) as archaeological finds. I am trained as archaeological illustrator, and apply a technique in which an object is drawn very precisely in ink. This technique, that demands a lot of time and careful attention, suggests that the objects are valuable, which is not exactly true in this case. Here, there is thus a contrast between form and content.

Objects that are chosen to draw are among others, a simit (a typical Turkish circular bread with sesame seeds), a transparent plastic bag (which Turks are using for everything, also their bread), a tesbih (the Turkish rosary for praying, many men carry it through the streets) and a selfie stick (sold on every street corner by Turks screaming "selfieler"). (Fig.5-6)

4.4.3. RE-ENGRAVING ISTANBUL

In a last project I revisited the places from some of Antoine Ignace Melling's engravings published in his *Voyage Pittoresque de Constantinople et des Rives du Bosphore* (1819). I looked for some landmarks that are still recognizable and reconstructed the drawings in their present-day form. However some of them are still similar, the atmosphere and architecture is quite different in my drawings. This project is an easy way to show how the city is different than the one the Orientalist artists visited. Also here I place myself technically in the Orientalist tradition and engage myself in a dialogue between my own work and historical works. (Fig.7-8)

All of the projects show my love for handwork and time-consuming procedures. In a time in which art became volatile and ready-mades are esteemed equal to renaissance paintings, I want to revive outdated processes and genres. These techniques not only demand a larger amount of time in the creative process, but also invite the viewer to look closer and longer. Profound observation often seems to have become a lost habit in these multimedia times, which every artist can only regret.

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Fig. 1: Gérôme, J.-L., 1886, *The Terrace of the Seraglio*.



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Fig. 2: Melling, A.I., 1819, *Marche Solennelle du Grand-Seigneur, le Jour du Baïram*.



Fig. 3: examples of photos fit for this project.



Fig. 4: an example of one of my photos that I printed as a salt print.

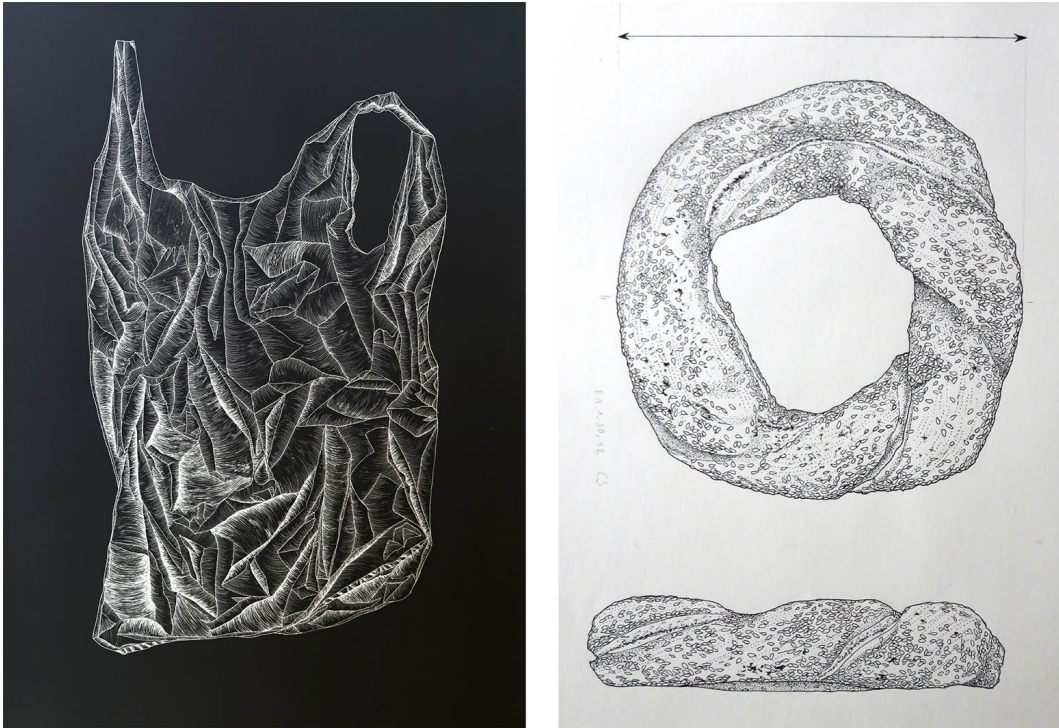


Fig. 5-6: two works of the Turkey's contemporary archaeological finds' series.



Fig. 7: Tophane, after Mellings *Vue de la Place et des Casernes de Top-Hané à l'entrée du port de Constantinople.*

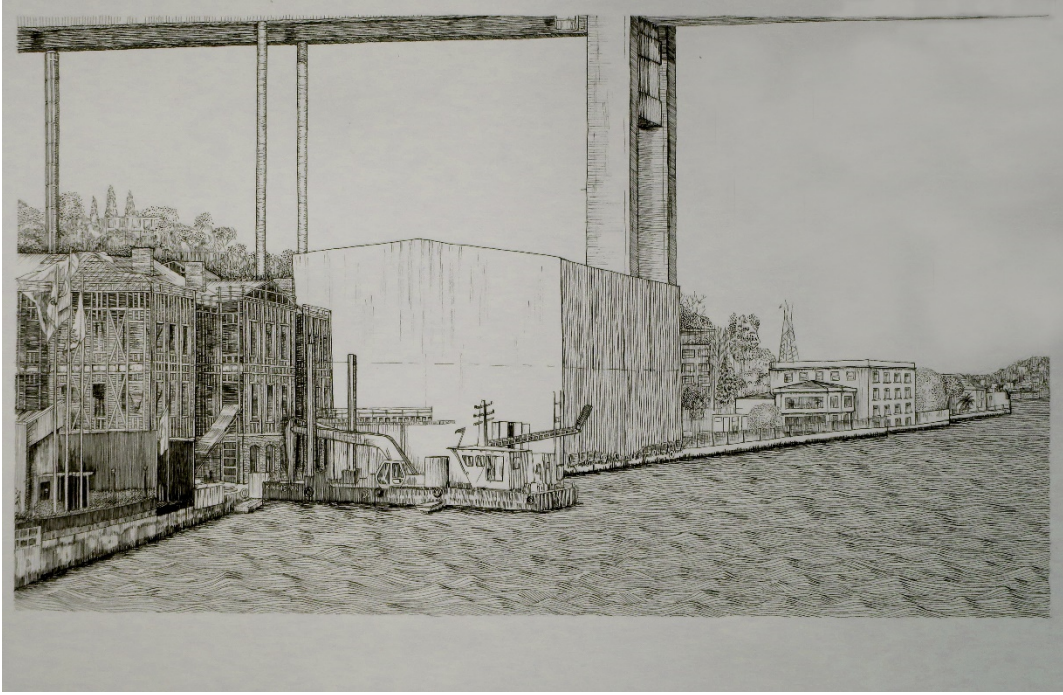


Fig. 8: Hatice Sultan Sarayı, after Mellings *Palais de la Sultane Hadidgé*.