

Turkey – past and present

• By BARRY DAVIS

The common denominators between Israel and Turkey come across loud and clear in an exhibition which has been up and running at the Museum of Islamic and Near Eastern Cultures in Beersheba since last week, and will be on display until January 2020. The exhibition, curated by Dr. Sharon Laor-Sirak and her Turkish counterpart Tuçe Erel, incorporates a wide range of artifacts, aesthetics and social and cultural undercurrents that, inter alia, feed off Turkey's unique geographic, religious and political location at the interface of the Western and Eastern worlds.

The show goes by the title of *Roots and Growth: Traditional and Contemporary Art from Turkey*, and much of it addresses the clash between new and old, the seeming incongruity to Turkey's basically Eastern historical and ethnic backdrop, and its enforced conversion into a Westernized society. In the aftermath of defeat in the First World War, and the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk created the modern Republic of Turkey, and introduced sweeping reforms in all areas of life, which included changing the Turkish alphabet from an Arabic-based script to Latin lettering. Atatürk himself was a heavy drinker, and in fact, died of cirrhosis of the liver. Women's status was also radically changed. "There was the idea of the 'republican woman,' whereby she had to go out and work and be part of the Turkish workforce," explains Laor-Sirak.

While noting the political subtext of the exhibition, Erel prefers to focus on the historical side of the project. "It is not directly about current politics [in Turkey]," she notes. "It is about the culmination of the first 100 years of the Republic of Turkey, and how it came out of the Ottoman Empire. It is not only talking about the recent years, about political parties and the current situation."

Erel says the idea was to consider Turkey through the prism of various ethnic and cultural strands that run through modern Turkish society. "It was really interesting for me to see the artists' contemporary artworks engaged with the traditional carpets and other ornamental objects in the [museum] space, juxtaposed



NEZAKET EKICI'S 2012 'Living Ornaments.' (Courtesy)

together, because of the way they are using traditional cross-media in a contemporary context is not directly talking about today. But it shows a clash of the last 100 years, of becoming a nation-state."

The East-West conundrum comes across graphically in *Internal Affairs* by Fatih Aydogdu. Aydogdu is visual artist, designer, sound artist and curator who divides his time between Istanbul and Vienna. He focuses on concepts of media aesthetics, migration and politics of identity, and linguistics issues.

Internal Affairs is an alluring work comprising two conjoined ouds. The oud is an ancient, lute-like instrument which is common to the Middle East and North Africa and, as such, represents Turkey's Eastern roots. However, Aydogdu's work has the oud necks pointing in different directions – seemingly, one to the East and the other pointing westward.

That may be a cultural inference however. In fact, in *Internal Affairs*, Aydogdu's primary line of intent, as the curators note, "alludes to political censorship in an era of fake news on which politicians rely and take pains to disseminate." Wonder what Mr. Trump would make of that. Exhibited in a glass showcase, and with their strings inaccessible, the instruments are rendered unusable. They have become silent sentinels of an endangered art form.

Turkey's cultural-artistic continuum, or the lack thereof, is conveyed throughout the Beersheba showing. It offers a glimpse of the current state of affairs there, as the country not only straddles Europe and Asia in a physical sense, it continues to weigh up its cultural options in an ongoing delicate balancing act.

"Traditional arts, such as miniature illustrations, calligraphy, rug-weaving and embroidery were not entirely abandoned," Erel and Laor-Sirak explain in their exhibition notes. "They survived in the art departments of academic institutions, as well as in public schools and municipality-led education centers. However, Turkey's international artistic identity was shaped by European art. The link between these two worlds is at the heart of public, political and cultural discourse in Turkey to this day."

Roots and Growth feeds off a yin-yang perspective on several levels. Besides Turkey's cultural-equilibrium equation, several of the exhibitors live all, or part, of their time elsewhere. And even the Turkish-based artists don't all reside in Istanbul, the physical juncture between Europe and Asia. Does that, then, enable them to look in from the outside? To adopt a more dispassionate and clinical stance?

"It was interesting to have people who have their origin in Turkey, but