

Yordanka BIBINA¹**Public Art in Turkey: Between Politics and Aesthetics****Abstract**

What we may call “public art” in Turkey starts with the establishment of the Turkish Republic itself. Mostly, it is associated with monuments and sculptures in public spaces in the modernising urban environment within the newly founded secular state that brought changes not only to the way of life and its dynamics, but also to the entire system of values and the aesthetics of space. The most popular public space, the square, altered completely its function and vision: from being entirely the domain of men enclosed between the mosque, the bazaar, and the coffee-house, to becoming the vital point of the new Europeanised Turkish cities highlighting thus the national identity and memory, and the new political order. This brief survey focuses on the different approaches to public spaces in Turkey and to public works of art, which are more than just ideological instruments of power. The study of this situation in a society that is concerned with its own identity appears as one of the most important issues of contemporary public art in Turkey. On the other hand, public art raises awareness about the value of art in public dialogue, and helps bring forward new interpretations and artistic quests.

Keywords: public art; Turkish sculpture; Kemalism; secularism; Turkish cultural identity

Публичното изкуство в Турция: между политиката и естетиката
Резюме

Онова, което можем да наречем „публично изкуство“ в Турция, започва със създаването на самата турска Република. То се свързва предимно с паметници и скулптури в публичното пространство в модернизирания градска среда на новата светска държава, която променя не само начина на живот и неговата динамика, но и системата от ценности и естетиката на пространството. Най-популярните публични пространства – площадите, се променят напълно като функция и визия от предимно мъжко място, съсредоточено между джамията, чаршията и кафенето, във витална точка на новия модерен европейски град, която подчертава националната идентичност и памет и новия политически ред. В центъра на краткото изследване са различните подходи към публичните пространства в Турция, станали предмет на сериозен обществен дебат, в контекста на изкуството, но и на обществените ценности, и намерили отражение в характера на самото публично пространство, за което се предполага, че е нещо повече от идеологически инструмент на властта. Изследването на тази ситуация в едно общество, загрижено за собствената си идентичност, е сред най-важните въпроси, свързани със съвременния обществен живот и корелацията му със съвременното изкуство в Турция. От друга страна, публичното изкуство създава по-голяма чувствителност спрямо ценността на изкуството в обществения диалог и съдейства за оформянето на новите визии и художествени търсения.

Ключови думи: публично изкуство; турска скулптура; кемализъм; секуларизъм; турска културна идентичност

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Art designed for public spaces determine their functional, emotional and meaningful character; it informs residents and visitors on their mutual interdependence in the expression of collective identity. The expression of this identity is an emanation of what is unique to the community, transforming everyday life, pride and values into the outspoken the community's aspirations for the future.

Public art stimulates cultural life in the city and the place. This, regardless of whom was initiated by – the authorities of the city or by private entrepreneurs, supports the development of the city and cultural tourism, re-vitalizaion of residential areas, international prestige and recognition of the city, the quality of community life.

What we may call “public art” starts actually with the establishment of Turkish Republic itself. The new concept of art replaced the old Ottoman model, introducing West European understanding of art. Rapid modernisation in all spheres of life advanced towards bringing deep social change, not just supervising societal shifts as it was in period of Tanzimat reforms. Cityscape has to change its Oriental look and to develop in line with European city model. Changes in life changed the perception of previous city centres with the mosques and surrounding. Art institutions, such as institutions of democracy have to be modernized and to attain universal values. Art entered the new spaces of modernized city. This newly born public art associated mostly with monuments and sculptures in public space in a new modernizing city and society, in a new secular state that changed not only the way of living and its dynamics but the system of values and aesthetics.

Turkish Sculpture itself find difficult ways for became a rightful art as religious limitations restricted the development of it through centuries. Except for plastic solutions mostly abstract in character in buildings and gravestones, later floral with influence of Baroque elements in fountains, architecture of palaces and villas, there were no other forms of that art. No animal or human figures allowed to be portrayed either in painting or stonework as Islam rejected them as idolatry.

Though there was interest among Ottoman elite toward European sculpture, practically there was no sculpture tradition in Ottoman times. To place a sculpture in a visible place of the city was not acceptable by Muslim population. Sultan Abdul-Aziz's natural-sized horse statue built in 1871 by C.F.Fullerand, for fear of public reaction in the public sphere in Istanbul was not shown to the public but placed in the garden of the palace. Just 50 years later, Atatürk monuments, memorials, became the image of the newly invented sculpturing tradition of the Republic. Physical reconstruction of Anatolia after the War of Independence, public works for improving the urban structure was among the primary programs of the new republican government.

Planned by experienced European experts with new approach and modern understanding of the city foreseen the public squares and parks to be important points and meeting place in the urban life. The main feature that makes new cities look differently were the placing monuments and sculptures in those areas. Republican architecture and monumental arts were seen and used as a tool to introduce and impose the ruling ideology of the Republic so the art of architecture and public art in general undertook the task of representing the state and new political regime.

Thus, the new public area was designed in order to replace the Ottoman city landscape and to create a new space heavy with totally different symbolism. For this reason, the creation of new cities includes a unity of government offices undertaking a new function, Community Centre buildings, primary schools, Palaces of Justice as well as other Republican administration structures placed on the squares of the Republic situated on the boulevards of the Republic, all this was unthinkable without the statues of Atatürk.² Unlike the Ottoman city built up around the commercial tissue of the city the newly established Republican urban centres, focused on the concept of nation-state, Turkishness, modernity and secularism turning into the public sign of all these. Atatürk statues usually placed in the centre of the city or the public spaces like street, parks, museums, and so on, where the society comes together and are thought as a part of this new function.

Republican administration was after another type of modernization quite different of Tanzimat visions and designed other types of modernity and contemporary living for the society. The Anatolia, the Anatolian culture was thought as basic unit of innovation and focuses on the Anatolian peasants, as backbones of new national culture. Ankara was chosen as the new administrative and cultural centre of the Republic instead of Ottoman cultural centre – Istanbul.

Turkey's "public art" first of all brings to mind Republic squares with Atatürk monuments and statues on them. Creation of public space projects, driven and held at the ideological request by the government and local authorities, and usually funded with state budget resulted in monumental sculptures on largely designed squares.

In 1926-1938 foreign sculptures invited to Turkey made a number of monuments – Heinrich Krippel's Atatürk sculpture in Sarayburnu was the first (1926), followed by sculpture of Atatürk in Konya, Ankara (Ulus, 1927), Samsun (1931), *Monument of Victory* in Afyonkarahisar (1936); Italian Pietro Canonica, Austrians Anton Hanak and Josef Thorak. Heinrich Krippel, 1883-1945, known Austrian sculptor, was invited in 1925 by the government of Turkey with aim to make Atatürk's sculptures. The Monument became a symbol of the town of Samsun, because here on May 1919 with military outbreak Atatürk started the Independence War. So, the Monument narrates the story of these

²Yeşilkaya, N.G. *Halkevleri: İdeoloji ve Mimarlık*. İstanbul, İletişim Yayınevi, 1999, p. 140, 147, 187.

heroic battles. Atatürk invited the sculptor to his palace and posed in person for all sculptures. Krippel prepared all drafts for the monuments in Turkey. The mold was made and later casted in Vienna cathouse in bronze. After that the parts were brought to Turkey and assembled in the places.³



Photos of casting works in Vienna casthouse and final view of the sculpture.

The Victory Monument in Ankara on the Ulus Square created by Heinrich Krippel in 1927, depicted Atatürk on his horse as a triumphant nation's commander and next to the Atatürk four stone pedestals emphasizing the image of *Mehmetcik* – a Turkish soldier, protecting the country, national hero “Kara Fatma”, known as a woman carrying a bullet symbolizing the solidarity among the nation during the Independence War, and the reliefs of people won the War, representing Atatürk integrated with people during his arrival to Ankara. This is a typical example of built-in visual symbol of Atatürk monuments repertoire.

³ <http://mksaner.blogspot.com/2011/11/ataturk-onur-ant-tarihi.html> (5.05.2017)



Monument of Victory, Ankara, Ulus Squire⁴.

Anton Hanak and Josef Thorak were also from invited foreigners who put their signature on the public art in Atatürk's Turkey. Because of the dead of Anton Hanak in 1934 he had to finish the back plan of Guvenpark Monument in 1935 in Turkey⁵.



Guven Park Monument

Referring to the relationship between religion and sculpture and traditional religious restrictions on this issue, Atatürk stressed that sculptors are the protagonist of the progress in the “enlighten and

⁴ Photo is taken from the web site of Goethe Institute: <http://www.goethe.de/ins/tr/ank/prj/urs/geb/mon/mon/trindex.htm> (5.05.2017)

⁵ Kıvanç, Osman. *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Anıt Heykelleri*. Ankara, 2003, p. 98-102.

religious nation” and that they have to promote to the world the progress of the nation through the beautiful sculptures in every corner of the country.

Atatürk, with his secular-religion-free image took the squares for a long time, and became a starting point in management of the images in public art. The ideals of the Republic were “written” on the most important places in the old capitol city but perhaps the most important representation symbol of the victory of the Republic over the Ottoman past was *Taksim Republic Monument* (Pietro Canonica, 1928).

The Republic Monument (Cumhuriyet Anıtı) is a notable monument located at Taksim Square in Istanbul, Turkey, to commemorate the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. It was built in two and half years with financial support from the population and officially opened by Dr. Hakkı Şinasi Pasha on August 8, 1928. The 11 m (36 ft) high monument portrays the founders of the Turkish Republic, prominent are depictions of Kemal Atatürk (who commissioned the work), his assistant İsmet İnönü, and general Fevzi Çakmak.



Taksim Republic Monument (Pietro Canonica, 1928).

One of the main points in the ideology of new Republic was opposition to its Ottoman past. It was even “forgotten” in the schoolbook until the mid-70^s of 20th century. This opposition is quite

visible in the Taksim Republic Monument where was represented in two different visions of the young girls symbolizing the new place of women in the new modernizing society. They are placed on the both sides over the figures of Turkish soldiers and as often admitted rarely noticed by the public. On the east side is covered Ottoman girls bas relief and on the West side is the portrait of the Republican Turkish woman with long hair.



*Medallion on the East side - Republican Girl with open face...
and covered Ottoman Girl: Western Side⁶*

We can add that by the time of monument building there still were a great number of covered girls in the provinces of Turkey where the Kemalist reforms were more slowly implemented in the life style but the images on two medallions were a clear expression of the direction to what Turkish society Republic was driven.

Since 1927 due to the official state's politics number of foreign experts were invited to work in Turkey. They have to teach in Art Academy and Universities transferring the modern trends and way of thinking in correspondence with modernizing efforts of the Republican elite. Among them were architecture, artists, construction engineers and technicians, city planners etc. The renewing and development plans for the new capitol Ankara needed specialists Turkey did not have by that time. There were 40 architects from Germany, France, Austria, Switzerland working in Turkey between 1924-1940 that left their traces in modern Turkish architecture and arts. Since 1936 in Academy of Arts (Güzel Sanatlar Akademisi) Leopold Levy from France headed the Painting Department and Rudolf Belling and Bruno Taut from Germany headed the sculpture and architecture Departments. They ensure the serious reform movement not only in Turkish art education but also in modernizing the art currents and trends. They managed to introduce and impose as a practice the system of ateliers as an effective part of education⁷.

⁶ Photo is taken from: <http://www.kenthaber.com/Haber/Genel/Kose/yilmaz-erguvenç/taksim-cumhuriyet-aniti--/f55c8cd5-8058-40ff-8c87-d0f7768b6445>, Kent Haer, Yılmaz Ergüvenç, Taksim Cumhuriyet Anıtı (page open on 20.02.2013).

⁷<http://ekitap.kulturturizm.gov.tr/belge/1-24053/sanatici-yetistirme-hedefli-kurumlarda-plastik-sanatlar-.html>

German sculptor Rudolf Belling (1886 – 1972) played very important role in raising Turkish sculpture. He immigrated in 1937 to Istanbul, Turkey where he lived and worked for thirty years. From 1937 he was professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, re-organizing the department of sculpture and mediating introductions towards modern art, basing his work on traditional studies. From 1951 to 1966, he was professor at the Istanbul Technical University, at the department of architecture.

In years up to Atatürk's death in 1938 Turkish sculptors also advanced in making sculptures of Ataturk. They started to express their discontent of commissioning the sculptures only to foreigners and expressed their opinion in most critical way in *Ar* magazine blaming them in megalomania and non-sensitiveness to Turkish spirit and atmosphere⁸. Kenan Yontunc created monuments of Ataturk in Edirne and Chorum, and Hadi Bara – in Adana (1935)⁹.



*The monument of Liberation (Ali Hadi Bara, 1935), Ataturk Park in Adana.*¹⁰

The acquisition of liberation and independence, the establishment of the Republic and Atatürk was the most important symbol of those values. Atatürk's secular personality gained sense of radical symbolic value in the history of the Republic. He became an ideological and political preference, the cornerstone of futuristic "modern" discourse. Indeed, there is no other Turkish greatest as Atatürk depicted and sculptured from the city to the smallest village. By allowing the dissemination of his own

⁸ Tansug, Sezer. *Çağdaş Türk Sanatı*, 5. baskı, Istanbul, 1999, Remzi kitapevi, p. 204-207.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 207.

¹⁰ <https://tarihturklerdebaslar.wordpress.com/2013/08/18/bir-kurtulus-savasi-kahramani-emine-kiz/> (last open 17.05.2017)

image he had played a key role in the abolition of certain taboos from this point the violent actions of his political opponents and conservative religious circles turned later against the sculptures and busts of Atatürk. Except when sculptured is a single figure, Atatürk was positioned among children, youth and women and almost in every sculpture the people was represent as a “peasant” and in this way the image of the peasant was moved to the city which was a phenomenon in Turkish culture.

The main ideas of Atatürk for independence, freedom of thought and modern values, as well as the implementation of so-called Kemalist revolution in the life were the primary source in forming the image. His being a nation’s hero, his strength and power moved to the suggestiveness of sculptures and found opportunities to be embodied in them. Atatürk statues combine the classical iconography of a victorious commander with the image of a dreamer with eyes gazed in the future; a stable, confident leader of the modernist stance stands out in front of us. “The seek Ottoman Past” opposites the image of a healthy youth whom the future will be trusted to. Usually to the right and to the left of Atatürk there are young boys and girls with their torches that will take his victory, triumphs and beliefs into the future.

After WWII, the social and economic situation in Turkey changed especially since 1950’s. With the transition to a multiparty system in 1946, the religion-politics-individual-society relations became the core issue in political competition, too. Many parties founded in the 1946-1950 just like Atatürk’s CHP placed the important stress on religion, traditions and laicism in their political programmes. Most of new political parties treated them in conservative and traditional realm accepting an approach closed to the ideas of political Islam¹¹.

After 1950’s Turkish artists exposed their understanding of art and style and produced artefacts as they wished. This situation was reflected in the art of sculpture, the searching of forms and abstract studies also practiced besides figurative sculpture. During that period, especially in abstract works the search of plastic values, balance, shape and material became important. The years 1950-1960’s are the transitional period to modern art in Turkey. The Turkish sculptors, who desire to catch the century, turned towards abstract work of art and wanted to be independent from the government. They gained success by trying to use different techniques with different materials. During this period, new exhibition centres and art galleries have been opened. The artists of 1950-1960 periods represented the country successfully, by joining exhibitions, biennales, congresses and competitions in Turkey and abroad.

After the military coup in 1960, aiming also to restore the principles of Atatürk considered abandon by the DP’s 10 years of rule, the number of monuments increased. This was due to the desire

¹¹ Bibina, Y. *Cultural Politics of Post-War Turkey, 1945-1960*. Sofia, 1988, p. 450 (Non-published dissertation).

to refresh the memory and adherence to the Kemalist revolutions among society. The sculptures and busts appeared again in the university campuses. The synergy between architecture and sculpture gradually was given up in public works. The Atatürk sculpture making gained momentum again with next coup in 1980 and celebration of the 100 Anniversary in 1981 although the sculpture had already fulfilled its mission and turned into a commissioning activity. Some of the authors just multiplied their previous works and put them on the new pedestals all over the country. Usually they gave up of bas-reliefs on the pedestals and groups representing heroic days of Independence War giving preference to single figure of Atatürk as undeniable leader and guardian of the Republic and to great extend mythologizing his image. The avalanche of statues and busts were placed in front of universities, downtowns, schools, cemeteries, barracks, military and public buildings deprived of meaning and turned into kitsch.

With time after Atatürk's monuments and statues changed and almost lost the meaning they had in Early Republican era, i.e. to identify the squire or generally speaking – public spaces and to visualize Republican ideals and principles thus becoming the very symbols of the Republic. Since 2000, they start to be placed in officially recognized area to wreath on holidays and official occasions. This practice was followed mostly by local governments in country sides often in the background of minaret's of the mosques that during last decade became – again – an important element of the squire just like in Ottoman times and in co-existence with other Turkish grandeurs from Ottoman Past – sultans, viziers, poets of Anatolia, or the new symbols of the cities (cow, cock, cotton, cherry, melon, tulip etc.).



Statue of Sultan Bayezid II, placed in front of the building of Turkish Standardization Institute in Ankara¹².

The tension between secularists and supporters of pro-Islamic AKP appears in hostile attitude to the Atatürk's monuments, statues, busts and there are accusation from the more secular parts of

¹² Photos is taken from Wikimedia Commons:
[http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosya:I. Bayezid_heykeli_Yavuz_G%C3%B6rey.JPG](http://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosya:I._Bayezid_heykeli_Yavuz_G%C3%B6rey.JPG) (28.02.2013)

society in attempts of governing party to destroy the foundations of the secular Republic through destroying or replacing the monuments of Atatürk thus sweeping the memory of everything he did for the Turkish state and Turkish nation. The social and ideological conflict appears again in controversy between Republic and Ottoman state and revivalism of all Ottoman alongside with “neo-Ottomanism” in which the AKP government is often accused and takes the forms of specific “battles for public spaces” and symbolism of monuments filled up with.

Severe opposition both in people and artistic circles arise around some megalomaniac projects like Sivriada (2005) to build a 110 m high figure of Whirling Dervish statue. The island is famous for its historical heritage from Byzantine times like monastery and church that will totally “clashed” with the image of dervish. Besides the Istanbul would “still” the symbol of city of Konya famous as a centre of Mevlevism and Whirling Dervishes. According to the history professor Özbayoğlu, the monument will “erase 1200 years old historical texture of the place” and will sweep the “sharpness” turning the island into “flat area” with nothing but a single statue on it¹³. Fortunately, the project was rejected and the island preserved its historical heritage – for now.



So, one can say that the monument and monumental arts keep their ideological and representational functions. One of the last examples is the quite disputed so called “monster” case¹⁴ around the *Monument of Humanity* in city of Kars that was destroyed by the order of Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan. The 30 meters high and 700 tons of weight, statue aimed to be seen in Armenia and to become symbol of friendship between Armenian and Turkish peoples, a kind of “counter-

¹³ Sivriada'ya sivri proje. 17 Ocak 2005 / İbrahim Doğan. Sivriada'ya sivri proje. <http://www.aksiyon.com.tr/aksiyon/haber-14649-12-sivriadaya-sivri-proje.html> (01.03.2013)

¹⁴ Monument was publically called “ucube” – “monster by him in an official interview. See: Berberoğlu, E. Heykele Ucube Dedim, *Hürriyet*, 13 Ocak; <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/16750441.asp> (02.03.2013).

monument” of many other that were built in memory of genocide. From other side the dispute showed the significance of controversy between artists and statesmen in public discussions on art and life relations.



*Monument of Humanity*¹⁵

The Monument was definitely destroyed on June 14 2011 and removed from the site¹⁶. Stefan Füle, member of the Enlargement Commission of EU, said that no state institution or government or even EU Commission could judge the aesthetic values of destroyed monument in Kars and that he was really sorry about the demolition of the only monument of Turkish-Armenian friendship¹⁷.

However, in broader picture of sculpture and other plastic arts in Turkey like elsewhere in the world, the ideal of creation a public area in places of common city living accented by a monument/statue/complex pointed on historic moments/historic memory already fulfilled its purpose and sense in the realm of modernization project and today gained its own significance. They leave the function of being visuals or enlightenment elements that have to expose the advanced European civilization to the Turkish people and turned to real dynamic of contemporary life. Yet the Squires are accepted as main public areas that supposed to host the public art, too. The same can be said about

¹⁵ Photo is taken from: <http://www.haberler.com/insanlik-aniti-yikiminda-sona-yaklasiliyor-2755446-haberi/> (5.05.2017)

¹⁶ 'İnsanlık anıtı' artı yok. Dinçer Aktemur/Kars, (DHA).
<http://gundem.milliyet.com.tr/-insanlik-aniti-artik-yok/gundem/gundemdetay/14.06.2011/1402439/default.htm>
(5.05.2017)

¹⁷ AB'densanatdersi: <http://www.haberturk.com/kultur-sanat/haber/641846-abden-sanat-dersi> (22.06.2011)

sculptures and monuments – they continue to be an important indicant in forming the very idea of public space.

What about the Atatürk's monuments while he is still living in the hearts of Turkish people they already do not need to see his image as serial productions of busts, statues, monuments that are deprived of art and aesthetics values everywhere on the squares, in front of public and government buildings, battered and even turned into hackneyed Kitsch. According to some art historians, there is no place or need in this in changing cultural, social and art environment¹⁸. Through ritualization of demonstrative practices like enwreathing his image not just becomes worn out but even meaningless in atmosphere of politics of efface (amnesia) the collective memory for Atatürk and stimulates the behaviour of disrespect (as we see) among youngest generations.

In general, we can conclude that the most important place of cultural identity reflected in the public sphere has been the subject of debate in Turkey in the context of art and social values reflected on the state of the public nature. The study of this situation in a society that is concerning about its own identity appears as one of the most important issues related to the contemporary public art in Turkey. Public art from another hand raises awareness and the value of art in the public dialogue and moves it forwards to new interpretations and artistic quests.

¹⁸ See: Yaman, Zeynep Yasa. "Siyasi/estetik gösterge" olarak kamusal alanda anıt ve heykel (The monuments and sculptures in the public place as political/ aesthetical signs). – In: METU JFA 2011/1, p. 92.