

# MODERN ESSAYS

*Modern Essays* investigates different aspects of modernism, the effects of Westernization, and the notion of progress in cultural practice via singular works and positions. Discussions and supplementary programming accompany these projects.

The “civilization project” of the Turkish Republic not only impacted cultural and artistic production; it also created a new framework for architectural practice, design and urban development. Examining visual and spatial production in Turkey, *Modern Essays* explores ideals of modernization in relation to constructed environments, design and the comparative material reality of different eras.

Turkey’s modern artists mediated the demands of a top-down, photogenic Westernization; they were both its model subjects and its initiators. From the 1909 Second Constitutional Era, when minority and Levantine professors at the Academy of Fine Arts were removed from their posts, to the days of Şişli Studio, when the 1914 Generation (artists who studied in Paris until the outbreak of World War I, also referred to as the Turkish Impressionists) began producing war paintings, to the establishment of the Gazi Teacher Training Institute in the new capital, Ankara, and the “Revolution Exhibitions” that ensued, artists served as engaged intellectuals, underscoring the ideological precepts of the Turkish Republic. Delegated to carry out a “civilizing mission,” these cultural producers were not so far removed in their approach from a blend of Soviet social realism and the culture of the National Socialist era. By the 1940s, this zeal to mold a new ideal was largely abandoned.

After World War II, the necessity and urgency of the assumed cooperation between subject and state waned. The situation became more ambiguous, and more convoluted, as the Democratic Party government swept the first multi-party elections. Nevertheless, the

Republican project had already been utterly naturalized and its future agenda was certain, with most artists holding an unwavering belief in and commitment to ideologies of the state as traditional intellectuals. The ideals of progress associated with modernization and elitist avant-gardism, supported by a nebulous leftist tendency, were unquestioned assumptions. It was none other than Bülent Ecevit, champion of Turkey’s “left of center” political movement and four-time Prime Minister of Turkey, who came up with the term *çagdaş sanat* [contemporary art]. *Çağdaş sanat* was more than a translation; the Turkish interpretation was loaded with secularist progressivism and a belated desire to be of its time.

Compared to other fields of cultural production such as literature, there were few visual artists invested in this political horizon. Art production itself did not take a pedestrian course before the 1960s, coinciding with the emergence of Turkey’s hopeful and modest middle class. The periods following the country’s dictatorships of 1971 and 1980 have yet to be analyzed in their entirety and complexity.

This narrow framework may neither correspond to the volatility of different realities of any single cultural producer, nor does it do justice to the manifold stories of Westernization. *Modern Essays* attempts to look at distinct conditions in Turkey - both from the perspective of other modernisms, and in comparison to concurrent conditions in the Southeast Mediterranean and East Europe during the 20th century.

Press contact  
Ceylan Yüceoral  
T +90 212 334 22 40  
[ceylan.yuceoral@saltonline.org](mailto:ceylan.yuceoral@saltonline.org)

Zeynep Akan  
T +90 212 334 22 45  
zeynep.akan@saltonline.org