Cross-Cultural Spaces in an Anonymously Painted Portrait of the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II

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Cross-Cultural Spaces in an Anonymously Painted Portrait of the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art History Department of Art and Art History College of the Fine Arts University of South Florida

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyzes an anonymous portrait painting of the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839), called by its descriptive title Seated Portrait of Mahmud II, within the context of the extensive portrait campaign commissioned by the sultan. Surviving examples from this series of diplomatic portraits share a unique set of intercultural iconographic vocabularies as a reflection of their time as well as implicit reinforcement of the sultan’s political goals. By focusing on Seated Portrait of Mahmud II, I argue that a closer inspection of the campaign within a context that pays attention to Ottoman, European, and Persian visual practices reveals a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of its cross-cultural histories and visual as well as ideological references. Structured to reflect the tripartite composition of the artwork itself, this thesis addresses the style and iconographies of the background, middleground, and foreground, respectively. Following a focused examination of the sultan’s portrait, I compare Seated Portrait of Mahmud II to two contemporary paintings: Napoléon Bonaparte as First Consul (1808) from France and Portrait of Qajar Ali Shah Seated on a Chair Throne (1807) from Qajar Iran. While bringing attention to the art-historical implications of a hitherto understudied, yet significant portrait of Mahmud II, my work reexamines the early-modern history of Ottoman art within the larger framework of cross-cultural encounters.
INTRODUCTION

In the 1820s, the Ottoman chronicler Ahmet Lütfi Paşa (1817-1907) recorded a spectacular ceremony held on the occasion of the official public installation of a painted portrait. The artwork, a large likeness of the reigning Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808-1849), arrived at the Selimiye Barracks in Istanbul in a carriage, accompanied by a parade of uniformed military officers, fireworks, and a twenty-one cannon salute. The spectacle culminated as soldiers assembled to formally salute, first the Sultan, and then, with equal reverence, his painted image. This act of public veneration linked the portrait, as a surrogate for the leader, with the physical, bodily presence of Mahmud II, imbuing the image itself with political power.

Despite the fanfare it received, the painting celebrated at the Selimiye Barracks has since been lost, as have all other large-scale works dating from Mahmud II’s reign. The unique legacy of these official portraits as propagandistic icons lives on, however, in other forms. One fascinating, unsigned, and undated image of Mahmud II hangs today in the Hall of Sultans’ Portraits at the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul. Known by its descriptive title Portrait of Sultan Mahmud II (Figure 1), it presents the sultan, sitting in his study before an atmospheric

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1 Ahmed Lütfi, Vakanüvis Ahmed Lütfi Efendi Tarihi I-IV (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1999), 882-3.

2 According to the English traveler and Orientalist historian Miss Julia Pardoe, refractory soldiers protested by spitting at and cursing what they perceived to be a sinful imitation of the act of Creation. The City of the Sultan, and Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1836 (London: H. Colburn, 1837), quoted in Semra Germaner and Zeynep İnan kur, İstanbul and the Orientalists (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası, 2002), 86.

3 For further information on the history of pre-nineteenth-century Ottoman royal portraiture, see Gülru Necipoğlu, Julien Raby, Jürg Meyer zur Capellen, Serpil Bağcı, Filiz Çağman, Banu Mahir, Hans Georg Majer, and Gül İrepoglu, The Sultan’s Portrait: Picturing the House of Osman (İstanbul: İşbank, 2000). Published on the occasion of the exhibition held at the Topkapi Palace Museum, İstanbul, between June 6 and September 6, 2000.
view of the Bosphorus. A heavy velvet curtain reveals the background view through a window, simultaneously demarcating the interior that makes up the middleground. That interior is furnished with a European-style table, atop of which a stack of three bound volumes rests, giving the viewer the impression that she has intruded on a private moment of study. The Sultan, whose learnedness is implied by his books, strikes a regal pose, taking his appropriate place in the foreground as both the subject of the painting and the ruler of the Ottoman Empire. His intense gaze penetrates the picture plane as his right hand points beyond the frame. This gesture, which immediately calls to mind the “go forth” command of the leaders of classical antiquity, simultaneously accentuates the position of the figure’s arm as it encircles the hazy background. In this way, the sultan’s gesture, present in the foreground and framed by the architectural structure of the middleground, reactivates the painting’s background as it intimates his protective role over his domain. The dynamic tension between these three planar segments – background, middleground, and foreground – amplifies Mahmud II’s dignified, commanding presence.

This thesis analyzes the unique and complex aesthetic rendered in the Portrait of Sultan Mahmud II, hereafter Seated Mahmud II. This title, with its emphasis on the sultan’s seated position, is intended to help distinguish the painting’s many idiosyncrasies in relation to a number of mid-nineteenth-century works featuring Mahmud II in a similar fashion. Seated Mahmud II, rendered naturalistically in oil on canvas, appears at first glance fundamentally non-Ottoman in its iconographic and stylistic borrowings. As I will try to demonstrate in the following pages, however, a closer inspection of the portrait within a context sensitive to Ottoman, European, and Persian visual practices reveals a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of its cross-cultural histories as well as ideological references. By using Seated Mahmud II as a lens through which to view these points of contact, my goal is to call attention to
the importance of reexamining the early-modern histories of Ottoman and Islamic art within the larger framework of cross-cultural encounters.

The histories surrounding *Seated Mahmud II* exist in both written records, such as the official chronicles of Lütfi Paşa, and in visual form, such as that preserved in small-scale artworks distributed as diplomatic tokens. Ivory medallions painted with miniature portraits of Mahmud II, an example of which will be discussed below, survive in museum and private collections around the world. Scholars refer to these items, including medallions, small-scale watercolors, and prints of the Sultan’s portrait, collectively as Mahmud II’s portrait campaign. Produced as official propaganda at the command of Mahmud II during the 1840s, campaign works typically share explicit iconographic vocabularies as well as implicit support for the sultan’s larger westernizing reform program.\(^4\)

Previous scholarship described the campaign portraits simply as western imitations and characterized their western style as an overt evidence of a shift in traditional Ottoman aesthetic tastes. Scholars argued that the appearance of European styles brought with it new iconographies that suggested an increase in the Ottomans’ wholesale adoption all things European. However, as Günsel Renda argues in her preeminent work on the campaign’s portrait medallions, the incorporation of western styles should be more accurately described as an adaptation, rather than unmediated integration, of non-Ottoman visual vocabularies. In a chapter in *The Sultan’s Portrait: Picturing the House of Osman*, Renda observes the iconographic and stylistic continuities present between the traditional genre of Ottoman sultans’ portraiture and the stylized

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\(^4\) Mahmud II passed a series of military and civilian reforms with the belief that top-down westernization could be the only impetus for modernization. These reforms eventually culminated in the era of *Tanzimat*, or Reorganization, the beginning of which was officially marked by the Edict of Gülhane, *Tanzimat Feram*, or *Gülhane Hatt-ı Şerifi*, delivered in 1839, just after the death of Mahmud II. The reforms introduced a new army, universal conscription, fairer taxes among the religiously diverse population, the beginning of compulsory primary education, and institutionalized postal service, among others.
representation of Mahmud II within his own visual propaganda. She argues that the integrated
Ottoman-European aesthetic that characterizes the Sultan’s portrait campaign should be applied
not simply as a set of distinct semiotic markers. Rather, Renda proposes, these stylistic and
iconographic parallels should be treated as part of a set of artistic tools available to both Ottoman
and non-Ottoman artists, fitted to the idiosyncratic complexities of Mahmud II’s campaign
portraiture, and reaching beyond the chronology of his patronage. Informed by Renda’s reading
of the campaign style as characteristic of, but not limited to, official portraits commissioned by
Mahmud II, the artwork at the center of this thesis shall be treated as a visual crystallization of
the synthesis that marks the distinctive artistic trends popularized during Mahmud II’s reign. By
building on Renda’s theories of adaptation within Ottoman visual culture, my methodology goes
beyond previous studies of Seated Mahmud II and, taking the image out of the limited analytical
boundaries within which it has been relocated, places it within a larger cross-cultural framework
that allows for a more thorough examination of the painting’s iconographic contents.

Prior to discussing the iconographic and stylistic idiosyncrasies of Seated Mahmud II at
length, I would like to address the limitations involved in this research. The main obstacle of this
study relates to the production of Seated Mahmud II, the conditions of which are unclear because
historical records indicating the work’s painter, patron, date, and place of production have not
yet been located. A definitive identification of the work’s patron is not possible, because,
although the painting shares significant stylistic similarities with the campaign material produced
during Mahmud II’s reign (such as a portrait medallion from the Topkapi Palace collection
signed and dated “Marras f. 1832” [Figure 2, addressed below) it is not certain that Seated

5 Cited by Wendy Shaw, Cezar Mustafa argues that this painting was recorded as the work of Franz Xavier
Winterhalter in the Ottoman newspaper La Turquie in 1874. Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the
Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 27; Sanatta Batıya Açılış ve Osman Hamdi
(İstanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Eğitim, Spor ve Sağlık Vakfı, 1995.
Mahmud II was actually produced during the Sultan’s lifetime. While it is certainly possible that Mahmud II himself commissioned the portrait, it is more likely that his son and successor, Sultan Abdülmecid I (r. 1839-1861), commissioned the portrait of his father posthumously.\(^6\)

Admittedly, this lack of information presents a seemingly untenable research problem. However, I believe that despite, or rather, because of the ambiguities that surround it, the work deserves focused and systematic scholarly attention. Given the factual limitations, the purpose of this study is not forensic research: instead of exerting efforts to identify the work’s patron or author, this thesis concentrates on and provides insight into the inner workings of the painting itself.

While I do not dispute the vital importance of documentary evidence to art-historical research, I do hope to overcome the shortcomings presented by a lack of information. I will do this by demonstrating that visual analysis alone can offer a substantial perceptiveness that might help strengthen the painting’s context as a whole and contribute scholarly insights into the cross-cultural milieu that shaped nineteenth-century Ottoman painting.

The ambiguities surrounding the image include the role of the painting’s commissioner, its target audience, and that audience’s possible response to the image. In the absence of written evidence, we are uncertain whether it was Mahmud II, one of his successors, or perhaps a non-Ottoman patron that commissioned the work. Given the plethora of images depicting the sultan in a similar fashion, we can safely argue that, at least in the moment of the inception of this iconography, Mahmud II must have played a role. While it is not possible for us to determine with certainty whether or not Mahmud II was the sole creator of that iconographic vocabulary, the multiplicity and prolonged circulation of these images of his public persona in art, even after his death, suggests that he must have at least some sort of agency, if not an active role in

\(^6\) Shaw, ibid., 27.
formulating and perpetuating this program. As mentioned earlier, artwork that we consider to be part of this campaign program was created for and viewed within diplomatic and court circles, therefore, even though we are unsure where and when this particular painting might have been displayed, we can argue that the painting’s target audience was most likely the people to whom Mahmud II was keen to send his reformist messages. As active observers of Mahmud II’s reforms, the royal household, diplomats, and soldiers in the Ottoman army would certainly have been equipped to recognize at least some of the iconographic elements. Pictured items, such as the fez, would have been intimately familiar to the target audience. Although surviving first-hand testimonials from this audience do not exist, we can argue that at least some of the iconographic elements present in *Seated Mahmud II* must have been familiar, if not readily accessible.

According to Renda, the records of *Seated Mahmud II* indicate only that it was moved to its current location as part of the royal collection.7 Renda provides the additional information that scholars commonly attribute the painting to Rupen Manas (1810-1875), son of an Armenian family of painters employed at the Sultan’s court.8 Manas, who served at the Ottoman Embassy in Paris during the reign of Mahmud II in 1847, received formal training in European painting techniques while abroad and sometimes incorporated elements copied from non-Ottoman works into his paintings.9 Contesting this proposition, and in part to support a claim that *Seated Mahmud II* is only half of a pair of portraits conceived of together, Wendy Shaw interprets “their

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7 The Sultan’s Portrait Gallery at Topkapi Palace is located within the colonnaded building of the third courtyard, hardly noticeable between the Hall of Sacred Relics and the Library of Ahmet III. Inside, portraits in various mediums, including manuscript pages, oil-on-ivory miniatures, and large-scale oil paintings, are hung on the wall or displayed within glass vitrines. Each ruling Ottoman sultan, beginning with Osman I (r. 1299-1326), is represented as a member of the House of Osman. *Seated Mahmud* is hung on a far wall, separated from the viewer by a rope barrier, where only dim, natural light from the oculus above illuminates the painting.

8 Renda, *The Sultan’s Portrait*, 98.

virtuosity and iconography” as suggestive of a non-Ottoman artist.\(^{10}\) Admitting that the attribution remains unclear, nonetheless, Shaw attributes the work to Franz Xavier Winterhalter (1805-1873), a German artist noted for his naturalistically inspired portraiture featuring lightly modeled figures against dark backgrounds, which echoes the treatment of the Sultan in Seated Mahmud II. However, when we consider the fact that both Manas and Winterhalter were working in styles that culled elements from popular trends in European elite portraiture, just as many nineteenth-century artists did, we are left with little conclusive evidence that would help us trace the artist’s cultural origins.

While a definitive attribution falls beyond the interest of this thesis, my work does concern itself with overcoming limitations of knowing authorship, patronage, and provenance. With respect to the painting’s socio-historical environment, this study focuses on interpreting the object’s visual vocabulary through iconographic and stylistic analyses. It attempts to refute perceptions of Seated Mahmud II as a mere extension of European art and relocate the painting in a space where it operates as intercessor between intercultural artistic trends, while serving the propagandistic needs of Mahmud II’s top-down modernization efforts. Accordingly, by going beyond a comparative analysis that assumes indiscriminate appropriation, rather than deliberate adaptation, this study addresses the painting’s participation in multilateral dialogues.

\(^{10}\) Shaw, ibid., 28.
METHODOLOGY

My analysis of *Seated Mahmud II* corresponds to the tripartite composition of the painting. It begins with the area furthest from the picture plane, moving to the space closest to the viewer, from background to middleground to foreground, emphasizing the painting’s iconography with respect to its treatment within the pictorial space. Structured to follow this three-part spatial division, my analysis involves comparisons among three distinct, but related, visual traditions: Greco-Roman, Napoléon, and Qajar.\(^{11}\) The tripartite construction, adapted in *Mahmud II* to depict a hitherto unidentified interior space, renders the work cross-cultural in its very essence.

The organization of space within *Seated Mahmud II* follows a blueprint codified by Neoclassical trends in elite western portraiture. This formula, which typically includes an idealized, full-length portrait against a dark interior setting, was first popularized by diplomatic exchange of portraits among European courts and was later adapted for official use in Qajar painting. Mahmud II must have been familiar with both examples of portraiture commissioned for the express purpose of gifting and the custom of exchange because both he and his predecessor, Selim III (r. 1789-1807), participated in similar exchanges with Napoléon

\(^{11}\) The Persian Qajar dynasty ruled from 1785-1925. For more on the history of Persian painting, see Layla S. Diba and Maryam Ekhtiar, *Royal Persian Paintings: the Qajar epoch, 1785-1925* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum of Art I.B. Tauris, 1998) and Julian Raby, *Qajar Portraits: Figure Paintings from Nineteenth Century Persia* (Brooklyn, NY: I.B. Tauris, 1999). I intend to pursue the fascinating subject of artistic exchange between the Ottoman and Qajar courts, especially those diplomatic exchanges documented in textual evidence, during my doctoral studies.
Bonaparte, Emperor of the French (r. 1804-1814; 1815).\textsuperscript{12} Rather than assuming an indiscriminate appropriation of European trends on the part of Mahmud II, this study instead aims to bring a new perspective to the painting’s cross-cultural history by accenting those aspects of it that point instead to a deliberate adaptation of diachronical and cyclical relationships. Aligning thus the textual and visual realms, I hope to expand the legibility of the work’s iconographic signs by walking the reader through the painting’s spatial crescendo. By characterizing the painting’s space as culturally “in-between,” I intend to delineate the relationship between Ottoman and European stylistic and iconographic elements, while at the same time calling attention to the significance of fluid cultural boundaries.

By way of unfolding the painting’s spatial constructions, this study addresses its treatment of depth. I read the anonymous artist’s use of linear and atmospheric perspectives as an attempt to figuratively capture the Empire’s reformist sultan’s desire to exist in a cross-cultural sphere. The conventions of this artistic attempt, like Mahmud II’s idealized reformist efforts, fit neatly into neither Ottoman nor European traditions of spatial rendering. An analysis that emphasizes spatial awareness, or a version of it, I argue, is only appropriate for this painting because of its implicit goal to represent, if not to promote, the Sultan’s reforms, so many of which dealt directly with reorganizing, quite literally, public spaces. Some of Mahmud II’s new laws, for example, involved reordering Ottoman lands and government buildings through census reforms and the abolition of Ottoman rulers’ traditional right to confiscate property.

This program of reorganization, I argue, finds visual expression within the painting, first in the distant presence of the Topkapı Palace, which, during the reign of Mahmud II represented

a traditional face of the Empire, moving to the middle ground, in the relatively closer interior walls of the unidentified modern palace, in whose modernizing environment the Sultan is seated confidently, if somewhat uncomfortably, and, finally, in the foreground, in the current (or recently deceased) sultan’s personal space, distinguished as nearest to the viewer, both in terms of its perceived closeness to the picture plane and its temporal closeness via the au courant accouterments of Mahmund II’s modern military fashion. In this way, I link the visual continuity of the composition, exemplified by the dovetail of background cropped by middleground underlapping foreground, to the contemporaneous developments of the Ottoman government as it moved from traditional but outmoded structures to a more modern system. This thesis, while addressing core elements of Seated Mahmund II’s traditional compositional, figural, and iconographic elements, as well as its non-Ottoman inspirations, treats the resulting tension between these visual idioms as a way of underscoring the painting’s vital role within Mahmund II’s political program of radical, westernizing reforms that the Sultan perceived and enforced as key to modernization. This modernization, however, was not necessarily incompatible with the empire’s Islamic past, and continued to embrace traditional religious and cultural vocabularies.

With this context in mind, my analysis of the portrait uses separate but interrelated levels, within which I will discuss the Ottoman characteristics of the painting, while simultaneously examining its visual and ideological engagements with age-old and contemporary visual traditions. This analysis will emphasize the dynamic artistic exchanges among Ottoman, European, and Qajar artists and patrons, as well as those active in the cultural in-between. By placing Seated Mahmund II in proximity to the nearly contemporaneous portraits Napoléon Bonaparte as First Consul, by Charles Meynier (1763-1832), and Portrait of Fath Ali Shah

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13 For a short discussion of conditions under which Napoléon commissioned this work, see Isabelle Mayer-Michalon and Charles Meynier, Charles Meynier, 1763-1832 (Paris: Arthena, 2008), 134-135.
Seated on a Chair Throne, by Mihr Ali (1795-1830), I will try to reveal some aspects of the interaction among artists that occurred within their respective compositional, ideological, and stylistic trends. Illustrating their striking similarities, my discussion will bring to light some deliberate connections among the works.

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14 This painting was intended as a gift to Napoléon. For a short description of its provenance, see Layla S. Diba and Maryam Ekhtiar, Royal Persian Paintings: the Qajar epoch, 1785-1925 (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum of Art I.B. Tauris, 1998), 181; for a more detailed description, see Pierre Amédée Jaubert, Voyage en Arménie et en Perse (Paris, 1821), 307; B.W. Robinson, “Persian Painting in the Qajar Period,” in Ettinghausen and Yarshater 1979, 336, Fig. 225; Robinson and Guadalupi 1990, 85.
A PORTRAIT OF SULTAN MAHMUD II

Background

Jutting out into the waters of the Bosphorus strait, the distinctive rocky outcrop of the Seraglio Point dominates the background of Seated Mahmud II. This famed promontory serves as a geographic marker, signaling that the scene is taking place near the banks of Istanbul, which served as the capital city of the Ottoman Empire from 1453 to 1922. The headland known as the Seraglio Point (Serayburnu) was so named because Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444-46; 1451-81), the conqueror of the Roman Constantinople, chose the peninsular shoreline as a strategic site for his new palace, the Topkapi. The saray, or palace, served as the official residence of the sultans and seat of administrative council, thus linking the architecture and geography together with the governmental body of the Ottoman Empire. In Seated Mahmud II, this symbolic connection converts the geographic setting of the painting, viewed through the window, into a poignant symbol that alludes to the dynastic origins of the political and military power that the Sultan wields over his domain.

In the background of Seated Mahmud II, the cityscape and architectural particularities of the Seraglio Point are difficult to discern, in part due to the devices of diminution and fading in atmospheric perspective, but also because of the haze rising from the waters of the strait and the

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16 This view of the Palace grounds shows the Gûlhane gardens, where the edict by Grand Vizier Mustafa Reşid Paşa officially announced the beginning of the Tanzimat Era.
strong back lighting of the setting sun. The few details that do materialize through the fog are compressed in a sort of visual shorthand that emphasizes distinctive features over topographical accuracy. For example, the pavilions of the Topkapı Palace, which appear at the left, are cramped into a tiny space right next to the soaring minarets and dome of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque. In reality, however, the structures are further apart, a fact that suggests that the artist might have worked from prints or sketches, rather than from direct observation. By compressing and abbreviating the skyline, the painting takes on an even stronger sense of an Ottoman place: in the few inches of the background dedicated to the skyline, the artist has captured some of the most notable feats of Islamic architecture, including the richly historical residence of the sultans as well as the Süleymaniye Mosque.\(^\text{17}\)

Just as the blurry vista is saturated with architectural information, it presents no less than three distinct bodies of water: the Bosphorus strait, front and center, the Golden Horn, on the right, and the Sea of Marmara, in the distance. Their presence further enforces the identity of the background as the Seraglio Point, while suggesting that the viewer is situated on an opposite shore, looking south from across the present-day Galata Bridge. Sultans built several royal palaces along the Bosphorus from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries as part of a trend among Ottoman sultans for commissioning new summer residences in modern styles, such as the Dolmabahçe (e. 1843-1856), Beylerbeyi (e. 1861-1865), and Çırağan (e. 1863-1867) palaces. Though the Topkapı had fallen out of fashion by the time that Mahmud II ascended the throne, in part due to its association with corrupt rule, the Sultan continued to rule from that

\(^{17}\) The Süleymaniye Mosque (e. 1550-1558) is an excellent example of blended Islamic and Byzantine architectural styles. Its monumental predecessor, Hagia Sophia, also appears in the skyline, acting as a particularly poignant example of an appropriated and reshaped architectural body. It was first consecrated as a Greek Orthodox basilica in 537, and was converted into a mosque in 1435, when Mehmed II conquered Constantinople. In 1935, under the secular Turkish Republic, the monument was designated as a museum.
palace during the early part of his reign. In 1826, along with a wider series of sweeping changes intended to modernize the state apparatus, Mahmud II separated the royal residence from the Topkapı, relegating the Palace as only the center of administration. By referencing this separation, the background of Seated Mahmud II invokes the sultan’s political goal of maintaining his legitimate dynastic claim to the so-called golden age of Ottoman rule, while distancing himself from the contemporary stigmas attached to political and governmental injustices of the past.

The background of Seated Mahmud II, framed by an apparently higher window, suggests Mahmud II’s pride in his heritage, while simultaneously highlighting his perceived achievements. Rather than signaling a comprehensive departure from the past, represented by the architectural monuments that make up the skyline as well as the waters that surround and push those buildings into the background, then, the view provides the foundation upon which the iconographic program of the middleground and foreground is built.

**Middleground**

The windowsill and drawn curtain in Seated Mahmud II neatly crop the seascape of the background, setting it into the top left quarter of the painting. The remaining space, three quarters of the picture plane, acts as a stage upon which the subject of the portrait, Sultan Mahmud II, is seated. In what follows, I will first analyze the ratio of background to middleground to foreground, addressing the use of tripartite division as a formula visible in both

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Ottoman miniature painting and western traditions. This will be followed by a detailed analysis of the interior—including its window, draped wall, and furnishings—based on its relationship to the background, concentrating only on the structure and décor of the middleground in order to identify the ways in which this division of space interacts with Ottoman visual tropes.

The tripartite division of space appears, as a stylistic device, in both Ottoman and western traditions, though its articulation varies depending on the genre of any given work. In Seated Mahmud II, as noted earlier, the division of space is achieved using a combination of linear and atmospheric perspectives to produce a 1:3 ratio of exterior (background) to interior (middleground and foreground), resulting in a space that is reminiscent of European depictions of interiors. Traditional Ottoman miniatures, especially those set indoors, also use this ratio. Rather than using perspective to achieve illusionistic depth, however, miniature paintings often use the 1:3 ratio to delineate the point at which the floor meets the wall. An example of this division will be discussed below. The following section compares Seated Mahmud II with its predecessors in the genre of sultanic portraiture in order to demonstrate its sensitivity to Ottoman convention while functioning as an official visual expression of the Empire’s cultural exchanges.

Mahmud II had inherited a centuries-long tradition of sultanic patronage that had converged eastern and western visual cultures through commissions assigned to both domestic and foreign artists. In the fifteenth century, in what is arguably the most famous iteration of cross-cultural artistic exchange, Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444-1446; 1451-1481) commissioned the Italian Gentile Bellini (c. 1429-1507) to make a portrait of himself in the verisimilar style.

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popularized in the cinquecento, setting a precedent for his successors.\textsuperscript{21} For the next four centuries, while future Ottoman rulers continued their patronage of non-Ottoman artists, albeit with enthusiasm of varying degrees, miniature painting remained the favored medium for recording official imagery.\textsuperscript{22}

As \textit{Seated Mahmud II} negotiates its unique iconography, it draws upon this centuries-old cross-cultural fertilization that made earlier sultans’ portraits possible. In its early years, the complex history of Ottoman official portraits built upon Turkic, Persian, and Byzantine traditions of manuscript illustration.\textsuperscript{23} As the empire expanded, so did the agglomeration of visual materials from which the Ottoman \textit{nakkaşane}, or royal atelier, drew inspiration. Through a synthesis of various past traditions, Nakkaş Osman, the chief court painter during the reign of Sultan Murad III (r. 1574-95), codified a vocabulary of uniquely Ottoman idioms. Among his most famous works, the historiographical \textit{Şema\i\name} recorded the appearance, including official dress, character, and facial features, of every Ottoman sultan through the reign of Murad III.\textsuperscript{24} The images in the \textit{Şema\i\name} employ a simplified, compressed space defined by the use of flat color, showing a clear disinterest in any indication of shadow, chiaroscuro, or depth.\textsuperscript{25} These key features helped create the formula associated with the genre of official Ottoman


\textsuperscript{22} Gülru Necipoğlu, ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 23.


\textsuperscript{25} Emine Fetvacı, \textit{Picturing History at the Ottoman Court} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 25.
sultanic portraiture, which would later evolve into an even more complex, cross-cultural style in the time of Mahmud II.26

A significant aspect of Nakkaş Osman’s paintings is their highly formalized, horizontal division of space, which prefigures the division in Seated Mahmud II. A page typical of the chief royal painter’s style, Şemalname, Portrait of Sultan Süleyman (Figure 3) serves as a good representation of sultanic portraiture. Here, the Sultan is seated on a divan with his legs folded beneath him, his left hand resting on his thigh, his right raised in an elegant gesture mirroring the pensive gaze with which he stares off of the page.27 His flatly outlined eyes, arched eyebrows, and even complexion references the Persian concept of ideal beauty. His long nose and auburn facial hair, in keeping with Süleyman’s physiognomy, express a concurrent interest in verisimilar practices. The sultan is further individualized by his contemporary garb, which consists of a tall white turban and a traditional, poppy-red robe over a cobalt kaftan. The combination of idealized and particularized physical features and clothing in Süleyman’s portrait anticipate the stylized facial type that appears in Seated Mahmud II, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Following the establishment of a classical style during the sixteenth century, the flourishing of the arts at the Ottoman Court ground to a halt as funding was diverted to support a series of wars against the Holy Roman, Habsburg, and Safavid empires. This period of artistic stagnation came to an end in 1718, when Sultan Ahmed III (r. 1703-1730) signed the Treaty of Passarowitz, signaling the beginning of a new period of development for the arts known as the Lale Devri, or Tulip era (1718-1730). During this period of revived interest in classical Islamic

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27 Citing Emel Esin, Gülru Necipoğlu argues that the ancient origins of this seating convention might be traced to Turkic palace etiquette, Buddhist iconography, or Timurid scrolls. For more information on postures and carriage in painted scrolls, see Necipoğlu, ibid., 35; Esin, “Oldrug-Turug: The Hierarchy of Sedent Postures in Turkish Iconography,” Kunst des Orients 7 (1970-71): 1-29.
cultural, the celebrated Abdülcelil Levni (d. 1732) was appointed court painter under Sultan Mustafa II (r. 1695-1703).\textsuperscript{28} Nearly a century after Nakkaş Osman had originally codified the grammar of Ottoman miniature painting, Levni revitalized the classical style by incorporating flattened spaces and rich patterning into his own work.\textsuperscript{29} Just as Nakkaş Osman’s \textit{Portrait of Sultan Süleyman} was painted as a single page within the context of a larger codex, so Levni’s \textit{Portrait of Ahmed III} (Figure 4) was painted for the sultanic portrait series \textit{Kebir Musavver Silsilename}. The visual vocabulary set by Nakkaş Osman and picked up again by Levni was originally developed within the context of bound pages, but their stylistic contributions to Ottoman painting appear with regularity in other mediums as well. Though later oil paintings, such as \textit{Seated Mahmud II}, differ from traditional works in their medium, some stylistic qualities, especially in the depiction of space, remain visible.

The tripartite spatial division of \textit{Seated Mahmud II}, for example, shares the paradigmatic method of partition systematized by Nakkaş Osman’s formula and repeated in \textit{Portrait of Ahmed III}. In the \textit{Portrait of Sultan Süleyman}, both the blue tiles of the background and the green carpet appear parallel to the picture plane. The seam between the floor and wall, which is perceived as a perpendicular angle in three-dimensional space, is represented here as a parallel line. This line divides the picture plane into thirds, with the top two thirds dedicated to the wall and the bottom third to the floor. In the \textit{Portrait of Ahmed III}, following the convention set forth by Nakkaş Osman, Levni treats the surface plane with a strict, grid-like pattern defined by the decorative


\textsuperscript{29} Hamadeh, \textit{The City’s Pleasures}, 200. See also Günsel Renda et al., \textit{A History of Turkish Painting} (Seattle, London: Palasar SA in association with University of Washington Press, 1988).
tiles in the background. Because the tiles also act as a subtle unit of measurement, they underscore the hierarchical scale in which the Sultan and his son are depicted. The floor is flattened, as if it has been folded backwards to rest against the vertical plan shared by the wall, repeating the spatial division seen in the previous example. These examples of the ubiquitous 1:3 ratio relate to the tripartite division of Seated Mahmud II, where one third of the space is dedicated to the background and two-thirds is occupied by the middleground and foreground.

Despite the parallels between the two traditional paintings, Levni’s painting differs from the earlier work by Nakkaş Osman in several ways, the most immediately visible difference relating to Levni’s use of diagonal lines. The throne’s armrest and the low stool on which Ahmed III rests his feet, as the only diagonal lines in the painting, offset the dominant horizontal divisions of the work. They increase the rhythmic tension of the work by receding in a manner inconsistent with one-point perspective. Though the painter does not employ a single mode of linear perspective, he does exploit perspectival tropes in the foreshortening of the chair and diminution of the şeyzade, or prince. Levni’s adaptation of perspectival elements demonstrates the way in which new visual idioms circulated among painters versed in classical styles. The combination of Ottoman spatial division and western perspectival tropes in Portrait of Ahmed III demonstrates, then, the mixed artistic heritage into which Mahmud II’s portrait campaign was eventually born.

As the heir to the artistic legacies of Nakkaş Osman and Levni, Seated Mahmud II’s tripartite division of space recalls earlier iterations of portraits set within a space divided into thirds. Traditionally, this appeared as an interior space, two-thirds of which was devoted to depicting the wall and one-third of which was left for the floor upon which the sultan’s cushion

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30 The tiles themselves are a manifestation of Ottoman pride, as both an expensive decoration popularized by their use in Süleymanic monuments and as an import from İznik.
or chair was placed. While *Seated Mahmud II* echoes this division, its contents are different: two-thirds of its space is devoted to the interior, including the wall and floor, while the remaining third depicts the exterior, or background. The iconographic contents of the background were discussed above in relation to their depiction of a specific place, the Seraglio Point. This discussion of the ratio of spatial division between the background and middleground, with respect to precedents in sultanic portraiture, facilitates an analysis of the idiosyncratic details present in the middleground of *Seated Mahmud II*.

The product of cross-cultural spatial and perspectival tropes, the space in which *Seated Mahmud II* takes place has been identified as a room within a Bosphorus-side palace, possibly Dolmabahçe, Beylerbeyi, or Çırağan, all mentioned above. All three of these palaces do share similar views of the Seraglio Point, the Dolmabahçe and the Çırağan being only about one and a half kilometers apart on the European side of the city, while the Beylerbeyi is directly across the Bosphorus strait, about two miles from the Çırağan, or three and a half from the Dolmabahçe. In “European Artists at the Ottoman Court: Propagating a New Dynastic Image in the Nineteenth Century,” Günel Renda proposes that the Çırağan Palace is the most logical identification because of its popularity as a setting among Ottoman artists. She points out that, although the architectural project had been started after Mahmud II’s reign had already come to a close, popular prints of the sultan’s full-length portrait used the grand porch of the Çırağan as a backdrop. In *Ottoman Painting*, Wendy Shaw agrees that *Seated Mahmud II* is a posthumous

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work, but argues that it was commissioned for display alongside a similarly composed painting of Abdülmecid I on the popular grand porch, intended to “affiliate the reigning sultan with the reforms instigated by his father.” Compelling though they may be, these speculations, which are based heavily on contextual evidence, fail to take into consideration the formal manifestations located within the painting itself. To address this issue, I now turn to a discussion of the structural and decorative elements that mark the interior.

The room represented in *Seated Mahmud II* offers no clearly identifiable features, save for the flat, wooden windowsill. The sill is low, but not flush with the ground, which is consistent with the style of windows used in at least some parts of the Dolmabahçe, Çırağan, or Beylerbeyi palaces (Figure 5). Seemingly indistinguishable from the proliferation of palatial windows produced during the boom in Bosphorus-side sultanic palaces in the nineteenth century, this windowsill seems to offer no significant clues with regard to the painting’s setting. Despite this ambiguity, the lack of elaborate ornamentation within the room and the plain, unornamented windowsill suggest that the setting is not to be read as an indication of any of the three palaces noted above. This is because these palaces exhibit distinctive blends of Ottoman styles with Baroque, Rococo, and Neoclassical elements. These architectural styles determine the treatment of the windows of each palace, including distinctive panes, a double-hung style, and unique Neogothic decoration that characterize the Dolmabahçe, the Çırağan, and the Beylerbeyi, respectively. A reference to any of these window styles, each unique to a particular palace, would have solidified the architectural identity of the interior. The result of the artist’s exclusion

33 Ibid., 29.

of these details, however, is a generalized interior that might be found in any one of the numerous modern palaces of the capital. A more plausible consideration would be to interpret the role of the interior space as an architectural project that alludes to westernization in general, rather than a specific venue.

The relegation of the interior to a generic space prompts us to consider it less as a particular location, and more as a symbolic space. In the absence of distinctive elements that would help us to identify the place, the décor of the interior can offer clues to its potential meaning. The intimate environment in which Mahmud II is seated, which includes such household items as a writing table stacked with books, imitates the contemporary, quasi-casual setting popularized during the Renaissance as the *studiolo*, and later exploited for its propagandistic qualities in Neoclassical portraits of “great men,” whose quintessential example during the Age of Revolution was Napoléon Bonaparte. The heavy velvet drape drawn up with a golden tassel, for example, appears as a convincing, if somewhat out-of-place, part of the iconography. This curtain, which would seem quite at home in a portrait of a western ruler, since these idioms had appeared in European royal portraiture since at least the seventeenth century, strike the viewer as odd here because such drapery never had been a standard trope in Ottoman miniature painting. Similarly, the writing table and gilded chair initially appear out of place. By the nineteenth century, however, Louis XIV-style furniture had been imported into new Ottoman palaces, making both diplomatic and stylistic statements. Challenging conceptions of a traditional Islamic setting, Mahmud II had his own throne produced in gilt and velvet, mirroring

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35 This detail recalls the accouterments of solitary, late night strategizing in Jacques-Louis David’s famous *Napoléon in his Study at the Tuileries* (oil on canvas), 1812, 203.9 x 125.1 cm. Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.15. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
his penchant for all things French (Figure 6).\textsuperscript{36} The use of ruby-toned upholstery recalls both the décor of foreign courts as well as the richness of the throne room at the Topkapı Palace. The generic quality of the room and use of popular visual elements, including the drawn curtain, gilded furniture, and velvet upholstery, suggests, then, that these are not signs to be read as signifying a particular location, but rather as markers of the notion of “modernity.”

The gold tassel is one such nonspecific item adopted from non-Ottoman royal portraiture that reappears in a great number of Mahmud II’s official portraits. In \textit{Seated Mahmud II}, this ostensibly frivolous decorative prop is located just above the Sultan’s right hand and attached to the curtain’s drawback. This decorative element seems to speak at once to Mahmud II’s interest in westernized appearances and the heavy use of ornamental pattern and gilding in sultanic portraiture. In Ottoman material culture, the tassel has a long history of decorating the palaces and garments of the elite, from the glittering tack of the sultan’s horse to the intricate frogging of his kaftan. In \textit{Seated Mahmud II}, the prominence and location of this ornament, surrounded by the light, open space of the background’s sky, highlights its heavy symbolism and its close proximity to the figure’s right hand suggests a central role for it in the iconographic program of the painting.

Since the time of Constantine and Justinian, tassels had played a significant role in the fashions of the wealthy in Istanbul. By the time of Mahmud II’s reign, due in part to a revival of ancient iconography, this sartorial embellishment came to represent, among other things, military and social status in eastern and western empires.\textsuperscript{37} By including such a detail, Mahmud II’s

\textsuperscript{36} Coşkun Yılmaz, ed. \textit{II. Mahmud: Yeniden Yapılanma Sürecinde İstanbul} (İstanbul: Avrupa Kültür Başkenti, 2010), 28.

portrait conveys a message related to the competitive shows of wealth, technology, and military might among great empires in the east and west. The interplay between this detail and the rest of the décor helps to further unfold the painting’s iconographic program and its role in portraying Mahmud II’s stately grandeur in a political and cultural milieu that included, among others, French and Persian leaders.

**Foreground**

Within its complex transcultural planes, the most convincingly Ottoman element of the painting is, most appropriately, the sultan himself. Situated in the foreground, the depiction of Mahmud II’s figure recalls eastern traditions of serial portraiture with a generic face, appended to a peculiarly posed and clothed body of somewhat disproportional size. The earliest portraits of Mahmud II, including miniature paintings from the early part of his reign in which he is depicted wearing the traditional kaftan and turban, as well as commercial engravings produced for a European audience, display a strikingly similar facial rendering: his flattened, round face, thin nose, large eyes, and rounded, full beard appear with regularity in the *Tesavir-i Hümayun*. One example of this type of portrait, in the tradition of European miniature portraits, residing today in the Topkapı Palace, is signed “*Marras f. 1832*” (Figure 2).38 Marras, a French artist of Spanish origin, initiated this style of small-scale diplomatic work within the context of Mahmud II’s portrait campaign.39

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38 Topkapı Palace Museum 17/208.

Without additional primary sources at hand, it is futile to hypothesize about the standardized, flattened face that has come to represent Mahmud II. The ambiguities related to its purpose aside, the iconic, unchanging face of Mahmud II could be interpreted as a metaphor for his perceived role as the steady center of a changing empire. This was especially needed during Mahmud II’s reign, when an indication of stability within a fast-changing nation would help strengthen his position as an unwavering leader. In fact, Mahmud II was the first sultan in centuries to reinstate himself as the başkomutan—literally, “head commander”—of the military. Images of the sultan, himself the symbolic head of the empire, inscribed in the minds of viewers a consistent, immovable leader.

The repetitive use of a prototypical likeness, since ancient times, has been connected to depictions of military leaders. In the Greco-Roman tradition of striking coins with the image of a leader’s profile or the image of a deity linked the physical likeness of a ruler with their divine right to rule the land and command the military. By distributing small, portable portraits that were likely to reach a large audience, ancient rulers ensured that their presence was recognized by the masses through a surrogate image. Napoléon, who was interested in the propagandistic value of ancient surrogate images, such as coins imprinted with Alexander the Great’s face or orating statues of Caesar Augustus, consciously appropriated poses, gestures, and ornaments in his own portrait campaigns. When Mahmud II modeled his own campaign on that of Napoléon’s, he or his artists saw these ancient tropes through a new lens, though they must have been aware of these trope’s Greco-Roman origins. Like the Greco-Roman leaders who ordered their images proliferated on ancient coins, the Ottoman sultan was cognizant of the power of using a familiar

40 Gültekin Yıldız gives some information regarding the historic precedent and symbolic function of the Sultan as a military leader in ibid., 109. Similar references to this iconography, rooted in ancient prototypes, appear in Kürkman, Garo. Armenian Painters in the Ottoman Empire 1600 – 1923. Trans. Mary Pricilla Işın (İstanbul: Matüalem Uzmanlık ve Yayıncılık, 2004), 37.
visual language to promote his position as a reliable ruler capable of protecting and advancing his domain.

Following a determination of the similarities between Mahmud II’s face as depicted in *Seated Mahmud II* and his likeness as it appears on portrait medallions, an examination of their source of inspiration points us this time not west, but rather east, to Qajar Persia. Around the same time that Mahmud II was drawing on Greco-Roman traditions of verisimilar portraiture, filtered through a Napoleonic lens, his neighbor to the east, Shah Fath Ali (r. 1797-1834), was using similar methods for exploiting portraiture. The distinctive style of Qajar painting was rooted in Safavid art, but it also culled such stylistic practices as the application of dark, saturated oil colors, from Europe.41 Both Ottoman and Qajar painters were interested in verisimilitude and applied illusionistic effects to their still lifes, though in painting human figures, painters of both empires opted for Persian notions of ideal, youthful beauty. Qajar portraiture, like its Ottoman counterpart, was produced in a myriad of forms and sizes, not least notable of which are the miniature paintings carried out in oil-on-ivory portrait medallions, attesting to yet another instance of shared aesthetics.42

These artistic interchanges among the Ottomans and Qajars appear in abundance in the small-scale works. The Mahmud II medallion mentioned above, for example, closely recalls a Persian medallion from the early nineteenth century: a *Portrait of Fath Ali Shah* (Figure 7). Both the sultan and the shah are miniaturized, as dictated by the format, painted in bright colors with fine detail. They share an even, flawless skin tone and rosy cheeks, signaling their status as


42 Diba, ibid.; Julian Raby, *Qajar Portraits: Figure Paintings from Nineteenth Century Persia* (Brooklyn, NY: I.B. Tauris, 1999).
refined, yet robust leaders. Their stylized eyes are elongated, trimmed with long lashes and set deeply beneath thick, dark eyebrows that sweep together. Luxurious, full facial hair appears in both medallions, though the Ottoman sultan’s is styled in a rounder fashion than that of the Shah’s. The striking facial similarities between these two miniature portraits suggest a confluence of Ottoman and Qajar artistic practices, especially in this small-scale, portable medium that lends itself so well to use as a diplomatic token, leading me to take an interest in the practices of exchange among Napoleonic/French, Ottoman, and Qajar patrons and artists.

The same facial type appears in portraits of sultans commissioned to European artists. A good example is the French artist Henri Guillaume Schlesinger (1814 – 1893), who produced paintings of Mahmud II for mass reproduction and consumption by European audiences. Dubbed the “Schlesinger type,” these pictures feature the Sultan in a manner reminiscent of the figures in European royal portraiture, heroically riding a galloping horse or standing against a Neoclassical column (Figure 8). In Schlesinger’s works and similar depictions, the Sultan is commonly rendered standing against a curtain in full military uniform, head turned to the right, holding a sword. He wears a frock coat that shares the fitted tailoring, stiff collar, navy or cobalt wool, and rows of brass buttons that appear in the Tesavir-i Hümayun, sometimes with the addition of imperial insignia on the breast or around the neck. This similarity facilitates a supposition that a copy of Mahmud II’s stylized face, possibly in the form of a Tesavir-i Hümayun might have reached France as a diplomatic gift. It is also possible to suggest that one of Schlesinger’s students or peers might have brought him an image of the Sultan. Schlesinger-type images usually allude to the Sultan’s military reforms by featuring soldiers, horses, or cannon in the

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background. This imposing iconography was heroic, and closely tied to the nineteenth-century European idea of an ideal ruler. Because of the similarities between *Seated Mahmud II* and the Schlessinger-type portrait, a contrast between the two helps to further highlight the distinctive features of the former.

In another instance of French, Ottoman, and Qajar convergence, we might consider, in respect to *Seated Mahmud II*, the large-scale *Portrait of Fath Ali Shah Seated on a Chair Throne* (oil on canvas), attributed to Mihr Ali (Figure 9), featuring the Persian prince seated on a jeweled carpet. Dated c. 1800-1806, the portrait was completed around the same time that Mahmud II ascended the throne. As in their respective miniature portrait medallions discussed above, the Persian shah and the Ottoman sultan share similar facial features: light complexion, thick, accentuated eyebrows, and elongated eyes. In the relatively larger scale, however, it is much easier to ascertain the difference between Mahmud II’s neat, short facial hair, and Fath Ali’s bifurcated beard. Like the Sultan, the Shah is seated in a gilded, throne-like chair before an open window or bay. However, the Persian setting is clearly demarcated with detailed, jeweled, and punched patterns on the sill and furniture. Whereas Mahmud II is wearing a western-style military uniform, the Shah wears traditional, rather than westernized, Iranian clothing and headgear. Although the Persian kaftan and navy wool jacket originate in different traditions, they do display curious stylistic similarities.44 As in *Seated Mahmud II*, here inanimate objects are rendered naturalistically, and dispersed against a heavily stylized human figure. This comparison of the full-length, seated images of Mahmud II and Fath Ali Shah serves to strengthen the

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44 Though the ensembles themselves differ, their rich blues, the shimmering textures of the silk and wool, as well as the rhythm created by the embroidered pearls and double row of brass buttons, echo each other.
similarities between nineteenth-century Ottoman and Qajar royal portraiture through their respective diplomatic programs.  

As these comparisons demonstrate, perhaps the most distinct element in the foreground of Seated Mahmud II is the position in which the sultan is depicted. The location and posture of the sultan’s body, like his formulaic face, was meant to be legible and recognizable to audiences familiar with nineteenth-century tropes of idealized portraiture. Elevated and seated on a gilded chair, Mahmud II is in a position of honor that conveys a sense of reverence, dramatically diverging from the cross-legged divan pose of paintings from the classical period, such as Nakkaş Osman’s Sultan Süleyman, mentioned above. Though seated positions have precedence in sultanic portraiture, Mahmud II’s pose nonetheless is distinguished from the canonized, dignified carriage of enthroned sultans because of his awkward stance. The Sultan’s extended right leg and covered left knee do little to ground his figure, who should be weighted most heavily in the area where he actually makes contact with the floor. If the Sultan were in the process of standing up, however, an appearance of weight in flux would still be logical. In that case, the figure would have to shift his balance, either by bending forward at the waist or by using his arms for support by placing them on the thighs, as Ahmed III appears to be doing in Levni’s work. Although the figure’s carriage proposes an aura of timelessness, invoking a posture of one between the ancient seated philosopher, orating surrogate, or equestrian ruler types, the contrived gesture and unnatural weight distribution belie a stiff, mannequin-like

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45 Despite remarkable parallels, comparative studies between Qajar and Ottoman courtly paintings of the nineteenth century await thorough scholarly attention.
quality. An examination of its sources may help explain the complexity and seemingly out-of-place nature of this pose, possibly drawn from multiple sources.46

The Sultan’s body, striking for its facial and gestural aspects described above, is draped in the most recognizably western accessory to his overall image: trousers. Though decidedly more loose than the iconic doeskin jodhpurs of Napoléonic fame, Mahmud II’s pants are tightly fitted about the thigh, terminating in a loose boot-cut fashion. It is this sartorial symbol that will come to signal the key changes that the Sultan brought to Ottoman military uniforms: the new ensembles were based on the European-style “upgrade” that Mahmud II’s predecessor, Selim III, had attempted to introduce. While the garments signaled to their rivals, east and west, the Ottomans’ readiness to appear and act like its modern contemporaries, the target audience for a more blatant message of change was a domestic audience. Following an uprising in 1826 dubbed the “Auspicious Incident” in which the Janissaries47 were ousted, Mahmud II introduced the new army, called Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediyye or “Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad.”48 The ranks were filled with Muslim Ottomans, in contrast to the former Janissaries, who were devşirme, young boys conscripted from Christian families.49

A painting entitled Official Parade of the Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediyye (Figure 10) documents these military exercises, showing Mahmud II wearing his new uniform while taking part in the training à l’Européenne. Dressed in the longer, tailed frock coat, white trousers, and

46 The Sultan’s hand appears, from some angles, to have been overpainted, but due to the poor lighting conditions of the painting’s display, a close examination has not been possible.

47 Formed in the fourteenth century, the Janissary Corps was an elite branch of the Ottoman military that answered directly to the sultan. From the seventeenth century until 1826, corruption ran rampant throughout their ranks, allowing many members to extort money from the government. When Selim III attempted to reform the Janissaries, they mutinied and deposed the sultan.

48 Yıldız, ibid., 105.

49 Alan Palmer, The Decline and Fall of the Ottoman Empire (Fall River Press, 1992): 23, 92-93.
fez as in the Schlesinger-type portraits, the Sultan is situated in the midst of his men. The infantry, on the other hand, wear cropped jackets that bear a closer resemblance to the garment worn by the Sultan in *Seated Mahmud II*. If this is an accurate pictorial description of the first implementation of drills in the new uniform, one wonders, then, why the Sultan’s uniform is so different in the latter portrait. Is the cropped version an earlier iteration of Ottoman à l’Européenne or a ceremonial version of the uniform? What does this subtle change in dress imply about the dates on which the respective paintings were produced, and how does this explicate the Sultan’s hyperawareness of appearance, especially in matters of dress? In order to answer these questions, one needs to briefly examine the rich and complex history of dress and headgear in the Ottoman Empire.

Ottoman dress laws date back to Osman I (r. 1299 – 1326), the founder of the Ottoman House. The laws that were set by Osman I were institutionalized by Süleyman in his canonical legislation in the early 1550s. Following Süleyman’s codification of dress laws, the uniforms in which a sultan chose to be represented, or his sartorial statement, began to function as an explicit message of either piousness or conspicuous consumption. When Mahmud II began to wear a modern, western-style military uniform, he sent a clear propagandistic message to his subjects via the sartorial legacy of his predecessors.

The jacket in *Seated Mahmud II* is unique among painted depictions of the Sultan. It is a cropped shell of purplish blue with a reflective quality suggesting the sheen of fine velvet. Its rich floral embroidery could be spun from fine gold wire, a common feature found in surviving

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imperial jackets from the period, preserved today at the Museum of Naval History in Ankara. The particular laurel leaf or chevron design couched into either side of the front closure and collar may have been adapted from European sources, which will be discussed below in regards to a Napoléonic uniform. The cut of Mahmud II’s garment, including its close fit, waist-length hem, and tight sleeves may likewise have been imported, as similar elements appear in contemporary imperial French military uniforms prior to 1839 as well as in official portraits of Napoléon. Despite its European references, however, like the painting itself, the jacket echoes older Ottoman works, including the former Janissary uniform, with its front center seam closure. This feature disappeared with the introduction of the double-breasted frock coat, though ornamental floral embroidery remained a chief element of Ottoman uniforms. By 1839, senior officers in the Ottoman Imperial Army had adopted the long frock coat and in the 1850s, a more lightweight version, complete with full standing collar and cuffs, was introduced. High turnover rates in the army, due to contagious disease, battle, and desertion, fueled a high demand for replacement uniforms, giving military tailors frequent opportunities to update and adapt the design of the ensemble.

Though Mahmud II’s introduction of the westernizing trousers and frockcoat were met with some initial resistance, the fez proved an even more controversial item of the new military

52 See later jackets in photographic detail in İlhan Akşit, Topkapı (İstanbul: Haşet Kitabevi A.Ş., 1986) and Charlotte Maury, À la cour du Grand Turc: Caftans du palais de Topkapı (Paris: Musée du Louvre Éditions, 2009), a catalogue published to accompany the exhibition “At the Court of the Grand Turk: Kaftans from Topkapı Palace” exhibition held at the Musée du Louvre from October 9, 2009 to January 19, 2010 as part of the Turkish Cultural Season in France.


54 Personal correspondence with Christopher Flaherty, April 2014.

55 According to Yıldız (ibid., 114), at the establishment of Asakir-i Mansure until February 1837, the number of enrolled soldiers was 161,036, but by February 1837 it had dropped to 54,670.
uniform. When Mahmud II popularized the infamous red, woolen cap, the Ottomans had already established a rich and diverse tradition of official headgear, which functioned within the state apparatus to demark the wearer’s role, rank, and religion. In fact, the variety of headdresses at the Ottoman court so impressed a European traveler that, in his account of the sultan’s court, he compared the wearing of feathered and tasseled headdresses to an “ornithological department.”

Although many elements of the uniform carry over from western styles, the fez stands out from the rest in its non-western appearance. In *Seated Mahmud II*, the fez almost fades into the shadowy folds of the curtain behind the Sultan, owing to its dark blue or black wide fringe tassel. Yet this headgear was not in any way an indistinct part of the reform.

The cylindrical, flat-topped fez is perhaps one of the most notorious sartorial symbols commonly, if mistakenly, associated with the Ottoman Empire. The inflammatory status of the fez, together with the larger cultural, religious, and military discourse surrounding its adoption into the Empire, makes it a rich and poignant icon in artworks dating from the early modern Ottoman period. Although the fez is often conceived of as a uniquely Ottoman object, it originates in the city of its namesake, Fez, in northern Morocco. Artisans in Fez produced this headgear through a process that involved crocheting the basic shape from woolen yarn and then felting the fibers together over a wooden mold. The headgear was then colored and finished with a black, silken tassel. The small rounded-top version that appears in the painting is likely the original fez—the simple unlined, and un-blocked red fur-felt one-piece molded dome hat that remained in use through the early twentieth century. Even today, some Turkish fashion trends incorporate headgear modeled on a one-piece felt pattern, though wearing the traditional red fez is largely limited to tourists, according to Christopher Flaherty (personal correspondence, April 2014). In 1925, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president of Turkey (1923-1938) banned the

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57 Even today, some Turkish fashion trends incorporate headgear modeled on a one-piece felt pattern, though wearing the traditional red fez is largely limited to tourists, according to Christopher Flaherty (personal correspondence, April 2014). In 1925, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first president of Turkey (1923-1938) banned the
top-down sartorial reforms of 1826, the popularity of the classic fez contributed to the Ottomans’ development of a great variety of differentiations in color, shape, and tassel style. Although the basic elements of fez design remained largely unchanged during its use in the Empire, these shifts in style, while seemingly discreet, signaled the Ottomans’ desire to transform this foreign object into an overtly Ottoman identity maker.

As an object, the fez’s highly charged nature clearly manifests itself in political and religious contexts. The most controversial aspect of Mahmud II’s headgear reform was the widespread replacement of the turban, the traditional headcovering that Muslims had historically considered to be a marker of the ümmet, the Muslim community at large. The replacement of the turban with the fez had significant connotations beyond the religious realm, however: with a fez on each head, in Mahmud II’s new empire, Muslims and non-Muslims appeared indistinguishable from, and thus equal to, one another. By dressing his diverse subjects identically and enforcing this dress code by a legal edict, Mahmud II was erasing from sight the centuries-long Muslim supremacy over the empire’s religious minorities, making them appear equal.58 Mahmud II’s daring act was opposed by conservatives who regarded the status of the turban as innately symbolic in nature as an identity marker of Islam. As a way of defending and disseminating these sartorial reforms throughout the vast lands under his control, Mahmud II fashioned a new public image of an Ottoman sultan wearing the fez as part of his new military uniform in both life and likeness.

58 The only exception to this new law was the ulaire, Muslim legal scholars, who were permitted to retain the traditional turban. It should be noted here that the ulaire did not oppose Mahmud II’s military reforms, including the new uniform, and agreed to approve the fez when the Sultan appointed imams for each of three central barracks. Avigdor Levy, “The Ottoman Ulema and the Military Reforms of Sultan Mahmud II,” Asian and African Studies 7, (1971), 24.
While the new uniform, composed of trousers, jacket, and fez, served his larger agenda of projecting a westernized appearance in the political realm, the Sultan does not appear completely comfortable in his clothes in Seated Mahmud II. His trousers fit his kneecap so tightly that the viewer is able to discern the bone structure underneath the fabric, which transforms at the calf into an incongruous cascade of fabric, falling freely and heavily around the Sultan’s boots as if the garment had not been hemmed properly. The jacket is equally awkward, its constricting fit rendered with equal stiffness across the Sultan’s rigidly straight torso and elegantly curving arms. Lastly, the fez, pulled tightly down to Mahmud II’s brow, appears snug enough to stay put during the most rigorous military drills, but its perfectly combed tassel suggests that its wearer barely stirs. These dissonant sartorial markers highlight the strained process of negotiation between the generic, canonical language of the body, represented in the timeless facial type and gesture, and the naturalistic, Neoclassical language of softly modeled fabrics that at once cover and make visible the imperial body. It is as if the sultan, Ottoman at his core, has taken on the outermost layers of the nineteenth-century “Drill Sergeant Sultan” in order to enhance his image of control over his domain as one of several great empires. In the power struggles of the early modern era, his venture for an unconventional and individualized identity as a powerful military ruler put Mahmud II at the helm of both the empire and the army.\(^{59}\)

\(^{59}\) For more examples of Mahmud II “in action,” see Yıldız, ibid., 109.
A PORTRAIT OF SULTAN MAHMUD II WITHIN FRANCO-OTTOMAN 
AND PERSO-OTTOMAN CONTEXTS

During the late eighteenth century, European artists produced an abundance of paintings 
that are reminiscent of the practiced handling of oil paint and the creation of a complex 
iconography we observe within Seated Mahmud II. Artists of the Neoclassical movement, 
including the workshop and students of Jacques-Louis David, drew inspiration from the artistic 
and cultural remains of ancient Greece and Rome. David’s students, among them Jean-Auguste-
Dominique Ingres and Antonie-Jean Gros, used the revitalized iconographies of past empires to 
produce effective elite portraiture that would serve the agendas of, first, the Ancien Régime, and 
later, of Napoléon Bonaparte. Under Bonaparte’s patronage, the so-called Davidian School 
produced a number of portraits for the Emperor, such as the equestrian Napoléon at the Saint-
Bernard Pass (1801) and Napoléon in his Study (1812). The latter work exemplifies the 
strategizing commander at work, an idiom repeated throughout many of Napoléon’s portraits, 
including the lesser-known Napoléon as First Consul, completed before Napoléon crowned 
himself emperor of the French in 1804. The relationship between the iconography present in 
Napoléon as First Consul and Seated Mahmud II will be discussed below.

When Mahmud II’s reform programs were realized, the legacy of the French Revolution 
and Napoléonic Wars was still fresh in Ottoman collective memory. The Napoléonic epoch, with

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its vast number of art works commissioned by the Emperor, provided a convenient source of visual material for the Ottoman Empire on its path to modernity. As discussed above, Franco-Ottoman diplomatic relationships had already been established for decades by the time Mahmud II introduced French-style military drills and uniforms. These two great personalities became associated even further when popular rumors claimed that they were related through Mahmud II’s mother, Valide Sultan Nakşidil Haseki, who was purportedly a cousin of Joséphine de Beauharnais, the wife of Napoléon.\textsuperscript{61} Whether or not this rumor holds any weight, its very existence is a remarkable testament to the public’s association of Mahmud II with Napoléon. After all, if elite members of the cosmopolitan Istanbul were the primary audience for the portrait program, it would be perfectly reasonable for the artist and patron to speak in shared visual language.

\textit{Napoléon as First Consul} was copied in both sitting and standing variations for a series of official portraits to be distributed to different cities in France. Ingres, for example, made a copy intended for Liege, while Meynier made one for Brussels.\textsuperscript{62} Of these portraits, Meynier’s \textit{Napoléon as First Consul} (Figure 11) presents the best example for a comparison with Mahmud’s portrait because of the specificity evoked in the view outside of the window, a detail that plays an equally vital role in both works. Despite obvious similarities, in the absence of written records of Meynier’s ever travelling to Istanbul, this juxtaposition cannot lead to an attribution of Mahmud’s image to Meynier. Nonetheless, it is important to reiterate the fact that artists frequently copied each other’s compositions during nineteenth century, as ever, and that it is of course possible that the sultan’s figure was copied from another work. The painter of \textit{Seated

\textsuperscript{61} Yılmaz (ibid., 23) adamantly dismisses this rumor as French propaganda.

Portrait of Mahmud II, then, did not necessarily have to be a creative genius, but he surely was familiar with the Davidian school’s production of Napoléonic commissions.

This discussion allows us, then, to safely assume that the unknown artist of Seated Mahmud II created the portrait or reproduced a copy of a preceding model with the knowledge that it would participate in the larger tradition of sultanic portraiture, while being legible in diplomatic exchanges of European royal portraiture. This contextualization is essential to the formal reading of the work because of the hybrid nature of the visual arts in the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. Although the material and technique used in the painting’s construction were popularized in the west, this painting relates to earlier Ottoman sultan’s portraits in its solemn, idealized depiction of dynastic power. The oil portrait traces its roots to the tradition of serial Ottoman sultanic portraiture via shared emphases on spatial construction, stereotypical representation, and iconography. The work’s importance to art history lies in the idea that the authorship really belongs to Mahmud II, who was responsible for fashioning the image, from designing the uniform and fashioning the personality, to creating the portrait program and literally living out the public persona that survives in the painting. The production of such elite portraiture is then shared between two orders of “great men”: followers of the Davidian School who canonized Neoclassic painting and the military leaders of the nineteenth century who so fastidiously crafted the ideological programs behind their public images.

Examples of such paradigms are present in the portrait series commissioned by Bonaparte as First Consul, referred to above. The piece copied by Charles Meynier for display in the city of Brussels pictures Bonaparte sitting in a dark interior, wearing a red frock coat and tight white trousers, calling to mind the setting and appearance of Mahmud II. Like the Ottoman sultan, Bonaparte holds an unfurled document in his left hand and a pen in the other. The view from the

63 Gülru Necipoğlu, ibid., 36.
window shows the chapel tower of the town, not too distinct in its role as a geospatial locator from the Seraglio Point in the background of *Seated Mahmud II*, suggestive of this painting’s role as a commemorative work on the occasion of a new order signed by Napoléon.

A more striking resemblance between the two portraits is the tripartite division of space into their respective backgrounds, middlegrounds, and foregrounds. In *Napoléon as First Consul*, the background, like in that of *Seated Mahmud II*, is located in the upper left side of the work, framed by a window and rendered in atmospheric perspective. Like the Seraglio Point, which situates the Sultan in a distinct place in Istanbul, the bell tower of Brussels’s cathedral locates Napoléon in a specific geographic and cultural location. Unlike the inclusion of the Topkapı Palace, however, here, with its dynastic connotations, the cathedral denotes a more specific event that ties Napoléon to the town.

The middlegrounds of both works frame their respective views using the form of the window, whose sharp outlines are relieved at the right sides by curtains and at the bottom by tablecloths. The obvious differences between the two include Mahmud II’s red curtain and tablecloth, arranged with a tasseled tie-back and Napoléon’s décor that consists of a green curtain and blue tablecloth, with the addition of the Neoclassical trope of the classical marble column. The golden tassel reappears in miniature in the fringe at the bottom of the tablecloth. Like Mahmud II, Napoléon is seated in a gilded chair that features a scroll motif copied from classical columns. Whereas the motif appears on the armrest of Mahmud II’s chair, Napoléon’s chair features the head and paws of a lion at the arm, arching back into the scroll at the backrest. Taken together, the compositional relationship between the background and middleground, the use of curtains, tables, and chairs, appear to belong to the same iconographic grouping. Each pictured alone, these two great leaders of the nineteenth century assert their latest achievements
in the form of signed documents. The viewer of each painting catches the Sultan and the Emperor just as they have finished laboring over written affairs of state, not oblivious to the traditions of the past, yet distanced and elevated from them, looking forward, surrounded by the richness of the furnishings that echo their glorious deeds.

The accouterments and accessories of the two men are also remarkably similar, despite their different effects. Mahmud II holds what appears to be an official document in his hand, signed with his gilded tuğra, or imperial cipher, and containing what appears to be pseudo writing. On the table, three leather-bound books with gilded fore-edges lay scattered, but closed, suggesting that the Sultan may have been interrupted while reading, or, perhaps that he is immersed in continued studying and researching. Symbolically, the books signal that he is not only a man of the sword, but a man of learning, grounding his reforms not only in the imitation of western empires, but also in the self-acquired knowledge on par with that of his contemporaries. The similarly sparse study of Napoléon features no books, but several documents, including the legible decree held in his left hand. As opposed to Mahmud II’s books, which are closed and inactive, however, Napoléon holds an inked pen, suggesting that he is still in the process of writing. Or, having reclined for a break after finishing work on one document, he waits, pen in hand, for his next enterprise.

The other striking objects in the paintings are the medallion around Mahmud II’s neck and Napoléon’s girded sword. These items reference the military status of their wearers, and, although they appear to be unrelated, they are in fact just as similar in meaning as the accouterments of study in the respective workspaces of each commander. In fact, according to Edhem Eldem, the fact that Mahmud II wore any sort of decoration on his breast or around his

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64 Due to the painting’s present positioning and light source, it is difficult to determine the precise contents of the document, though, excepting the tuğra, the inscription appears to be largely pseudo-text.
neck was a result of a misunderstanding caused by the Napoléonic Wars, which encouraged the development of medals given out for merit rather than birth. Prior to the reign of Selim III, rank in the Ottoman military was marked by headgear. Ottoman men did not typically wear pendants before the reign of Mahmud II, although sultans wore a variety of jewelry. Based on Eldem’s classifications of Ottoman medallion types, the piece pictured in *Seated Mahmud II*, owing to its circular shape as well as its suspension from a distinctive gold linked chain set with rubies, does not appear to bear a striking resemblance to any of the published works in the Topkapı collection. Later portraits of Mahmud II, including the miniatures by Marras, replace the chain with a metallic strip or ribbon and feature an oblong medallion rather than a round one, indicating that the medallion pictured in *Seated Portrait* is either a unique or invented item.

During the emergence and evolution of Ottoman military decorations, western precedents were absorbed, translated, manipulated, and used as diplomatic tools. The ‘invention’ of Ottoman medals occurred during a misunderstanding when Selim III bestowed the first “order,” which was actually a decorative pin meant as a gift, upon Admiral Horatio Nelson for his intervention against Napoléon’s troops in the Battle of the Nile in 1798. When the Ottomans realized the appreciation that soldiers had developed for the decorations, Selim III struck the “Medal for Egypt,” the first pendant specifically made for the purpose of distribution in 1801. Five years later, in 1806, the “Order of the Crescent” or *Hilal Nişan* was used to honor the French. The medallion that Mahmud II wears in *Seated Mahmud II* may be an early iteration of

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66 Ibid., 24.

67 Ibid., 52.
the Hilal, which underwent many changes in design during its time as an awardable order. In the painting, the medallion can be read as an object denoting a specific meaning as the Hilal Nişam, but also as another indication of the painting’s careful balance between eastern and western modalities.

In addition to their accouterments, the manner in which Mahmud II and Napoléon inhabit their spaces conveys aspects of their character. Although both men are seated, they strike the viewer with their erect, alert, and ready-for-action poses. Their right hands, themselves historically auspicious bodily symbols in royal iconography, are assigned active tasks within the larger iconographic program. Mahmud II gestures commandingly, directing the viewer’s eyes though the space, while Napoléon, in a subtler manner, points with his pen to the document he is about to sign, his wrist resting on his knee. Both actions encourage the viewer’s eye to move through the painting, activating the space in the foreground. In the former painting, Mahmud appears as if he is preparing to stride in the direction of his pointer finger, which is further accentuated by the diagonal axis of his leg. Likewise, in the latter painting, the diagonal created by the pen in Napoléon’s hand is echoed by the pen that remains in the inkwell as well as Napoléon’s leg and sword. Despite the differences between the explicit “go forth” command and the more subtle point, viewers of both paintings are put in an immediate position to obey the rulers’ authority, following the direction of the respective leaders, if only in an imagined space.

Above, I had compared Mahmud II’s pose to manuscript paintings in dynastic works. However, it is now important to note that the sultan’s particular pointing gesture does not have an immediate referent in Ottoman painting. The outstretched index finger brings to mind the equestrian portraits of ancient Greek and Roman emperors, congruous with the semi-divine

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68 Hoca Boghos Düzyan, the head jeweler at the Imperial Mint from 1839-1853, made an album of decorations in 1851, available at the Topkapı Palace Museum Library.
“soldier-king type” initiated by Marcus Aurelius (Roman Emperor 161-180) and carried on through the equestrian iconography of Sassanian reliefs.⁶⁹ “Soldier-king” imagery, such as the commanding “go forth” signal, reappeared in European art during the popularization of highly posed, exaggerated musculature in the Renaissance. Michelangelo’s Creation of Adam fresco from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1508-1512), for example, cast its biblical figures as ancient nudes, referencing the classical myths from which Renaissance humanists drew inspiration.⁷⁰ Michelangelo’s iconic description of the extended, almighty hand of God later appears in Neoclassical portraits, such as David’s Napoléon at the Saint-Bernard Pass (1801), a more contemporary precedent for the motion of Mahmud’s hand. Both nineteenth-century leaders, Mahmud II and Napoléon, sought to align themselves with the successes of ancient semi-divine heroes by means of appearing—in painted form—capable of embodying the austere grandeur of classical rulers. When read within this framework, Mahmud’s curious hand gesture calls to mind the Ottoman sultan’s designated role as the caliph, the shadow of God on earth. As in the Creation of Adam, where God’s hand is igniting the life force within Adam, in the sultan’s portrait, Mahmud II is reviving an empire poised—in the minds of its rivals—to lie down on its deathbed.

Above, I discussed the Sultan’s figure in relation to its Ottoman precedents, favoring a traditional reading of its style and iconography. However, those terms specific to Ottoman-Islamic art cannot fully describe Mahmud II, not because the terms are inherently vague or insufficient, but because the Sultan set out to portray himself as an heir to a dual imperial throne: that of contemporary Istanbul and that of ancient, legendary Rome. After the Renaissance,

⁶⁹ Yıldız, ibid., 109.

⁷⁰ Prints of The Creation of Adam were widely circulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One such print, made by Domenico Cunego in 1772, is in the British Museum collection 1886,1124.267.
political leaders wished to enforce an imperial connection to the “emperor type” developed by Augustus I, as manifested, for example, in the *Augustus of Prima Porta* found in Villa Livia in 1863. During Mahmud II’s reign, as the Ottoman Empire was beginning to lose territories and appear less powerful than it used to be, its ruler developed a propagandistic campaign, based on exploiting and adapting the iconographic and stylistic strengths of portraits commissioned by his contemporaries. The resulting portraits promoted his own image as that of a vivacious, intelligent, able ruler, capable of controlling–and expanding–his empire. By looking back at these paintings through the compound lens of Ottoman dynastic artistic heritage and contemporary western trends in elite portraiture, we can come to a more nuanced understanding of the appropriation and reshaping of ancient idioms in *Seated Mahmud II*. 
CONCLUSION

In “Excursus against influence,” Michael Baxandall argues that the use of the term “influence” muddles our understanding of art “because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the inferential beholder will wish to take into account.”71 In this thesis, in line with Baxandall’s discourse on the questions of agency, I interpreted Seated Mahmud II as a visual manifestation of cross-cultural diplomatic, political, and ideological practices within multilateral dialogues among rival rulers and their artists. The issue of conflated symbolism, which demands iconography shared among French, Ottoman, and Persian artists to be read in constantly shifting and overlapping perspectives, complicates the discussion of propagandistic images and their impacts on the late Ottoman Empire. The figure of Mahmud II, as the subject of the painting, functions as an embodiment of personal and political dynastic decrees in order to persuade his viewers of his competence as Sultan, military leader, and modern worldly sovereign. This multifaceted persona reflects the many roles of the omnipotent ruler, but also the interest in a “multicultural vision for Istanbul as the New Rome.”72

As my visual analysis tried to demonstrate, the popularity of the archetypes that functioned as the paradigm for sultanic power during Mahmud II’s reign cannot be fully explained through Ottoman-Islamic traditions. By incorporating the visual vocabulary of the


72 Gülru Necipoğlu, ibid., 35.
official court portraiture of his forbearers, Mahmud II presented himself not only as the heir to the Ottoman Empire, but also as the emperor of a modern, metropolitan realm in a state of transformation.\textsuperscript{73} Seated Mahmud II represents a collaborative attempt by patron and artist to reify the sultan not only as a son of the House of Osman, but also as the ruler of an up-to-date and internationally competitive empire. His dynastic legacy encompasses ancient leaders of Greek and Roman fame, and simultaneously points to the constructed image of Napoléon Bonaparte. As scholarship on Ottoman and Islamic art continues to expand, the importance of reexamining its early modern histories more closely and within the larger framework of cross-cultural encounters becomes more vital. Tracing these histories can help scholars to better understand the motivations behind the choice of specific visual languages that persist for centuries.

In the English-speaking world, art historians have only recently begun to discuss the cultural and social implications of Mahmud II’s larger reform program. Post-Saidian approaches offer an alternative to the idea that such works can only be read through the wholesale adoption of the westernization or modernization paradigm.\textsuperscript{74} Through mapping the ebb and flow of cross-cultural exchanges and their resulting artistic trends across the Mediterranean, art historians continue to dismantle stereotypes about Ottoman aspirations of reform along western lines. Instead of perpetuating the idea of their “failure” to imitate the artistic ideals of the Christian world, we might view the beginning of a new sort of Ottoman-ness based on an ideological justification that could only have existed within a Muslim context. Through a more comprehensive view of the multilateral artistic spheres of the empire, we can begin to understand

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 36.

the propagandistic tools used by Ottoman ideologues to develop a distinctly Ottoman mode of negotiating modernization. A better understanding of transpositions can help us answer art-historical and cultural issues by looking at how eastern and western trends converged in the early modern era. It is in this spirit that I believe that portraits of Mahmud II deserve scholarly, if belated, attention for their ability to provide greater insight for our distant perceptions of the Ottoman Empire.
Figure 1: Anonymous. *Portrait of Sultan Mahmud II*. Mid-nineteenth century. Oil on canvas, 135 x 190 cm. Topkapı Palace Museum, Istanbul.
Figure 2: Marras. *Portrait of Sultan Mahmud II*. 1832. Oil on ivory, 6 cm. diameter. Topkapı Palace Museum, Istanbul.

Figure 3: Nakkaş Osman. *Portrait of Sultan Süleyman*, in *Şemailname* of Seyyid Lokman. 1584. Gouache on paper, 48.5 x 30.5 cm. Topkapı Palace Museum, Istanbul.

Figure 6: Mahmud II’s throne. Nineteenth century. Image reproduced from Coşkun Yılmaz, ed. *II. Mahmud: Yeniden Yapılanma Sürecinde İstanbul* (İstanbul: Avrupa Kültür Başkenti, 2010).

Figure 8: Henry Guillaume Schlesinger. *Portrait of Sultan Mahmud II*. Oil on canvas. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.
Figure 9: Mehr Ali. *Portrait of Fath Ali Shah Seated on a Chair Throne*. c. 1800-1806. Oil on canvas. 227.5 x 131 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, Section Islamique, MV638.

Figure 11: Charles Meynier. *Napoléon Bonaparte as First Consul*. 1804. Oil on canvas. 225 x 160 cm. Musées de la Ville de Bruxelles, Bruxelles.
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