



ACROSS THE SEAS

ÖZER KABAS, AND HIS TIMES

Across the Seas: Özer Kabaş and His Times examines the work of artist, educator, and writer Özer Kabaş from the 1960s to the 1990s and his place in Turkey's cultural history.

After graduating from Robert College (Boğaziçi University) with a degree in engineering, Kabaş studied painting at the Yale School of Art from 1957 to 1962. Between 1964 and 1974, he taught at Robert College and helped develop the campus's cultural environment as director of Social Hall and advisor to the Robert College Cinema Club. In 1971, Kabaş began teaching part-time at the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts (later Mimar Sinan University), where he joined the core faculty of Basic Design Education and introduced the Bauhaus methodology he learned from Josef Albers at Yale into the curriculum. He continued guiding many artists throughout his career until his passing in 1998.

Through concepts he developed in his writings, such as “montage,” “synthesis,” and “horizontal and vertical effects,” Kabaş explored the relationship between local visual culture and the global art scene. He rejected both the idea of tradition as something fixed and the uncritical adoption of Western art as a model. For him, art was shaped by the constant interaction of culture, history, geography, and everyday life. Alongside his painting and teaching, his short films, texts, and jewelry designs at the Uart Art Studio, which he co-founded, were part of the same intellectual quest.

From the 1970s onward, Kabaş focused his paintings on the sea, labor, and human relationships. The world of fishermen, sailors, and dockworkers gave him a way to engage with broader historical and social contexts. Marmara Island and sea voyages shaped his artistic practice and held an important place in his life.

The exhibition brings together the artist's paintings, prints, jewelry designs, and works in theater and cinema alongside archival documents. It highlights Kabaş's interest in various artistic disciplines, his approach to art education, and his contributions to Turkey's cultural landscape.

STUDENT YEARS AND EARLY WORK

Özer Kabaş was born in Mersin in 1934. His family, involved in the import and export of agricultural products, expected him to become a mechanical engineer. He did not challenge those expectations and graduated from Robert College in 1957.

Kabaş entered Robert College in 1946, where he laid the foundations for his interdisciplinary practice. As a boarding student, he became actively involved in the school's social and cultural life. Theater, athletics, and basketball were among his primary interests.

During these years, Kabaş took an active part in elective courses and student clubs. One of these was the Dirty Palette Club. He also served as president of the Plastic Arts Club. Under the guidance of İlhami Demirci, an art teacher at Robert College, and later painter and ceramicist Tom Kendall, the club provided a space for students to engage in artistic production. As an extracurricular site of aesthetic education, it organized a joint ceramics exhibition at the United States Information Service (USIS) in Beyoğlu in 1957 with Mithat Tokay, who taught pottery classes at the school.

After graduating from the Department of Mechanical Engineering at Robert College, Kabaş studied painting at the Yale School of Art from 1957 to 1962, contrary to his family's expectations. At Yale, he worked with artists and educators such as Josef Albers, Bernard Chaet, William H. Bailey, Neil Welliver, Rico Lebrun, and Gabor Peterdi. He received his BA in 1961 and his MFA in 1962, graduating with distinction. That same year, he held his first solo exhibition at the Ross-Talalay Gallery in New Haven.

Kabaş's years in the United States brought him into direct contact with the modernist tradition of art education spanning from the Bauhaus to Black Mountain College and Yale. Josef Albers, a leading figure of the Bauhaus, developed an educational approach that encouraged students to learn how to see and question the relationships between material, form, and color, rather than directing them toward a particular style. Albers's studio was a learning environment in which art was approached not as a repertoire of expression but as a practice rooted in experience, observation, and critical inquiry.

In the 1950s, Yale was an international hub where the Bauhaus legacy remained influential and discussions on modern art, architecture, and design intersected. During his years there, Kabaş encountered key pedagogical models of the period and became part of an intellectual milieu that saw art as an interdisciplinary practice. At the same time, Abstract Expressionism was becoming increasingly institutionalized and widespread in the United States. Kabaş's experience in this environment played a decisive role in shaping his critical distance from prevailing artistic trends.

During his studies at the Yale School of Art, Özer Kabaş was deeply influenced by *New Images of Man*, curated by Peter Selz at MoMA in New York in 1959. The exhibition's emphasis on figurative art at the height of Abstract Expressionism made a profound impression on Kabaş. He was particularly drawn to the way it situated the human figure in relation to existential anxiety and alienation. His return to Turkey in 1962 marked a new phase in his artistic practice. Amid the tensions of the Cold War, social critique came to the fore in his expressionist paintings, drawings, and engravings.

Kabaş's early paintings oscillate between a post-Ottoman world—recalled with melancholy yet not longed for—and the insatiable *nouveaux riches* of the 1960s. In sparsely furnished interiors stripped of memory—punctuated only by 18th-century Rococo chairs—views of the Bosphorus are typically confined to a window or picture frame in the background. At the center of these compositions are solitary figures wearing fezzes and dressed as if for a ceremony. Although they appear prepared, they seem to have nowhere to go. Even in crowded, bustling settings, these figures retain an inner stillness and a sense of inertia. Figures wearing fedoras or top hats, on the other hand, are more dynamic, unruly, and in tune with the times. Portraits of fez-wearing “father figures” adorning bare walls reinforce the critical atmosphere of the paintings.

By contrast, his drawings reveal a denser and more meticulous approach. Although some evoke an aesthetic reminiscent of cartoonist Turhan Selçuk's character “Abdülcanbaz,” Kabaş's work maintains a distance from Selçuk's cubist tendencies.

Abby Weed Grey was an American art patron and the founder of the Grey Art Museum at New York University. During the 1960s, she built a comprehensive collection of modern art from outside the West. Supported by cultural diplomacy networks that emerged during the Cold War, she traveled to countries including India, Turkey, Iran, and Egypt, forging direct relationships with artists and acquiring their works. During her visits to Turkey between 1961 and 1969, she also developed close ties with the local art scene. Convinced that modern art could serve as a tool for intercultural communication and exchange, Grey assembled a collection now regarded as one of the earliest initiatives of “global modernism.”

*At the time of our visit with him in his Istanbul studio at Robert College, he was combining various materials and producing work of unexpected excellence. During his army stint he had made many sketches about the war. Two of the paintings I bought were based on them, and they were fresh and powerful. On his easel that day was a portrait of Charlie Chaplin, an international icon. [...] One Sunday, I met Mike for tea at the apartment of Özer Kabaş, [...] his English was excellent, and so was his wife's. They lived four flights up in a flat in the Bebek area, and their apartment, which also had a large roof terrace, was full of rugs, books, treasures, art such as an artist might collect. [...] Özer had made a sketch for me which was displayed on an easel: a death's head on a seated figure with a scarf wrapped around his neck, an artist holding up a palette, and saying, in a comic's balloon from his mouth, the words: "Merhaba, Mrs. Grey, we are just 'fine.'" The message was clear: they weren't.**

Kabaş's *Merhaba, Mrs. Grey*, dedicated to Abby Weed Grey, is an early expression of his engagement with questions of imitation, originality, and locality.

*Abby Weed Grey, *The Picture Is the Window—The Window Is the Picture: An Autobiographical Journey*, New York: New York University Press, 1983, pp. 141, 222.

ROBERT COLLEGE

After completing his studies at the Yale School of Art, Özer Kabaş returned to Turkey and joined the faculty at Robert College, where he taught from 1964 to 1974. He also served as director of the Social Hall and actively shaped the campus's academic and cultural life.

In the second half of the 1960s, Robert College was at the center of debates over university autonomy and the future of higher education. During the transformation led by founding president Aptullah Kuran, Kabaş stood out for his contributions to university life. After five years of teaching, he was appointed Assistant Professor by the Faculty of Science and Letters in the 1969–1970 academic year.

Kabaş adopted an interdisciplinary pedagogical approach, situating art in relation to architecture, painting, theater, cinema, literature, and music. In addition to the “Art Appreciation” and “Art Studio” courses, the “Combined Arts” program—developed with Oya Başak and Donald Hoffman—brought together theory and practice, as well as art history and studio production. The art history programs he developed with Aptullah Kuran further extended this approach. Kabaş also established close ties with student clubs and supported student participation in university governance. He was among the faculty who advocated for student representation and democratic participation in the Senate.

In 1971, when Robert College was nationalized and transformed into Boğaziçi University, Kabaş helped shape the new institutional identity. The logo was based on the conceptual framework established by Aptullah Kuran and designed by Kabaş. Symbolizing the meeting of the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara at the Bosphorus, the design gradually evolved into its current form with the addition of the inscriptions “Boğaziçi University” and “1863.”

Özer Kabaş taught at Robert College as a faculty member, and that is how many of us came to be his students. In the “Art Appreciation” class I took with him (February–May 1970), he repeatedly emphasized and discussed three books that reflect the breadth of his intellectual and cultural knowledge: Ernst Fischer’s The Necessity of Art; George A. Huaco’s The Sociology of Film Art; and José Ortega y Gasset’s The Revolt of the Masses.

Mişel Grunberg, 2022
(A former student at Robert College)

*Back then, my passion for the visual arts—especially photography and film—was completely at odds with the future my family had planned for me. There was considerable pressure for me to become an engineer, but I found myself fantasizing about a “guardian angel” who would rescue me. That was when Özer Kabaş entered the picture. He admired my photographs and organized an exhibition of my work at the Social Hall, which he directed. Before long, without my knowledge, he wrote to the dean of the Yale School of Art—his alma mater—recommending me for admission.**

Sedat Pakay, 2007
(Photographer, filmmaker, and a former student at Robert College)

*Sedat Pakay, “Özer Abi, the Guide on My Journey” (New York, December 2007), *Özer Kabaş: Retrospective*, Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Publications, 2008, pp. 27–28.

I somehow ended up studying civil engineering at Robert College, before going on to study architecture at the Sapienza University of Rome. I say “somehow” because there was no architecture program at Robert College, and I thought civil engineering was the closest option. Özer Kabaş steered me toward Italy through a friend who taught at the Yale School of Architecture. He had even made inquiries on my behalf about a master’s degree in architecture at Yale. But when his colleague saw my educational background in Italian schools, he said, “Why not go to Italy instead? We send our master’s students there!” So I chose Italy, which had already been on my mind before college.

Cavit Sarioğlu, 2022 (A former student at Robert College)

*[...] I was teaching at Mimar Sinan University. One day, when I came out of a lesson, I came across Mehmet Güler, I remember us having a deep discussion in front of the school; he recommended I went abroad and stay there for a long time, whereas I opposed this idea by saying that there was still a lot I had to do here and much to gain from this country. Then there is also the important offer I received in my second year at Bosphorus [Boğaziçi] University. One day, Özer Kabaş brought the director of the Rome School of Fine Arts to my studio at school, he wanted him to look at my paintings. A while later I received an offer of a scholarship to study at the school in Rome. When I put forward the excuse that I was in my second year, I was told that I could transfer directly to the second year and that I could later transfer to the school's branch in America if I wished to do so. I rejected the offer without much consideration. Every time he saw me from that day on Özer Kabaş told me that he never could forgive me for my decision.**

Fatma Tülin, 2010

(Artist and a former student at Boğaziçi University)

*Levent Çalikoğlu, "Interview with Fatma Tülin," *Fatma Tülin*, Istanbul: Masa, 2010, p. 19.

The most important event for me was the arrival of Özer Kabaş from America where he had studied art under [Josef] Albers who was one of the foremost engravers, among other things; and he did not hide his respect for Özer's engravings. [...] I have never met anyone who did not like Özer and I was grateful that he liked me. But then he liked anyone. He continued to paint and engrave in spite of an exacting job. But it was less exacting for him because he had only to be himself to be trusted by the students who were soon turning to him for help.

Many years later, he had to resist becoming the rector of Mimar Sinan University where he was universally liked and admired. He refused because the post would have taken all his time and the heart of his working life was painting.

[...] It was a sudden decision that took Özer and me to Marmara Island early in the 1960s, because neither of us had seen the Proconnesian quarries nor the island itself, which was not yet more than a very minor tourist attraction. [...] There was a fine expanse of sand which Özer changed into a gallery of low relief sculptures devoted to aspects of the reclining goddess, who by one name or the other has ruled this part of the world since before recorded memory.

Özer planned a summer school for sculptors since the marble is kind and easily worked. The masterpiece was left there on my advice, which could not have been worse. One night, a handsome American motor yacht arrived with no lights burning, beheaded and stole the philosophers and, no doubt, took them to the cattlemarket which is the world of corrupt art dealers.

We swore that we would come back and build a house on the island. Özer being Özer, he did just that, complete with its own well in the cliff. Before it was finished we used to go down to the village well and we also carried basket loads of vegetables and fruit. By then, there was a daily boat to Erdek and back and one had time to shop for meat and drink. The crossing was often rough but in no way like the voyage back from Palatya [Saraylar].

*[...] The architect Aptullah Kuran [then president of Boğaziçi University], inspired by Özer, built himself a house next door. [...] He also grew the most delicious tomatoes which we learnt when he decided to sell his house.**

Godfrey Goodwin, 2002

(Art historian and former colleague at Robert College)

*Godfrey Goodwin, *Life's Episodes: Discovering Ottoman Architecture*, Istanbul: Boğaziçi University Press, 2002, pp. 198–216.

Kabaş maintained a consistent engagement with theater throughout his years as a student at Robert College. He performed in several notable productions, including *Köşebaşı* [The Neighborhood] alongside Cevat Çapan and *Julius Caesar* with Engin Cezzar. This commitment continued after his return from the Yale School of Art, and his contributions extended beyond acting. He was responsible for the set and mask design for the 1965 production of Jean Genet's *Les Nègres* [The Blacks], translated into Turkish by Ali Taygun.

These pursuits placed Kabaş within a circle of peers who would later become prominent cultural figures such as Oya Başak, Haldun Dormen, Üstün Ergüder, Genco Erkal, Ali Pasiner, and Ülkü Tamer. At Robert College, theater developed into a creative environment intertwined with literature and visual arts, first through the Hisar Players and later the Robert College Players. A key figure in shaping this environment was Hilary Sumner-Boyd, who played an important role in theater and the humanities at the school.

Özer Kabaş's activities at Robert College in the late 1960s were instrumental in establishing an intellectual platform for independent cinema and laying its institutional foundations in Turkey. His pedagogical approach united various disciplines, viewing the campus as both an educational space and an alternative site of cultural production. One tangible outcome was his work as advisor to the Robert College Cinema Club, where young filmmakers seeking an alternative to the commercial conventions of Yeşilçam cinema came together. This vision was embodied in the Hisar Short Film Competition, organized annually between 1967 and 1970 to encourage documentary, animation, and experimental filmmaking. As Turkey's first short film festival, it positioned cinema as an aesthetic and intellectual medium and became a foundational platform for independent cinema. The repressive political climate that followed the military intervention of March 12, 1971 ultimately led to the closure of the club and brought the festival to an end.

Kabaş's work during this period also gave practical expression to his theoretical studies. His 16mm observational documentary film *İstanbul Hatırası* [Memory of Istanbul] (1967) captured the city's cultural fabric while reflecting the era's experiments in cinematic form and visual language. Another pillar of his interdisciplinary pedagogy was the open forums held during the Robert College Culture Weeks. Interweaving art, cinema, and politics, these forums were grounded in the conviction that art cannot be separated from its social and political context. The intellectual milieu around the club brought together artists, writers, and filmmakers such as Kuzgun Acar, Tahir Alangu, Özcan Arca, Üstün Barışta, Cihat Burak, Adnan Çoker, Atilla Dorsay, Ayşe Erbil, Selahattin Hilav, Nurten Karaçivi, Onat Kutlar, Aziz Nesin, Tan Oral, Mutlu Parkan, Faruk Pekin, Kemal Tahir, Sezer Tansuğ, Orhan Taylan, Ömer Uluç, and Artun Yeres. Discussions focused on revolutionary cinema, organized political struggle, the aesthetic potential of short films, and the social function of art. The journal *Görüntü*, first published in 1966, served as a platform reflecting the theoretical foundations of these intellectual debates. Bringing artists and students together around aesthetic, political, and social issues, these initiatives laid the groundwork for a vision of art education and independent cinema in Turkey whose influence continues to the present day.

The 1960s marked a pivotal period in shaping Özer Kabaş's visionary role as an educator and cultural figure. In addition to teaching at Robert College, Kabaş served as director of the Social Hall, transforming it into an art center. From the mid-1960s onward, the venue provided an important platform, especially for young artists, and hosted a series of exhibitions:

- Oktay Anılanmert, Nuray Ataş, and Mehmet Güler (May 25–June 5, 1964)
- Nil Yalter (January 5, 1965)
- Sedat Pakay (1966)
- Ara Güler (May 2–20, 1966)
- Gülsün Karamustafa, Figen Demirel, Mustafa Şener, and Komet (December 6–16, 1966)
- Saim Bugay (1967)
- Ziya Gökçek (October 21, 1968)
- Şerefnur Ayiter (November 6–17, 1968)
- Kuzgun Acar (circa 1968–1969)
- Cem Kabağaç (circa 1960s)
- Aliye Berger (circa 1960s)
- Zerrin Kehnemuyi (1970)
- Fatma Tülin (1973)

At a time when Istanbul had relatively few concert halls and theater venues, these exhibitions established the Social Hall as a gathering place for artists.

*The research on the exhibitions held at Robert College is ongoing. If you'd like to contribute, please contact salt.research@saltonline.org.

Photographer and filmmaker Sedat Pakay was among Özer Kabaş's students while studying engineering at Robert College. Photography became a shared interest that forged a bond between them. Together, they explored Istanbul, visiting flea markets in Kuledibi and Beyazıt and talking about photography. Kabaş's interest in the built environment and visual culture influenced Pakay's work from the early 1960s, when he photographed Istanbul's streets, neighborhoods, waterfronts, artisans, shopkeepers, and everyday life.

Kabaş closely followed Pakay's work and encouraged him to exhibit his early photographs at the Social Hall at Robert College, where he served as director. He also urged Pakay to apply to his alma mater, the Yale School of Art. Pakay's application, which included photographs of Istanbul, caught the attention of Walker Evans—a pioneering photographer, photojournalist, and Yale professor whose iconic documentary style captured the spirit and social reality of 20th-century America. Pakay transferred from Robert College to the Yale School of Art, where he received his master's degree in 1968.

Through Engin Cezzar—a theater actor and director Kabaş had known since his years at Robert College—Pakay met James Baldwin and his circle in Istanbul. From the 1960s onward, he began photographing the writer there. This encounter grew into a long-lasting relationship that culminated in Pakay's Baldwin portraits and his film *James Baldwin: From Another Place* (1973). His photographs of Istanbul also featured prominently in John Freely's book *Stamboul Sketches* (1974).

One day, completely outside my comfort zone and just to enjoy the act, I made a drawing. It was free from the rules and concerns I had imposed on myself. When Özer saw it, he said, "Why aren't you pursuing this? What you've created here is quite distinct. Don't stand in the way of your own expressive power!" I hadn't taken either the routine sketches I did in class for Cemal Tollu or the drawing I showed Özer seriously. He, however, recognized the foundation on which I could build my painting. Only someone else can tell you this because it can easily escape your own attention. That's why I always tell my students: "Show me everything you've made, including the things you don't consider important; the real value might lie there."

*Özer Kabaş and I developed a genuine artistic friendship—a relationship in which we opened each other up, broadened each other's horizons, learned from one another, and didn't shy away from it. We never tried to assert dominance. I believe I owe this turning point in my painting to Özer.**

The friendship between Özer Kabaş and Mehmet Güleriyüz evolved through exhibitions, collaborative works, and discussions about art. The Social Hall at Robert College was one of their early meeting points. The expressive

possibilities Kabař recognized in Gülerüz's drawings foreshadowed directions that would become evident in the artist's later work. Their dialogue lasted for years, sustained by mutual criticism and exchange.

*Ayşegöl Sönmezay, *Güldüğüme Bakma: Mehmet Gülerüz Kitabı*, İstanbul: İşbank Cultural Publications, 2004, p. 165.

After high school, I had a chance to visit museums and exhibitions abroad. This provided me with a different view of the work I was doing. I find it interesting that I opted for Bosphorus [Boğaziçi] University instead of the Fine Arts Academy. I didn't even take the Academy exams. I still ask myself why. I think I believed that painting was something that I already "had." Bosphorus University would teach me something else.

The "Humanities" course I took at Bosphorus University was taught by Özer Kabař. When I found out that he was a good painter, I wanted him to see my paintings. He took me seriously and showed interest. So he became my one and only art teacher. He would often comment on the paintings I did. For a while, he asked me to complete the homework assignments he used to give his students at the foundation course in art at Mimar Sinan University. I carried out some point and line work for a while, without exactly understanding the purpose. However, one day I got bored with all this and out of the blue, I made a painting of an apple. He came to the room I worked in, saw the painting, stopped, looked at it, walked towards the door without saying anything, and just when he was about to leave the room he said, "It's best you don't do that homework I gave you anymore." He greatly contributed to my work. It was he who taught me the importance of hard work and discipline, and how the work has to be taken seriously, and that talent alone is not enough. I never forget something he told me: "You must take care of the level of taste of the friends you choose. We inevitably want people who are close to us to appreciate our work; you might suddenly realize that you are producing work suitable to their taste." It happened to me once. Then I understood how right he had been.

Another way in which he helped me was that he had arranged for a room to be given to me at school. I could go and paint even during the intervals. In time, I began to stay there overnight and during holidays, including the summer. This gave me the opportunity to work intensely and with great discipline. Before long, I opened my first exhibition at Bosphorus University. This time, Abdullah Kuran, who was the rector at

*the time, suggested that Bedri Rahmi see my paintings. It seems strange now, but Bedri Rahmi was truly a test in everyone's eyes back then. And so years later, this test was still on my trail, and I was faced with it again.**

Özer Kabaş played a pivotal role in the early stages of Fatma Tülin's artistic practice. While she was a student at Boğaziçi University, Kabaş closely followed her work and helped create the conditions that enabled her to work on campus. Tülin used the Student Affairs Office as her studio. This period marked what the artist would later describe as “the first steps of her work.”

*Levent Çalıkoğlu, “Interview with Fatma Tülin,” *Fatma Tülin*, Istanbul: Masa, 2010, pp. 15–16.

URART

Urat Art Studio* was founded in Yeniköy, Istanbul, in 1971 by Özer Kabaş and his brothers, Mehmet and Vedat Kabaş. It sought to reinterpret Anatolia's cultural, archaeological, and aesthetic heritage through a contemporary design language, combining the forms and techniques of ancient jewelry-making with modern jewelry and object design. Each piece was conceived as a unique work of art.

Urat's starting point was the recognition that public interest in Anatolia's traditions of metalworking and ornamentation had gradually faded amid modernization. Rather than reproducing historical forms, the studio translated the formal vocabulary of Urartian and early Anatolian art into a contemporary design language. This approach deliberately distanced itself from the dominant jewelry aesthetics and mass-production ethos of the period. For Urat, the past was not a decorative object of nostalgia but a living cultural resource.

The "horizontal" historical influences that informed Özer Kabaş's understanding of art and culture were also reflected in Urat's work. Geography, everyday life, crafts, and local visual culture were treated as generative sources in their own right rather than as passive recipients of imported aesthetic trends. In this sense, Urat Art Studio was not simply a design initiative but part of a broader effort to forge a different relationship between modern art and craft, the body and the object, and history and contemporary life. Kabaş's interest in mini-sculpture and jewelry design continued after he left Urat in 1976.

*Urat refers to Urartu (the Kingdom of Van), an Iron Age civilization from the 9th to the 6th century BCE. Covering parts of present-day eastern Turkey, Armenia, and northwestern Iran, it was a significant regional power known for advanced bronze work, architecture, and complex irrigation systems.

ACADEMY AND MİMAR SİNAN UNIVERSITY

At the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts, Basic Design Education was introduced into the curriculum after a two-month student occupation. Students and teaching assistants gained representation in the Academy's administration, and educational reform began. The Basic Design Education Chair was established by a resolution adopted by the Department of Sculpture on December 1, 1969, and approved by the Academy Council. During the 1969–1970 academic year, at the invitation of Zühtü Müridoğlu, Altan Gürman taught the chair's first course to about ten students and faculty members in the Department of Sculpture. In 1970, Ercüment Kalmık was appointed to the chair. As the course expanded into a joint studio program with 140 first-year students from the Departments of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, and Decorative Arts, Ali Teoman Germaner and Erkal Güngören joined the faculty. After Kalmık passed away in 1971, Zühtü Müridoğlu took over as chair, and Özer Kabaş joined the core faculty from Boğaziçi University. Kabaş taught "Surface," Gürman "Color," Germaner "Texture," and Güngören "Structure." Nuri Temizsoylu served as the teaching assistant. Initially established as a chair, the program later became a department and eventually a faculty. This distinctive pedagogical model came to an end following the 1980 military coup, with the establishment of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and the Academy's subsequent restructuring into Mimar Sinan University in 1982.

Kabaş, one of the key figures who conceptualized Basic Design Education at the Academy, had firsthand experience with the curriculum at Yale. The transformation at Yale was driven by German artist Josef Albers, who arrived in the United States in 1933 following the closure of the Bauhaus. Charles H. Sawyer, dean of the School of Fine Arts, invited Albers to help him replace the Beaux-Arts method and reorganize the curriculum. In a 1951 report to the Yale president, Albers explained his philosophy as follows: "Art, I believe, cannot be taught directly. Our teaching is, therefore, [...] a training in observation and articulation. [...] The development of technical skills must be subordinated to the development of a flexible imagination." According to Kabaş, Basic Design was "the only well-documented educational method born of modernism through the Bauhaus. Beyond this, every attempt made in the name of contemporary education has faltered severely."

Kabaş joined the Department of Painting following the transformation of the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts into Mimar Sinan University and the closure of the Basic Design Education Chair. He became an associate professor in 1984 and a professor in 1990. During the institution's restructuring, he played an active role not only in faculty administration but also in shaping its art programs. He chaired both the executive committee and the jury of the *Yeni Eğilimler* [New Trends in Art] exhibition in 1985, organized as part of the Istanbul Art Festival. A precursor to the Istanbul Biennial, *New Trends in Art* laid the groundwork for debates that would remain central to the art scene for many years and sparked transformations that shaped the course of art after 1980. Kabaş's initiatives to establish an international center for stonework on Marmara Island were also part of a broader effort to extend the university's educational and research activities beyond the campus.

During these years, Kabaş was at the center of debates surrounding the resurgence of figurative painting in Turkey. Alongside his solo exhibitions, he participated in group shows focused on figurative themes with artists including Neş'e Erdok, Kemal İskender, Hüsnü Koldaş, and Nedret Sekban. His work was featured in exhibitions such as *Türk Resminde Ortak Bilinç* [Collective Consciousness in Turkish Painting] (Yapı Kredi Kâzım Taşkent Art Gallery, 1989), *Figürde Duyarlılık* [Sensitivity in the Figure] (Teşvikiye Art Gallery, 1990), and *Figür 5* [Figure 5] (Yapı Kredi Kâzım Taşkent Art Gallery, 1990). Yet, Kabaş remained critical of polarizing approaches that positioned figurative painting in opposition to abstract art. He argued there was no absolute distinction between abstraction and figuration; both offered different means of artistic expression. In his view, what mattered was not the chosen style but the artist's ability to develop a unique language rooted in geographical context and lived experience. This perspective also informed his educational and administrative work at Mimar Sinan University. While preserving the Academy's long-standing tradition, Kabaş advocated an approach that emphasized continuity between design, drawing, and painting.

LABOR AND ITS IMAGE

Kabaş approached the sea not as a passive, picturesque backdrop but as the site of fishermen's everyday reality. For him, the sea was a battleground where human labor and the struggle for survival against the forces of nature became visible. His interest in sociology, literature, and local histories enabled him to examine maritime labor within a broader historical and cultural context.

From the 1980s onward, Kabaş increasingly turned his attention to the sea, depicting fishermen along the Bosphorus as they sort their nets, haul heavy ropes, or steer their boats through the waves. Whether focusing on an individual figure or on fishermen working together, his paintings capture not only the rhythms of daily labor but also the introspective, stoic world of those bound to the sea. The artist takes these everyday scenes beyond descriptive realism, making the relationship between labor and nature the central concern of his work. Ropes, nets, boats, and waves become structural elements embodying human labor rather than mere environmental details.

MARMARA ISLAND

In 1969, Kuzgun Acar and I launched a small boat from Ayvansaray. We would discuss serious matters, then imagine ourselves sailing out into the open sea and feel a sense of relief. We also made a few test runs in the Bosphorus with a charming little European-made catboat—a sailboat Kuzgun inherited from his father. After completing his large relief sculpture in Ankara, Kuzgun faced serious personal hardship.

*During our friendship, he held an exhibition in the Red Hall at Robert College. We commissioned a relief from him for the theater. We always planned to get back on our feet and set sail together. Shortly after the military intervention of March 12, things got complicated, and he was detained for a while. They let him go, but our schedules did not align, so I embarked on the curious adventure of filming a documentary at the marble quarries of Marmara Island and set out on my first sea voyage with Altan Gürman, accompanied by Ayma [Kabaş] and Bilge [Gürman]. We experienced our first real shock at sea on the sixty-five-mile crossing to Marmara Island. We also felt cultural, historical, and natural shock upon arriving: the three-thousand-year history of marble buried in dust and soil, two thousand workers on hills covered in white marble dust, massive trucks, and marble-laden barges waiting for storms to subside. We weathered the waves and storms before finally taking refuge in the magnificent Ottoman harbor of Paşalimanı Island. That year, Poyrazlı (Vori) Village was discovered with Altan. From then on, I returned to Paşalimanı Island every year in that small boat.**

The islands of Marmara and Paşalimanı left a lasting mark on Özer Kabaş's art. The voyages he undertook from the mid-1960s onward, his research trips with Godfrey Goodwin—a leading scholar on Ottoman architecture and local culture—and his investigations of the marble quarries in Saraylar Village with the artist Altan Gürman deepened his interest in the relationship between the sea, history, and geography. The ancient marble quarries of Saraylar, half-finished sculptures, architectural ruins scattered along the shore, and the millennia-old tradition of stonework coexist with the island's everyday life. Kabaş's writings and research on Marmara Island examine these historical layers through sea voyages and the lives of fishermen, sailors, and stonemasons.

These experiences did not translate directly into paintings. Instead, the time spent on the island and at sea between 1970 and 1976 first accumulated as lived

experience. The sailors he observed in Poyrazlı Village on Paşalimanı Island, boats sailing against the wind, coastal life, and the island's rugged nature gradually transformed into sketches, watercolors, and oil paintings. The sea began to appear in his paintings not just as an element of the landscape but as a “space” where human beings, nature, and history converge.

Over the years, Kabaş came to define this field as “sea space.” It encompassed not only the sea itself, but also the ways of life, forms of labor, fears, journeys, and memories bound to it. These encounters around Marmara Island became a principal source of the maritime theme that would later emerge distinctly in his paintings.

*Özer Kabaş, “Ressam Özer Kabaş ve Sanata Bakış” (*Sanat Çevresi*, No. 174, April 1993, pp. 28–30), *Sentez ve Montaj: Özer Kabaş Yazıları*, Istanbul: Salt, 2022, p. 231.

*In 1970, after I returned to Turkey following my art studies in the United States, we went to the house he [Özer Kabaş] had just built in Paşalimanı, near Marmara Island. When we entered the coffeehouse by the shore, I noticed a line drawing covering the entire wall opposite me. Signed by Özer Kabaş, it depicted Boreas—the Greek god of the north wind—with puffed-out cheeks, blowing a gust of wind. Through his friendship with the fishermen and local people at the coffeehouse, and by making their lives the subject of his paintings, Kabaş brought together the legendary Anatolian figures in the stories of Cevat Şakir—the Fisherman of Halicarnassus—with the people of contemporary Anatolia. Fishermen battling rough seas, people along the shore, and rowboats were recurring subjects in his paintings. After returning from the United States, where he had produced abstract paintings and sketches influenced by the New York School, he shifted his focus to Turkey. That commitment led this artist, rooted in the heart of Anatolia, to depict the daily struggles of people under difficult conditions in a realistic style. He gave presence to the oppressed and the helpless, introducing us to brave, anonymous people we might otherwise never have known. And his love of the sea never left his work.**

*Sedat Pakay, “Özer Abi, the Guide on My Journey” (New York, December 2007), *Özer Kabaş: Retrospective*, Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Publications, 2008, p. 30.

In Kabaş's paintings, the sea is a central element embodying the history, mythology, and cultural memory of the Mediterranean. Narratives from Homer to Anatolian legends, together with coastlines, islands, and sea voyages, form the conceptual foundation of his work. Here, history, daily life, legend, and experience coexist as intertwined layers of collective memory.

The bull and ox figures in the paintings are also part of this continuity. Among the oldest symbols of Mediterranean civilizations, they evoke productivity, fertility, and humanity's age-old relationship with the environment. In this respect, Kabaş's paintings resonate with the Fisherman of Halicarnassus's vision of the Mediterranean, where mythology is understood as a living cultural layer that persists in everyday life. This approach also defines Kabaş's artistic language. Shifting perspectives, bold forms, and the transformative use of light and color bring the sea's ceaseless movement into his compositions. The journey, the waves, and the shore become visual elements shaping the painting's rhythm. The "mythological indifference," power, and boundlessness of the sea are fundamental sources for these paintings.

The idea of establishing an educational institution on Marmara Island began to take shape in 1965, when Özer Kabaş and art historian Godfrey Goodwin discovered the region's marble potential during a trip to the village of Saraylar. In 1969, Kabaş and artist Altan Gürman closely observed the village's ancient marble quarries while filming a documentary.

In 1979, Kabaş proposed establishing a vocational training center or a summer school in Saraylar as a joint initiative of the Academy's Department of Sculpture and the Department of Basic Design, and began discussions with local authorities. One objective was to organize sculpture festivals and competitions on the island, following the example of Carrara in Italy. However, the Academy's transformation into Mimar Sinan University brought the initiative to a halt. The project was revived in 1988 through a petition Kabaş submitted to the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts. The following year, the proposal to open a summer school in Saraylar and organize an international symposium was approved. Plans were also made to establish a university-affiliated center for stonework. During Kabaş's preliminary visits, villagers were reported to have expressed keen interest in the project.

At meetings held in 1991, it was emphasized that the summer school should begin operating as soon as possible to prevent other universities from taking over the project. It was decided to design housing units for at least ten students, along with an open-air studio. The conversion of an abandoned marble processing facility into an industrial museum was also considered.

The initiative took a different turn in the autumn of 1991. Unable to reach the island in August due to adverse weather conditions, Kabaş met with the village headman in Erdek and learned that the villagers' stance on the land issue had changed. The village administration, having planned to build a hospital on the site, no longer agreed to transfer title to the land allocated to the university by the Ministry of Finance. They stated that the failure to launch educational activities and the absence of any sculptors in the village had undermined confidence in the project. Although the village head offered to help identify alternative state-owned land, the project ultimately came to nothing.

CART PAINTING

Cart painting was one of the fields through which Kabaş explored the folk arts of Anatolia. In this practice, he recognized a distinct visual language that had developed outside the conventions of academic art, characterized by its own colors, motifs, and compositional arrangements. The historical and environmental continuities Kabaş described as “horizontal effects” appear here as a visual repertoire passed down through generations. These horizontal effects, encompassing traditions and social realities embedded in history, play a decisive role in the work of folk artists whose practice has remained largely untouched by “vertical effects.” By contrast, top-down vertical forces such as politics, media technologies, and global cultural practices can disrupt or transform the natural flow of horizontal relations. For Kabaş, the fundamental condition for an artist to develop a distinctive language is the ability to resist the homogenizing pressure of vertical effects while remaining attentive to historical and environmental continuities.

In this context, Kabaş approached cart painting not as a repetition of folkloric forms but as a dynamic understanding of color and form relevant to contemporary art. He photographed examples of cart painting in the town of Akhisar and served as a researcher for the documentary *Araba Resimleri* [Painted Carts], which aired on Turkish State Television (TRT) in 1989.