

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR GÜLRU NECİPOĞLU

Gülru Necipoğlu is Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Director of the Aga Khan Program at the Department of History of Art and Architecture in Harvard University. She is regarded as one of the most important historians of Islamic art and architecture working today. Professor Necipoğlu has written substantially on the modern construction of the field of Islamic art, on Ottoman visual culture, and on early modern Islamic art and architecture. She is well known for her writings on historiographical and methodological issues, and for her distinctive comparative, cross-cultural approach. She has published numerous books and articles in the field of art and architectural history. Her books include *Architecture, Ceremonial Power: The Topkapı Palace* (1991); *The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (1995); and *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire* (2005). She is also the editor of *Muqarnas: an Annual on the Visual Cultures of the Islamic World* and an elected member of the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Professor Gülru Necipoğlu was interviewed for *Tarih* by **Gizem Tongo**.¹

First of all, on behalf of the graduate journal of the history department, I would like to thank you for this interview. Let's start with a few personal questions before we proceed to more specific questions about your research. Since 1993, you have been the Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture at Harvard University, where you earned your PhD in 1986. What has been your experience of being a Turkish female scholar in a prestigious university like Harvard?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

Before my appointment as Aga Khan Professor, I started teaching as an assistant professor, one year after I finished my PhD in 1986. I was lucky to earn a post-doctoral Mellon fellowship at Columbia University, so I spent a year there at the Society of Fellows in the Humanities, both teaching and doing research. That year was a nice transition to become a professor in the department where I had been a student; to change roles and to discover what

¹ I would like to thank Lee Beadoen, Selim Güngörürler and Yan Overfield Shaw for their critical commentary on the interview questions.

kinds of lecturing techniques suited my personal style. Even though I had been a teaching assistant, I had never had a course on my own, so that was a good transitional experience. I felt very much welcome at Harvard as a Turkish scholar; my department is very international, so I did not feel like a foreigner at all. As for being a woman, it was a good time because when I had been a student there, there were no female instructors in the faculty; it was all male. We, as female students, signed a petition showing how asymmetrical this situation was, when the majority of students in art history were women, while most – all! – of the faculty consisted of male professors. Just around that time, Harvard changed its policy and then began to make moves to include more female candidates in the recruitment process. So, when I began to teach, the percentage changed rapidly, to the point of becoming more like fifty-fifty. I think this made the situation much healthier and more welcome for all types of students.

To see the change in the demographics was really interesting. When I started to teach, I was the youngest person in the faculty (also having been a student there, I was in a special position). However, very quickly, most of the senior faculty retired, and the age level changed; it became a much younger department. Before that, there had been a clear hierarchy between the senior professors and the junior faculty. One of the chairs in our department made a radical move to equalize this, and make it a more democratic department, with graduate student representatives and undergraduate student representatives also being allowed to attend departmental meetings. So it became a very pleasant department to teach in.

You have written on Ottoman visual culture, early modern Islamic art and architecture and cross-cultural artistic exchanges between Byzantium, Renaissance Italy and Islamic lands. How did your specialization develop?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

I began to study art history as an undergraduate. I went to the States when I was 18 or 19 years old, after finishing Robert College here in Istanbul in 1975. At that time, my interest was in studying late medieval, Byzantine and Renaissance art, which would become my major. I wrote my senior honors thesis on an Italian Renaissance subject, namely the city of Pienza, an ideal city created by a Renaissance Pope in Italy. At that time I was beginning to discover Islamic art, thanks to the guidance of my professors, one of whom assigned a paper project, in which I was supposed to compare the emergence of early Islamic art with early Christian art; both of them being born in a Mediterranean context where the Roman or late antique tradition was adopted but translated into the new religious setting. I was fascinated! My professors furthermore pointed out that this was an underdeveloped field, and that my

background and knowledge of Turkish and coming from this region would make an important contribution to the field. The texts I read also showed it was wide open in terms of making new discoveries and asking innovative questions. This contrasted with the Renaissance situation where selecting a thesis topic seemed to me very difficult because you could find at least ten other books written on every subject. So the openness of the field was very attractive to me. I applied to Islamic art programs, which were very few – only 3 or 4 existed at that time – and I selected Harvard, not only because it was renowned in architectural history, but also because the Aga Khan Program of Islamic Architecture had just been established in '78. I applied in '79 because it seemed like a very good opportunity to be in that program. I must admit, though, initially I did not have any kind of focus; I did not know what period or what kind of subject I would study in Islamic art. My Professor, Oleg Grabar, is a famous medievalist, and he himself focused primarily on the very early Islamic period. His book on the formation of Islamic art was a very big influence on me. Had he guided me more in that direction, I may very well have become an expert on Abbasid or Umayyad art. But at that time, and also because the Aga Khan Program had started to broaden the horizons of Islamic art into later periods, my professor assigned me the Süleymaniye complex as my first seminar paper topic. This eventually became my qualifying paper, and was published as one of my earliest articles. So I must say that it was thanks to his guidance that I began to move to Ottoman studies, which was probably natural. But if I had been encouraged in another direction, maybe I would have chosen a medieval Islamic topic.

Can we say that, due to your identity, Oleg Grabar wanted you to study something he felt you belonged to?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

That's very interesting, because right now most people think along those lines. There has been a review on the state of the Islamic field written by Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom in *Art Bulletin* (2003), and it argues that most people coming from Middle Eastern countries only study their own traditions because they are interested in finding out their roots and their identity. Actually, I think a lot of this is due to the professors who believe that, oh, this person is coming from that culture and will therefore be able to understand it in greater depth; like a "native informant" of sorts. I should say that, of course, I wouldn't have studied Ottoman art if it didn't interest me, but Oleg Grabar similarly guided Iranian students to study Safavid art, and more than a search for one's own roots and identity, the guidance of advisors played a decisive role.

In your academic career to date, what would you describe as your most exciting historical discovery in the field?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

I think it is difficult to say... I think the documents that I discovered in the course of my doctoral dissertation were among the most exciting because, at that point, it was a period of great awakening and continual discovery. Many of these early discoveries, which I did not use directly in my dissertation on the Topkapı Palace, led to articles and other publications. One of them was related to the helmet-crown of Süleyman, concerning the contextual aspects of this unique object, on which I wrote an article later on ("Süleyman the Magnificent and the Representation of Power in the Context of Ottoman-Hapsburg-Papal Rivalry," *Art Bulletin*, 1989(71):401-27). I still keep finding relevant documents related to it. Also, when I was doing archival research on the Topkapı Palace, one of the important discoveries I made was the wholesale renovation of the palace ordered by Sultan Süleyman during the grand vizierate of İbrahim Paşa. Contextualizing the artistic patronage of that period, with İbrahim Paşa as one of the important intermediaries, and then noticing the switch in identity that happens with Rüstem Paşa, was one of the formative moments in my career. I began to see how the commissioning process was much more complex than was initially thought. Most of the scholarship until that point focused on sultanic patronage, but to see the broader patronage bases of state officials, and how changes in the cabinet could lead to different ideological strategies in cultural politics was a new aspect that I uncovered. Moreover, another very exciting discovery was the role played by Sinan's predecessor, Acem Alisi, also known as Mimar Alaeddin, who was the chief architect before him. He not only emerged in the documents as the architect who extensively renovated the Topkapı Palace under Süleyman, but also transformed it with a different, more Persianate idiom. Moreover, this was the time when, after Selim I's conquest of Tabriz, all the craft ateliers were flocked with new artists from Iran. To see how these artists reformulated Ottoman visual aesthetics was to me a revelation because it was followed by yet another transition under Rüstem Paşa, during which Sinan's style emerged. The inspiration often came from documents that gave me clues to follow up in the manner of a detective.

So you used primary sources, but also worked on the relationship between patronage, the art work, and the socio-economic situation of the time, and so on. I think this is what an art historian should take into consideration; not only the primary sources, the simple facts, but also how ideology is at work in these art works and buildings.

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

It is very true because, in a way, you could read hundreds of documents, but not make any sense out of them. I think you have to approach the documents with certain kinds of questions in mind, so that they come to life and give you more food for imagination. Many aspects of historical interpretation, whether practiced by historians or art/architectural historians, involve a reconstruction of the past. To me, it is always challenging to combine written sources with visual evidence to create a more nuanced kind of picture.

The focus of this interview is your work on the interrelation of Ottoman architecture and Ottoman identity in the Classical Era. Your work understands the distinctive Ottoman cultural production of the Classical Era as a necessary facet of the Ottoman elite's domestic and international hegemony, and as one consciously developed through elite patronage. You foreground the complex interaction of Ottoman cultural production with its historical, regional contexts - Safavid Iran and Mughal India to the East and the Hapsburg Empire and the city states of Renaissance Italy to the West. How has your own intellectual project developed in opposition to or in dialogue with other intellectual projects, both in Turkey and in the wider academic world?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

Wonderful question! Let us start with the wider academic world, and then move on to Turkey. My intellectual project grew in response to being exposed as a graduate student mostly to medieval studies in the Islamic art/architecture field, where Ottoman visual culture was often regarded as a somewhat derivative offshoot of earlier models and hence characterized by lack of originality. I was very quickly impressed by Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*. Of course, like many others, I had some criticisms of it, but it was for me a formative book. I became exposed to it as an undergraduate at Williams College where I spent my Junior year in an exchange program. I took my first class in Middle East History there, and the professor was a friend of Said, so we read a draft before it was published! The year I started graduate school, the book was making big waves all over. It helped me realize early on that Orientalist discourses essentialized and exoticized Islamic architecture, which was assumed to be timeless and static, and not to evolve, unlike European art which is seen to have had different periods culminating in Modernism. In this conceptualization, the ninth and tenth centuries, the "golden age" of the Abbasid era, forms a kind of turning point, followed by the arrival of the Seljuk Turks marking the beginning of decline.

Given my interest in early modern visual culture, I reacted to this paradigm and contributed (through my own publications and teaching) to the development of studies focusing on the “late Islamic empires” in American academia, where it is now a well established and no longer marginal field. When my professor urged me to study Ottoman art/architecture, I decided to specialize on the three early modern empires in comparative framework: Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal. I chose to study these empires because they chronologically complemented my earlier formation in the field of Italian Renaissance art. So I adopted a synchronic perspective in order to place the Ottomans in relation to their neighbors in the East and the West, thereby interpreting early modern changes within a kind of a world perspective. So that was what I was reacting to in the wider academic world.

As for Turkey, the more I began to read on Seljuk, Beylik, and Ottoman art, I noticed a rather narrow scope in which Turkishness was emphasized and different kinds of nationalist discourses influenced at least the mainstream approaches. There are always, of course, exceptions to the rule, but the predominant discourses were either Pan-Turkic or took modern Turkey (with an Anatolian bias) as the basis. They hardly acknowledged the geographic span of the Ottoman Empire, and preferred to focus more on the present Turkish territories, which are only a fraction of their Ottoman counterpart. Most survey books began with ancient Anatolia, starting with the Hittites and coming all the way to the modern period, taking a very broad diachronic sweep, following a teleological, linear scheme of chronological development. My own synchronic approach was a measure to counter this by going in depth, not only within a particular period, but also by comparing the Ottomans with their neighbors. I attempted to show that, even within the same period, Islamic art is very distinctive in each region and dynasty, and these are not just the ramifications of climate or ethnic identity, but often conscious strategies of the patrons in collaboration with the artists. I think I had this idea from the beginning. The ways in which I developed it depended a lot on my research, but somehow, by the time I finished my coursework, I had this vision.

What is interesting here is that, in the ‘70s and ‘80s, the kinds of question that were being asked in the field of Islamic art were primarily characterized by essentialism; many articles were written on what is Islamic about Islamic art, or what is Turkish about Turkish art. Unchanging principles were conjured up, and these were supposed to define the essential differences of this or that civilization. Today, because of globalization since the 1990s, the interest has begun to shift and to come closer to the approach that I had adopted much earlier, when it was not very fashionable at all! Now, many individuals, whatever ideological background they come from, want to emphasize cross-cultural exchanges and dialogues. But, I believe, this is

being done in a rather superficial manner, without looking too deeply into contextual specificities.

Another reaction was that, in both the Turkish and wider international scene, textual sources were not emphasized that much. This was due to the fact that the study of Islamic art, being focused on the pre-eleventh century as its “golden age,” was largely an archaeological field and did not have too many written sources, which increase exponentially after that period. So, in a way, the Ottomans stood out with their unique archives and the large diversity of written sources; sources that I noticed were not being used so much by art/architectural historians. I thus became very interested in this hugely untapped source of information. What I have been doing, in tandem with field work and analysis of the monuments and artworks themselves, is a kind of textual archaeology. This parallel approach, combining verbal and visual sources, can yield rich and multilayered insights. Yet, I have always tried not to fall into text-fetishism, which is also a danger. In fact, this is currently a predominant approach in Turkey, where, one still finds endless publications of texts without substantial interpretation. I must add that historians rarely make use of material culture or architectural culture, even when they study documents on cities and urbanism. You read a book on Konya, Kayseri or Manisa, and there is not even a plan or a map of the city, let alone pictures of its monuments – it’s all in the realm of text! Hence, I was also aware of this aspect and reacted to the depreciation of the visual/spatial dimensions of Ottoman cultural history by adopting a “total history” approach.

The Turkish art historian Celâl Esad (Arseven) was the first to use the term “classical period” for the zenith of Ottoman architecture during the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566) and, particularly, during Sinan’s tenure as chief royal architect (1539-88). In his book Türk Sanatı Tarihi: Menşeyinden Bugüne Kadar (1954-59), Arseven explains that he chose the term “classical style” (klâsik üslûb) because in Europe it denotes a “high style” based on rational principles. The art historical usage of “classicism,” however, lacks a critical perspective in the field of Ottoman art history. What kind of new perspectives can be provided in terms of the notion of “classicism”?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

I partly touched upon this issue in my essay on the nationalist historiography of Sinan, in the published proceedings of a symposium we organized with Sibel Bozdoğan at Harvard, titled “History and Ideology: Architectural Heritage of the ‘Lands of Rum’” (“Creation of a National Genius: Sinan and the Historiography of ‘Classical’ Architecture,” *Muqarnas*, 24 (2007): 141-

83). Arseven's book is a good example of the kind of diachronic perspective I referred to previously that starts with the ancient Turks in Central Asia, and comes all the way to the present. Within this mono-linear chronology, the classical period was highlighted by him, particularly the age of Sinan, as the best and highest achievement. As you point out, there is no in-depth and consistent theorization of this concept of classicism, a concept which also dominates Ottoman history. Halil Inalcık's *The Classical Age*, for instance, defines the Classical Age as something broader, between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century. Godfrey Goodwin's book on Ottoman architecture, adopts the same paradigm of rise, classical age and then decline and fall. Now Ottomanist historians have started to criticize the decline paradigm very effectively, showing that what is generally called decline can instead be conceptualized as change and transformation, even perhaps modernization. However, this new critical approach has not sufficiently penetrated mainstream art history. I think one could find a degree of classicism in each period, if you define "classic" as a kind of mature expression, rather than as a single "classical moment," with everything before being a prelude to that moment and everything after being an inevitable decline. But I also believe that there is a point to defining the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries as *the* classical period because of the formulation of a distinctively classicizing aesthetic with a new system of harmonious proportions and a certain "purism," but this should be done without attributing it superior status. In other words, one could accept classicism as the codified crystallization and refinement of earlier experiments, but it is not necessarily the highest expression of Ottoman art/architecture. So, as long as you shed from the concept its implicit value judgment, which ranks other periods in a lesser position, I think it is still, for me, a useful concept. In many ways it is similar to what happened in Renaissance Italy just around the same time, where a new classicism was codified in the sixteenth century on the basis of earlier fifteenth-century experiments. There is a consciousness within both cultures of having reached a point when, rather than continuing to adopt new elements, there is a desire to express one's distinctive architectural identity through refinement of proportions and systems of restrained ornament. This also entails a relative rejection of external influences, which I believe are very prominent before and after the so-called classical period in Ottoman visual culture, in that those other periods are characterized by innovative searches and appropriations rather than by synthetic attempts at crystallization.

I remember that we were reading your article in class ("Creation of a National Genius") in which you criticized the term "classical," and, the more we read your other articles, we realized that you actually presuppose a

classical age, and then, just now, you used the term itself. Isn't that a problem?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

I do not see a contradiction; it all depends on how you define this “loaded” term. I cannot say that I necessarily like the term “classical,” but, I accept it because it is widely used in various art historical fields and has a particular resonance with Ottoman art. I specifically selected as my focus the period from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century as a slice of time I find particularly fascinating and rich for my own purposes. My focus on this era was not because I regarded it as the highest period of Ottoman art, but because I preferred a synchronic comparative approach with a cross-cultural dimension, instead of moving from century to century. If I had several lives, I would have liked to apply similar approaches to other periods as well. My students are now working on those equally valuable periods, as are other scholars. Such choices are highly personal and informed by individual sensibilities. Once we have a more effectively contextualized picture of each period, we will be able to construct more sophisticated diachronic readings of artworks and monuments in the Ottoman survey books of the future.

In the years following the conquest of Istanbul in 1453, Ottoman architecture incorporated the Byzantine use of urban space, Roman notions of palatial architecture, as well as Timurid and Persianate notions of the palatial garden, into an indigenous Ottoman architectural vocabulary. What is your own view of the role of inherited influences in shaping Ottoman cultural identity through architecture?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

In my classes, I often say that the term “influence” should be avoided completely, and we collectively decide to ban this word, but we always seem to come back to it and say “oops!” This problematic term implies a passive phenomenon of absorption, whereas each so-called influence is a mode of conscious appropriation, which is often selective. Of course, there are continuities that are not always self-conscious, but there is after 1453 a highly conscious Ottoman dialogue with the Byzantine heritage. This imperial project grew with Constantinople becoming the capital, which triggered a greater exposure to both Persianate and Europeanate artistic models. I have

written on the artistic patronage of Mehmed II (forthcoming)² in which I define this period as one that programatically foregrounds hybridity and cosmopolitanism. I call this an “aesthetics of fusion,” where, very consciously, elements from different traditions are used autonomously and fused with one another in recognizable quotations. However, when we reach the sixteenth century, we no longer find such quotations. Instead, elements become submerged within a synthetic style. Sinan is clearly seeing many places and monuments, both in his eastern and western travels, but he never resorts to recognizable quotes. That’s what the classicism of Sinan is all about. As for intentional cosmopolitanism, although I do see a turning inwards around the mid-sixteenth century, cosmopolitanism never stops; it continues throughout the Ottoman centuries all the way to the modern era, but the mode in which it is expressed changes in each context.

You say that “influence” is a word you don’t want to use in class; I have even seen a few writers use “emulation,” is this worse than “influence” from your perspective?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

Just a minor footnote to this is that, influence itself was considered bad which is why much of the early republican historiography attempted to prove that the Turks were not influenced by anything, and that there have always been purely Turkish forms. Now, interestingly, with the new globalism initiated in the 1990s, influence has almost turned into a desirable commodity, instrumentalized by the project of Turkey to join the European Union. Not surprisingly, the latest international conference of Turkish Art was on European influences, so you can see how changing orientations can exert their influence on art historians. As for the term “emulation,” it implies a desire to go beyond mere imitation and even competitively surpass selected models. Hence, I tend to embrace “emulation” as a term which allows for a greater degree of artistic and patronal agency than “influence” does.

You have suggested that Ottoman Sunni “orthodoxy” was less an inevitable manifestation of the empire’s Islamic constitution than a sixteenth century attempt to delineate an autonomous cultural and political identity in response

² “Visual Cosmopolitanism and the Aesthetics of Fusion: Artistic Interactions with Renaissance Italy at the Court of Mehmed II,” joint proceedings of the “Bellini and the East” conferences at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (Boston) and the Warburg Institute (London), edited by Alan Chong and Anna Contadini. (forthcoming)

to regional rivalries, notably with the Shiite Safavid Empire. How does the empire's newfound religious orthodoxy relate to and condition the expression of Ottoman elite identity in the architectural culture of the sixteenth century?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

I believe that, in addition to the Safavids, it was also the emergence of empires in sixteenth century Europe that conditioned the Ottoman state's growing emphasis on Sunnism in the construction of the sultan's image as divinely ordained world emperor. Particularly important was the emergence of the Habsburg Empire, with its emperor who claimed to be the "protector" of the "true" religion, which also found a counterpart in the Safavid regime, similarly established in the first decades of the sixteenth century. So, in terms of how Ottoman religious orthodoxy conditions elite identity through architecture, it is in this context that the Sinan phenomenon emerges. In each of these three empires, the state becomes the police of the new "official" religion, and wants to impose "correct" religious behavior in differing degrees. The Ottoman state did not indulge in inquisitions as the Spanish Habsburgs and elsewhere in Europe, but it became a relatively repressive regime, I think, no longer as inclusive as it had been in the past. We tend to overlook the state control of religion when we talk about the glories of the classical period. It seems romantic to view Sinan as expressing a timeless Sufi religious ethos. Yet this was precisely the period when the fluid identities and openness of the early Ottoman period were replaced with an officially promoted, homogenizing state religion. Religious orders, such as the Bektashis and Alevis, were increasingly suppressed. Many of the *tekkes* and *hangahs* were either closed or converted into *medreses* by means of imperial decrees in the sixteenth century. There are many examples of this, and it has been studied by historians. Sinan's magnificent architectural idiom was formulated at a time when the Ottoman state wanted to create *mescids* and *camis* in every city and neighborhood. It is therefore no coincidence that the majority of Sinan's artistic innovations converge in mosque construction. Even though a wide range of constructions are taking place in public sphere, such as caravanserais, hospices, hospitals, madrasas, water works and bridges, there is a dominant ideological dimension. It is not until the seventeenth century that one observes a shift away from this delineation of identity to a more flexible situation, with a diversification of Sufi orders and a toning down of state control, also because centralized state power diminished in all areas at that time, characterized by decentralization and increased pluralism in differing spheres.

Now, while religious orthodoxy conditions the Ottoman elite's identity, what it also does is to create sub-cultures and marginalize other forms of architecture. So, for example, one of our former students in Harvard,

Dr. Zeynep Yürekli-Görkay, worked on Bektashi shrines in Kırşehir and Seyidgazi, which represent the marginalization of particular groups. In these two great complexes, we don't have state commissioned sixteenth-century works in the classical style, and the patrons who sponsored the buildings were usually the Gazi warriors who developed close ties with the milieu of dervishes. Other sub-cultures are, of course, those of Christian and Jewish groups who continued to build within the Ottoman Empire, but in the canonical literature on Ottoman architecture, the study of churches and synagogues has not yet been taken up. So this would be an interesting phenomenon to study in greater depth in the future. For example, the orthodox churches that were being built throughout the Ottoman territories in the Balkans fall into the purview of Byzantinists, who tend to regard post-1453 as falling beyond their specialization. I hope that as the Ottoman field develops, more people will look into this subject because the late Byzantine style continued to flourish well into the nineteenth century. In short, the question of how Ottoman elite identities condition architectural culture in the sixteenth century is a central aspect of empire formation and imperial geopolitics, as I argued in my book on the *Age of Sinan*. Visual magnificence articulated and constructed the new realities of the empire, while reciprocally being informed by those realities.

In The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire (2005) you have explored the factors that ushered in a new architectural paradigm within the hierarchical structure of the empire, particularly at the turn of the seventeenth century. How did the social stratification and hierarchy of Ottoman society relate to the systems of architectural patronage of the Classical Era, and how is this reflected in the architectural record?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

I only briefly touched on the changes in the 17th century and the emergence of a new paradigm because, once again, I believe it has to be studied separately on its own. I drew attention to elements that to me on initial viewing seemed to be emerging differences. One notable difference is that, in the classical system codified by Sinan, there is a clear stratification in the social status and imperial geography hierarchies that I analyze extensively in my book. I focused mostly on mosques and mosque complexes, but one could find it in other types of architecture as well. The seventeenth-century change that has been attributed to decline is actually a response to and an expression of new cultural orientations which take shape in a context of decentralization, where clearly demarcated hierarchies begin to dissolve (both between differentiated patronage levels and between the capital and the provinces). The 17th century is also a time when the economic situation

changes considerably, and a combination of factors leads to the abandonment of large scale mosque complexes, favoring a shift to smaller, intimate structures like *medreses* or *hangahs*. I think this echoes a shift in the religious sphere, characterized by the increasing public visibility of the Sufi orders. Moreover, with the transformation of the *devşirme* system, which is the backbone of the classical Ottoman order, the ethnic diversity of the ruling elite from *devşirme* origins changes considerably. Turkification increases in the language of written sources; for example, the earlier “cosmopolitan” approach, whereby Arabic, Persian, Greek, or Latin were used in the diplomatic correspondence of the Divan gives way, starting with the reign of Süleyman, to documents primarily written in Ottoman-Turkish. By the end of the 16th and early 17th centuries we no longer find *şehnamecîs* writing Ottoman dynastic histories in the *şehname* mode in Persian; there is a marked preference for Turkish.

During the 17th century there is a major cultural transformation that needs to be studied much more carefully. Scholars generally study the 15th and 16th centuries and then jump to the modern period. In the 17th century, which is often deemphasized by art historians, the smaller buildings and changing tastes in the other arts reflect new attitudes. As I interpret it, this signals a gradual move away from court art to a more market dominated artistic sphere, where even the royal patrons or viziers buy luxury goods from the commercial domain. The royal craftsmen in *ehl-i hiref* registers decrease in number. Also a new group of so-called “bazaar painters” (*çarşı ressamları*) is thought to have emerged. The exclusivist, elitist culture that one associates with the 15th and 16th centuries becomes transformed into a premodern mass culture, and this change (also seen in the Safavid Empire) still needs to be analyzed.

In the architectural record, new paradigms appear continually between the 17th and 19th centuries, when the nuanced stratification of hierarchies is no longer operative in the same manner. In my estimation, the little studied early Ottoman period and 17th century remain most elusive, as they are the least scrutinized periods.

As you suggest in your essay “A Kanun for the State a Canon for the Arts: Conceptualizing the Classical Synthesis of Ottoman Arts and Architecture,” (1992) the visual culture of the ruling elite was created in the court milieu at the capital from which it spread to cement Ottoman identity and unite the vast empire. How can the patronage of monumental works give further insight into Ottoman identity as it was conveyed outside the capital? What identities were represented in the architecture of the periphery of the empire that were muted in the architecture of the capital?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

An excellent question. It raises the issue of the literature not focusing equally on the Ottoman architecture of the Balkans, North Africa, and Arab lands. One can identify regional styles that have not been studied extensively, even though the Ottoman Empire stretched over three continents: Europe, Asia, Africa. Of course, there were many losses in the architectural record of these diverse regions, but there are enough remaining monuments from which one can construct regional histories, which reflect a desire not to suppress local identities. This was also an aspect of Ottoman law and other kinds of cultural practices in the provinces, where many earlier customs and laws became integrated into or merged with imported Ottoman ones. In the Balkans, because the architectural dialogue is taking place with the late Byzantine style, in which the monasteries were still continuing to be built in this predominantly Christian region, a very purist and austere Ottoman style develops, reduced to its barest common denominators. However, when you move to Syria and Egypt, you find mixtures with the local Mamluk style which is infused with new Ottoman elements, such as hemispherical domes and Iznik tiles. Also, areas that never became fully integrated and remained semi-autonomous in the Ottoman legal and *timar* system, like North Africa and Iraq, for example, constitute intriguing special cases. There you find even more autonomous local styles, to the point that, in Baghdad, Ottoman buildings depart radically from the canonical models of the capital. Therefore, the diversified architecture in these provinces expressed the colorful identities of each region. When we take periods into consideration, in the post-17th century, due to decentralization, these regions gain even more autonomy. We find, all of a sudden, great dynamism in the constructions; in Albania, in North Africa, and in Egypt, the major public monuments are built not in the classical period, but in this later period when the local elites are beginning to express their individual identities. From the 18th century onwards, you also have the Christian elites becoming more and more prominent through trade. In Beirut and Aleppo, for instance, you find impressively monumental houses being built in regional styles that bring Istanbul fashions into their painted or woodwork decorations, but several of these patrons are local Christians who adopt Ottoman status symbols. I think that through the study of regional styles, one can trace the continually shifting relations between the capital and provinces, and also the rise of new international trade centers such as Izmir and Aleppo, which begin to overshadow Istanbul in many respects. This has been studied by historians but more recently architectural historians have also been taking up these hitherto understudied subjects.

One interesting development is that in the study of Roman art, for example, relations between capital and province have been exposed to new

critical analysis; there has been an opposition to the term “province” or “provincial” which often implies a lesser or less sophisticated style. Yet the Ottomans do define certain regions as provinces, and there is a very clear cut system whereby being closer to the capital denotes a certain status hierarchy. In the classical period the influence is more from the capital outward, whereas, later on, many influences are exerted on the capital from the provinces and a more reciprocal two-way traffic appears. Even the hierarchy itself is transformed. For example, in palatial architecture, we see the urban styles of the common people becoming adopted by court circles, such as the wooden vernacular architecture. Ahmed III specifically ordered palatial buildings to be constructed in the manner of Istanbul’s wooden houses and mansions, which hints that there is a more dynamic exchange between “high” and “popular” art/architecture than we have previously imagined.

In your 1990 essay “From International Timurid to Ottoman: A Change of Taste in Sixteenth-Century Ceramic Tiles” you show that before the development of the Iznik industry as a source of tiles around 1550, Ottoman buildings were decorated by a technically and stylistically varied repertoire of tiles characterized by a Turco-Iranian “international Timurid” taste. How do you explain this shift in the Ottoman tile industry?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

In various articles I attributed this stylistic shift to the changing definition of the official Ottoman identity that departed from formerly fashionable “Persianate” idioms. This was paralleled by the growing centralization of the Ottoman court ateliers (*ehl-i hiref-i hassa*), and also the new building boom in which very large numbers of tile decorated structures were required. I furthermore linked the shift with the initiatives of certain powerful individuals whose agency in the construction of a new Ottoman identity was previously underestimated. Rüstem Paşa, for example, was very instrumental in the development of the textile industry because he opposed the large scale importation of Italian textiles. Also, Sinan, as the chief architect, was in charge of the Iznik tile industry. According to an *Es’ar defter* from 1640, the chief architects were in charge of construction-related crafts, including tiles, from the time of Mehmed II onwards (Yaşar Yücel, *Es’ar Defteri (1640 Tarihli)*, Ankara, 1992, p. 131). It is in this highly centralized period when, through the interventions of the state, the Iznik tile industry was channeled from the production of pots and pans to a predominantly architectural tile production industry, thereby replacing the smaller royal tile workshop based in Istanbul (which I discovered in documents that are cited in my article you refer to). It is not surprising, then, that we find a relative loss in quality when the state is no longer able to supply Iznik with the needed materials. Also

because of devaluation, from the late 1580's onwards, the Iznik workshops suffer from state imposed fixed prices and prefer to produce tablewares for the more lucrative open market. Moreover, the *Celâli* revolts contribute to the decline and eventual collapse of the tile industry there. We don't have decrees by the sultans, which order Iznik to produce this or that tile in the age of Sinan. It all happened silently, like clockwork, whereas from the late 16th century onwards many decrees document the problems and discontent arising in the Iznik tile manufacturing sector. It is a sure sign of the centralized system not working anymore.

We talked about how the identity of architecture changed; wasn't this change also reflected in the designs of the tiles themselves? When seeing the tiles from the so-called classical era, you realize that the tiles themselves are more visible, with bigger and bolder shapes, different from the previous types which were more Persianate. Does Ottoman identity make this style particularly more identifiable from a distance, like those in Topkapı?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

Motifs do become more easily identifiable and legible from a distance. The same motifs also appear on Ottoman textiles, which was one of the major state-sponsored industries in other pre-modern societies as well. We see the parallel emergence of these large-scale patterns in both tiles and textiles, which eventually marginalize the formerly cultivated Persianate aesthetic. It is notable that the gradual reduction and almost complete elimination of figural imagery in these two artistic media marks yet another contrast with the court style of Safavid Iran. These highly public media, more than private illuminated manuscripts, played a central role in the articulation of a distinctively Ottoman visual identity around the 1550s.

*Elsewhere, you have spoken about how the centralization of Ottoman aesthetic production in the *nakkaşhane* and the *devşirme* system of apprentice recruitment affected the emerging Ottoman decorative vocabulary. Mimar Sinan is clearly the definitive figure and shaping force in the development of Ottoman architecture of the Classical Era. Could you comment on how Ottoman institutions shaped Sinan's art, and on the role of Sinan's monuments in shaping Ottoman identity?*

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

Indeed, the two reciprocally influence one another. Sinan was not entirely free in his artistic agency as assumed. The prominent approach in books on Sinan is to represent him as a great genius who was almost entirely exploring

his own creative impulses, a kind of Ottoman Michelangelo, who was developing his early style, his middle style, his later style. True, of course, Sinan in his more than fifty-year career underwent notable stylistic development. However, unlike his contemporaries in western Europe, he belonged to the centralized *Hassa Mimarlar* organization of royal architects, so he was the head of an institution and many of his projects, empire-wide, were designed by him but actually executed by these royal architects as collaborative projects. Thus, I argued in my book on Sinan that he is voicing the collective identity of an empire's ruling elite. He is an employee of the state and a bureaucrat, unlike most of his European contemporaries who compete for the patronage of the rich. Sinan has to work full time for the sultan and sometimes he is even scolded for diverting his attention to the projects of others. In his free time he was allowed to work for other patrons, but only part time. What I find fascinating is that, on the one hand, there is a great individualism in Sinan's persona (as articulated in his autobiography) and a proud awareness of his own artistic genius, but, at the same time, this individualism is being tempered by the collaborative workshop system and by the corporate identity of the Ottoman ruling elite that he is monumentalizing through architecture. In my opinion, this dichotomy is best expressed in Sinan's desire to commission his Ottoman-Turkish autobiography (existing in various versions), which is unique. In none of the earlier Islamic courts do we find an architect coming out with an autobiography in the first person point of view, nor do we find any thereafter in the Ottoman context. There is his student, Mimar Mehmed, who built the Sultan Ahmed mosque, and has a biography, but it was written in the third person point of view by someone connected to his household, rather than being commissioned by him. I detect in Sinan an anxiety of authorship. Earlier Ottoman buildings usually carry the signatures of architects and craftsmen. Similarly, in the Seljuk and Beylik periods, we find many signatures, whereas almost none exist in the major monuments Sinan built. His only signature is on the Büyükçekmece Bridge. Because he was not able to sign his buildings, by compiling in his autobiographies lists of hundreds of buildings that the *Hassa Mimarlar Ocağı* created under his supervision, he aspired to leave his name "on the pages of Time." And he succeeded in this aspiration. Indeed, the autobiographies have completely conditioned Sinan scholarship and they have perpetuated his fame through the ages according to his own wish. Many copies were made well into the 18th and the 19th century and were read throughout the empire, some manuscripts are even preserved in Cairo (one of them belongs to an architect). I think Sinan is an extraordinary genius caught between personal and communal expression. Just as his style and practice are shaped by Ottoman institutions, his monuments play an active role in shaping Ottoman identity. As the "architect of empire,"

Sinan is literally “constructing” an ethos of architectural magnificence for the ruling elite through the codification of a new idiom.

The reign of Süleyman the Magnificent, identified with the central concept of a sixteenth century “golden age,” has been presented not only as a time of military success but also as a time during which an indigenous decorative vocabulary was established. To what extent did the decorative language of the reign of Süleyman influence the architectural practice of the post-classical period and later Ottoman arts more generally?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

As we discussed earlier, a distinctive Ottoman decorative language was formulated under Sultan Süleyman and his immediate successors in the second half of the 16th century. Thereafter, the relative continuity is remarkable throughout the 17th century. However, as I pointed out, there is a transition from an elitist courtly visual culture to a more market oriented economy and mass culture. Hence all of these decorative motifs become shared, not only among the different social strata of the empire’s Muslim populations, but also among non-Muslim subjects. They are, for example, used on the robes of church officials, they are exported to Russia and elsewhere in the Balkans. The changes from the 18th century onwards appeared not so much in the structural aspects of architecture as in the realm of decoration. In the 19th century, architects are being sent to Paris and they usually build smaller mosques, where stylistic innovations are expressed more on the surfaces than in the structure. The new decorative motifs with a Europeanizing flavor, often dubbed Baroque or Rococo, are very interesting and have been extensively studied by Turkish scholars, but they did not attract the same amount of attention abroad because there is still a prevailing notion that the “classical style” represents the “golden age.” Unfortunately many of the excellent studies that are being published in Turkish are not accessible to the international community.

Is the Westernization and Modernization period after the 18th century – named the decline period because of its distance from the classical “high-culture” – also mostly ignored by Western and American scholars because it is seen to demonstrate the influence – again, using that word! – of the Western style?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

Yes, and recently this is being put under scrutiny by scholars like myself and others, noting that there are many texts – mainstream survey books – in the

States and Europe that don't even treat the post-17th century. Maybe there is a very little chapter on the 18th century, but then the 19th century is not even considered part of the general surveys. Therefore it is claimed in an article on the state of the field by Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom ("The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field," *Art Bulletin*, 85, 2003) that these periods are of interest only locally or regionally, and not deserving to be part of broader "universal" scholarship. A recent article by Barry Flood, however, criticizes this bias as a colonial approach: whereas modernity evolved in Europe, everything in terms of creativity in the Islamic world allegedly stops in the 17th century, and so is not even worth studying ("From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art," in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, ed. E.C. Mansfield, New York, 2007). By implication the contemporary Islamic world is denied modernity. More and more this approach is being problematized and deconstructed.

Ottoman cultural identity as it came to be delineated in the Classical Era has subsequently been re-inscribed and drafted into service in support of later political projects, particularly by twentieth century permutations of Turkish nationalism. How have modern historiography and national discourses interpreted or constituted Sinan's role as that of a "national architect"? To what extent was your Age of Sinan (2005) conceived as a response to these projects?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

Thank you for asking this because, in a way, my book became so long that, I suspect many of its critical perspectives may have been lost in the details! True, it is a response to certain approaches and discourses. First of all I wanted to show that the ethnicization of Sinan as the Turkish national architect is anachronistic within the context of what we call the classical regime. This was a period of multiethnic composition within the Ottoman polity, and by focusing not just on Sinan but also on his elite patrons and their biographies I wanted to highlight the fact that about ninety per cent are converts. Not just Sinan, but such grand viziers as Sokollu Mehmed and Rüstem Paşa and other grandees came from either Balkan or Anatolian Christian backgrounds, and then rose to the top. In nationalist discourses, the classical era is glorified, but somehow this aspect tends to be overlooked, or even suppressed. In my book, I therefore included in the back an appendix of Sinan's elite patrons (both male and female) in which I charted out their incredibly diverse ethnic origins. One can see that the majority of these patrons of mosques, the ultimate symbols of Sunni Islam, did not come from the *ulema* or the local Turkish population; they were the slave-servants (*kul*) of the sultans. This changed in the 17th century and later, which is why, I

think, one has to clearly demarcate different periods from one another and steer away from generalizations. What Ottoman identity was in the age of Sinan is not the same as what it became later or was before. There is, in fact, no such monolithic thing as “*the Ottoman identity*.” That was one aspect I wanted to bring into clearer focus. Another presumption my book responds to is the interpretation of Sinan as a misunderstood genius operating outside and beyond the cultural norms of his era. I aimed to show how fully integrated he was within the Ottoman system as a prestigious agha of the imperial household. He not only partook in the Ottoman corporate identity of his time as a member of the ruling elite, but was also one of the major constructors of that identity, as it materialized in the realm of architecture.

It's also anachronistic, because these people were calling themselves Ottomans – “real” Ottomans – good Muslims who were servants of the Sultan and supported his system; they were no way calling themselves “Turks.” It was Europe that was calling the Ottoman Empire “The Turk.”

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

For me it is very indicative that Sinan, whose autobiography summarized his life, says not one word in it about his childhood. He says that he came to Istanbul as a *devşirme* from his hometown in Kayseri and explored his natural talent as an *acemi oğlan* by choosing to be trained in the craft of carpentry. He learned his craft in the Ottoman court, through his education in the *acemi oğlanlar ocağı*, and he praises the unnamed master craftsmen from whom he learned geometry and carpentry. He never once feels the need to indicate what his ethnic origin was. It is only later on that different groups have tried to claim Sinan because of his greatness; Armenians want to see him as an Armenian, Greeks as a Greek, and Turks as a Christian Turk etc. However, I think, had ethnic identity been important to Sinan, he would have stressed it in his autobiography. Moreover, there is no reference to the influence on him of the Anatolian Seljuk architecture of the Kayseri region. Nationalist discourses in the early republican period initiated the still popular claim that Sinan was born from Turkish parents and that he supposedly learned his craft from his invented grandfather: Doğan Yusuf Ağa. Even documents were forged to support this claim, as I discussed in my essay on the historiography on Sinan, titled “Creation of a National Genius.”

In my book, I aimed to demonstrate that there are many other Ottomans like Sinan. Celebrated personages we are supposed to be proud of, like Rüstem Paşa, like Sokollu, and other major players in the Ottoman system came from this kind of background. Unfortunately, the recent trend of neo-Ottomanism in Turkey and the ever-growing popular media attention to history often represent Ottoman “greatness” out of context. Somehow,

modern views originating in the 19th century or in the republican era are imposed on earlier periods and the Ottoman past is anachronistically imagined as being a single, monolithic entity. In most of my scholarship, I have tried to show that the generalizations we have inherited from orientalist and nationalist paradigms have been detrimental to understanding Ottoman cultural history. We have to be modest and unlearn what we think we know. Today, most people in Turkey presume they know all about history, but it has to be learned through patient research with visual and verbal primary sources: we are only beginning to learn, and research with a critical outlook is the key.

Your investigation of Topkapı in your 1991 book, Architecture, Ceremonial and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries was the first to systematically utilize Ottoman sources to answer questions about the construction and use of space of the Topkapı Palace. What is it that these particular sources tell us about the relationship between Ottoman identity and Ottoman monumental architecture? What falls outside their purview? What sources remain to be utilized in the field of Ottoman Architectural history?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

This has a long answer and a short one. The short one is that one can divide the sources mainly into two groups. One would be the archival documentation, consisting of account books, *vakfiyes*, court orders, and price regulations etc.: a wide range of unpublished sources. Also, there are wage registers that give us the names of the architects. Yet there is no single study of the institution of royal architects from beginning to end; the sources are there but they are not being studied comprehensively. This is the archival end. Also, there are the narrative sources: Sinan's autobiography; the *Risale-i Mimariye*; court poetry, *kitabes*, poems that praise buildings and cities (*şehrengiz*), chronicles, and so on. There is a predominantly positivist approach (I am not talking about the few exceptions; there are of course scholars who utilize these sources) that regards such texts and especially poetry as irrelevant for the purposes of architectural historians, being full of clichés. Clichés are, however, important; they hint at concepts within which societies perceive art, architecture and other forms of cultural production. What I mean by positivism is that sources are primarily used to derive factual information – dates, attribution to a particular architect, and the like – whereas what interest me are the mentalities that inform aesthetic preferences, the reception of architecture, and the specifically Ottoman ways in which buildings were described and assessed. I think there are two ways of interpreting historical architecture. Either through our own modern analyses of style, typology, and so on, which are perfectly valid and necessary, or by

asking: why were certain forms preferred over others and why do the buildings look the way they do? What were the mentalities and experiential categories that guided the artists and their patrons? For that, we have to understand the contexts in which architectural monuments were produced and received, both at the time of their creation and in subsequent periods.

That is how contextual interpretations, studies of mentality or aesthetic sensibility are conducted for other societies. I really don't subscribe to the particularistic treatment of Ottoman culture that, according to some, requires a different methodology of its own. According to this particularizing viewpoint, "foreign" methods are not suitable for understanding Ottoman cultural history. However, even the most basic methods of stylistic and formal analysis are not value free. Those who say that contemporary "western" methodologies are irrelevant for the field of Ottoman architectural history are assuming that "purely" formal analysis is somehow empirical, rational, and therefore free of contamination from foreign value judgments. Formal analysis, too, was definitely invented in Europe in the 19th century and has been the basis of western art history for a long time. I think it is not fruitful to claim that there are different methods for studying different cultures. I value keeping an open eye to methodological and theoretical developments in other related fields, beyond what is narrowly defined as "Turkish." It is important to have wide interpretive horizons while at the same time remain strongly rooted in the primary sources of the culture one is analyzing.

To address what remains beyond the purview of the sources; this is a really important point because, as indicated earlier, one should not fall into textual fetishism. Neither the texts, nor the monuments themselves, reveal all the answers that we are seeking. One should never forget that one is engaged in an act of reading and interpretation. The written sources are usually laconic, formulaic, and don't provide direct answers to our questions. Thus, one frequently has to read between the lines, interpreting omissions and ideological glosses. This is, however, true about textual sources of any culture and any period. It requires an awareness of modern critical and theoretical models of interpretation, and a self-consciousness that this is a hermeneutical project, always conditioned by the reader's own historicity – his or her own point of view and interests.

In terms of what sources remain to be studied, as I pointed out, the archives are still largely untapped, and even uncatalogued, so what will be available to art and architectural historians in ten years or later is still an open question. For architecture, the *vakfiyes* are an underestimated source of information. They have been used mostly by economic or social historians for studying prices and the types of services that are provided in charitable institutions. But they are also great sources for the study of mentalities. The *vakfiyes* usually have formulaic statements, but some of them include very

interesting preambles which shed light on the intentions of patrons and on their architectural programs. Also, literature and poetry remain to be analyzed in a closer relationship with literary historians, maybe engaging in interdisciplinary studies, because we have much to learn from each other. I also believe that premodern theories of aesthetics, poetics and the study of the history of science are important. Because architecture is a branch of engineering, it is very closely tied to the history of science. What I find fascinating is that Sinan's *mescid*, which still exists, and is described in his *vakfiye*, had caretakers who had in their possession the mathematical and astronomical manuscripts that were collected by a student of the great Timurid astronomer-mathematician, Ali Kuşçu, who was the head librarian of Mehmed II and Bayezid II: Molla Lütü. The fact that this collection was kept by the waqf administrators of Sinan shows that the chief architect's milieu is closely conversant with mathematical culture. I discovered this quite coincidentally, in a recently published decree sent by Murad III to these waqf administrators, commanding that they should give the manuscripts to the new observatory that was created in Galata at that time. We have not even started to look at what were the mathematical treatises, the historical, and technological texts that were available to Ottoman architects and artisans. Huge catalogues have been published by IRCICA (edited by Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu) on the mathematical and astronomical manuscripts of Turkish libraries, which show that a large number of Persian and Arabic classics were collected, translated, and widely circulated in the Ottoman period. These manuscripts have not yet entered the radar screen of architectural historians, and, once again, interdisciplinary collaboration would be desirable.

What about the theories of aesthetics that you also mentioned?

PROF. NECİPOĞLU

This subject is more complicated because, in Ottoman culture, there were no treatises on aesthetics or on architecture in the manner of Vitruvius, which European Renaissance architects emulated in their own architectural treatises. This is seen, in general, as an indication that Ottoman architecture was completely non theoretical and entirely based on empirical practice. I have opposed this widespread viewpoint in my book on Sinan. Because comparable treatises were not produced in Ottoman literary culture, it has been assumed that there was no theory behind Sinan's architecture or that of other architects. I find this problematic because it assumes that any kind of theoretical approach requires a Vitruvian written manifestation, whereas one can argue that, in Ottoman culture, certain aspects remained part of oral culture, and that the written culture developed in a different manner. This in no way proves that the architects and artisans did not have a theory in mind

(especially in a cultural setting that blurred the boundaries between theory and practice): they just didn't write about it in the same manner as their European contemporaries did. Because they were not competing in a free market, they didn't need to advertise their skills through texts. Many of the Italian Renaissance treatises were a manifestation of humanist culture; the architects tried to raise their practice on a higher intellectual level and to attract the attention of cultured patrons. Within the context of the *Hassa Mimarlar Ocağı*, according to the 17th-century *Risale-i Mimariye*, books on geometry were being read aloud to train apprentices. Curiously, the author of *Risale-i Mimariye*, Cafer Efendi, said that he wrote previously a book on geometry after serving for many years in the household of Mimar Mehmed Agha. Nobody has yet found this treatise. Mehmed Agha was first a musician, but then he gave up his practice of music because he realized that architecture is a higher pursuit and moved to become an apprentice in the Topkapı Palace's workshop of carpentry and mother-of-pearl-inlay woodwork. Thus, in the biography of Mimar Mehmed Agha, there is a lot of terminology on music and Pythagorean music theory. Ottoman architects raised their practice to a higher level through theories rooted in the sciences of geometry and engineering. These theories, however, were not written in the form of treatises, but remained part of the professional workshop training of architects and artists. Therefore, a large part of architectural knowledge will never be retrieved because of the high degree of orality in Ottoman cultural practices.

Finally, to return to your question about aesthetics, I wrote in my book on the Topkapı Scroll, which is about a 15th-century Timurid-Turkmen scroll created for architectural use (it is not an Ottoman source) that one fruitful type of text for the visual arts is treatises on poetics, music, and calligraphy. These are the realms which received lots of theoretical elaboration in the premodern Islamic lands, but parallels are frequently drawn in such treatises with architecture and the visual arts. Thus, by reading these texts one can deduce some of the aesthetic concepts shared by visual artists and elite patrons. So this is another new direction that I think could be explored in the future.

Gizem Tongo is an MA student in the Department of History at Boğaziçi University. This interview was conducted in August of 2009 during Professor Necipoğlu's sabbatical leave in Istanbul.