

ARTISTIC AWAKENING IN ANKARA (1953)¹

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Until very recently, we Ankara residents were as jealous of Istanbul's artistic awareness as we were of its sea and its trees.

Our trees have yet to reach maturity, and we are as distant from the sea as ever, but an artistic awakening has now begun in Ankara as well.

Concert tickets have begun to sell out in the blink of an eye, as soon as they are available. Curiously enough, tickets to the opening night of the opera reportedly sometimes sell out even before they are released.² I say “reportedly” because this is a story I heard from one of the people interested in opening nights at the opera. Our opera no longer admits people to the concert hall who are ungroomed or who lack a formal dinner jacket. There are frequent balls at the opera. You'd think you're in 18th-century Vienna. Because, as far as we know, this kind of dandyism no longer exists in any 20th-century city. Even in the most traditional of cities, like London, people in dinner jackets sit side-by-side with those in sports coats.

¹ First published in Turkish as “Ankara’da sanat uyanışı,” *Dünya*, April 2, 1953, n.p.

² The Ankara Opera, designed in 1933 by Turkish architect Şevki Balmumcu as a space for large-scale exhibitions, was converted for use as the Ankara State Opera by German architect Paul Bonatz in 1948. It was a widely recognized symbol of Turkey's—and especially Ankara's—cultural sophistication. The Ankara Opera was also a major social hub for the city's art and literary crowds during the 1950s, a time when Ankara rivaled Istanbul for the status of the country's top cultural center.

Anyhow, this is not the topic at hand!

In the wake of music and theater, people have recently begun to show significant interest in painting. There are at least three or four exhibitions open at any given time. Between the two galleries at Ankara University's Department of Language, History, and Geography, and the newly founded Helikon Art Association located on Mithat Paşa (formerly İsmet Paşa) Street, there are no gaps.³ Additionally, exhibitions are held in different school associations' gathering-places.

It used to be that the state was the most reliable patron of art exhibitions.⁴ Now, individuals' gradually increasing interest fills in the void left by state support.

What is more, an intellectual youth are chief among those who are purchasing paintings. These young people, who invest the money for which they have fought tooth and nail in painting, have increased in number to a tangible degree. In this way, paintings aligned with contemporary art [*çağdaş sanat anlayışı*] receive more attention than ever before.

Officialdom [*resmî*]⁵—whether half-official committees, or rich people who only appreciate painting to the extent that it resembles something else—requires that purchased paintings be “*klasik*.”⁶ This is the situation in many countries. Now, with the emergence of buyers from amongst young intellectual circles, painting has attained the patron it craves the most in all countries. In this way, modern art receives support in the most salubrious way.

The fact that the Helikon Association, which receives no aid, was founded and is able to maintain its hold reveals that an intellectual com-

3 Ecevit himself was one of the cofounders of Helikon, which was active in Ankara between 1952 and 1956. He frequently used his art columns as a platform to publish photographs of Helikon's exhibitions and promote the gallery's activities.

4 *Müşteri*, which I have translated as “patron,” also means “customer” or “buyer.” Ecevit used the English word “patron” elsewhere: for instance, when he was quoted in an American newspaper, stating, “no longer could the government continue as a generous patron of arts” in a talk he gave to a local audience about the Turkish art world. Marjorie Hunter, “Ottoman Empire's End Freed Turkish Artists,” *Winston-Salem Journal Sentinel*, November 1, 1954, n.p.

5 *Resmî* can translate as a range of things, but it indicates belonging or affiliation with the state, in contrast to something that is by nature private (*özel*) or personal in nature.

6 I am leaving *klasik* as such because this calque carries very specific meaning in the mid-century Turkish context: specifically, as Ecevit's statement reflects, *klasik* was used to refer to a mimetic painting tradition, primarily landscapes and still lifes, which was promoted by the Turkish state in the context of the yearly State Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions, and which stood in opposition to newly emerging modes of abstract art-making.

munity has emerged in Ankara. In other Western countries, this type of association is what enables advanced (avant-garde) [*öncü (avant-garde)*] art movements to survive. Helikon is, I believe, the first of this type of association in Ankara, and if it is not, it is the most broadly engaged.

At the beginning, the name was thought to be a bit strange. But the fact that it seemed strange was also good, because once heard it is not forgotten.

Helikon was the name of a mountain in Greek mythology. In ancient times, some of the Muses would gather at the mountain of Helikon, some at Parnassus.

The association will primarily take up today's advanced art movements. While its gallery on Mithat Paşa Street is not large, it is Ankara's most central and enlightened gallery. Since mid-October, exhibitions have opened of Hasan Kaptan, the Group of Ten, and an exhibition of some seventy reproductions of modern French paintings with explanatory captions. Arif Kaptan and İhsan C. Karaburçak have each given talks on the topic of modern painting. In addition, there are film screenings about well-known painters and sculptors and related talks. The gallery currently has an exhibition of Hakkı İzet's ceramics, which will be followed by an exhibition by the Eyüboğlus.⁷

The association's musical branch endeavors to introduce contemporary musical movements that are not very well-known in our country, including twelve-tone music. For this, Helikon organizes gatherings with musical records and explanatory texts, and vocal and chamber music recitals. Recently, one of the young generation's important composers, İlhan Usmanbaş, organized a two-night program with explanatory texts on *Wozzeck*.

On the evening of March 30, another concert program held in the foyer of the Great Theater, and featuring Leyla Gençer, Mithat Fenmen, Fethi Kopuz, and Enver Kakıcı, will feature songs by another of our young and important composers, Bülent Arel, which he has composed using the twelve-tone technique.⁸

7 All of the artists cited by Ecevit here were involved in various currents that challenged the conservative *klasik* paradigm of painting, with an appeal to various abstract modes.

8 İlhan Usmanbaş (b. 1921) would go on to have a long, distinguished career as a composer of experimental music. In the case of Bülent Arel (1919–1990), a 1957 piece composed for a group of Helikon musicians—in which Arel manipulated an electronic circuit from the audience, emitting sounds from a hidden speaker while a classical quartet played at the front of the room—ultimately led the composer to the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Studio, where he contributed to the invention of electronic music in the early 1960s.

The association's cinema branch will endeavor to support films that our filmmakers, doubtless because they look down upon the level of culture even of our major cities, have neglected to import. Of course, to do this properly requires money, which is connected to time and luck. For that reason, for the moment we are making do with the films that the Embassies Association can get hold of.

The Ankara Law Employees Thought Club (*Ankara Hukuk Mensupları Fikir Kulübü*) has also contributed significantly to the cultural life of our city. On the occasion of each new play's staging in Ankara, the Club meets and has discussions with the writer, director, and actors; it also organizes poetry nights, art talks, architectural visits, and group trips to art exhibitions.

According to what we hear, this Club—some of whose activities everyone can benefit from—will soon widen its reach and also admit members who are not from the Law and Political Science Departments.

Perhaps the best aspect of the new artistic awakening in Ankara is that it is an awakening unconnected to state support. No longer overshadowed, the intellectual community in Ankara has blossomed to the extent that it no longer needs other sources of benefaction.

TRANSLATED BY SARAH-NEEL SMITH