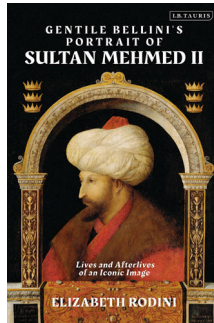


# ELIZABETH RODINI, *GENTILE BELLINI'S PORTRAIT OF SULTAN MEHMED II. LIVES AND AFTERLIVES OF AN ICONIC IMAGE*

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Elizabeth Rodini's book calls for a reexamination of Gentile Bellini's iconic portrait of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444–1446; 1451–1481), also known as Mehmed the Conqueror or *Fatih*. The author engages her reader through a collection of stories about the physical portrait-object (its “lives”) and the imagined or remembered iterations of the image (its “afterlives”).<sup>1</sup> The central purpose of telling these stories is not to pin down an airtight provenance for a single historical work, but rather to advocate for an art historicism that embraces uncertainty and intertextuality as a means of enriching meaning. “This is a history”, in the author's own words, “not of painter making but of time transmuting” (p. 4). Thus readers are led on a “biographical” journey during the course of which the subject is created at the Ottoman court of the fifteenth century, disappears for

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Here the author is building on Arjun Appadurai's concept of the “social life” of objects, first introduced in the series of essays *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1986. Igor Kopytoff coined the use of “biography” to describe shifts in an object's perceived value in an essay in this series, *The Cultural Biography of Things. Commoditization as Process*, 64–91. The term “afterlife” (*Nachleben*) comes from Aby Warburg's work. See for example, Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity. Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, ed. by K. W. Foster and trans. by D. Britt, Los Angeles 1999, 563–591.

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400 years, resurfaces in nineteenth-century Venice, is purchased by an Englishman, and finds itself at the center of international litigation in a debate over Italian cultural patrimony.

At its core, this book is a case study of how an image's meaning is made and of how context, meticulously reconstructed through archival traces, changes those meanings over time and space. In the pursuit of this study, Rodini does not shy away from deep theoretical engagement, revisiting time and again the deceptively simple question of "what is a painting?" and the related query, "what is a portrait?" Her answers are nuanced, but straightforward enough that the general reader can follow the narrative threads of her stories without getting lost in the thick of visual theory. True to the central premise of the book, the answers to those forementioned questions change as the reader is led to re-trace the portrait's cross-cultural trajectory. Rodini consistently draws the reader's attention to questions of the art historical and political legacies of this single work (in both physical and intangible forms) and its myriad reproductions in textbooks, official posters, postage stamps, and trinkets.

The original work was produced at the behest of Mehmed II, who in 1479 requested from the Venetian senate the services of a skilled portrait painter. In response, the Doge sent Gentile Bellini as part of an official diplomatic delegation. Rodini situates the Venetian artist's residency at the Ottoman court in terms of exchange, envisioning, for example, the interpersonal exchange that could have taken place between artist and sultan as they pored over an album of drawings by Gentile's father, Jacopo, discussing matters of culture, history, skill, and taste.<sup>2</sup> In turn, this imagined interaction is framed by a wider web of cultural, diplomatic, and commercial ties between the Ottoman court and Venice in the fifteenth century. Here, Rodini is building on her own previous work as well as the rich and growing body of academic productions on the role of cross-cultural interactions in the visualization and negotiation of power.<sup>3</sup>

Rodini masterfully demonstrates the use of an intertextual methodology for making sense of rumors and traces throughout the book. This is most obvious in chapter 4, where she treats the 400-year period during which the painting has a less-than-airtight provenance as an opportunity to lay out the historical traces by which the image-as-text persisted through historical memory. Perhaps the painting was acquired by a merchant – as recounted in

## 2

For a similarly situated study treating an object as intermediary, see Mary Roberts, *Divided Objects of Empires. Ottoman Imperial Portraiture and Transcultural Aesthetics*, in: J. F. Codell (ed.), *Transculturation in British Art, 1770–1930*, New York 2012, 159–175.

## 3

This emphasis on cross-cultural interactions reflects a broader shift towards a global art history. For example, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Global Artistic Circulations and the Global History of Art*, Burlington, VT 2015. For essays on the shared histories of Islamic and Italian art, see *Muqarnas* 29, 2012, especially, Gülru Necipoğlu, *Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation. Artistic Conversations with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II's Constantinople*, 1–81. For an example of the author's previous work on the subject, see *The Sultan's True Face? Gentile Bellini, Mehmet II, and the Values of Verisimilitude*, in: James Harper (ed.), *The Turk and Islam in the Western Eye, 1450–1750*, Burlington, VT 2011, 21–40.

Giovanni Maria Angiolello's *Historia Turchesca* – after Mehmed II's son, Bayezid II, had his father's portrait sold off at the bazaar. Had that merchant (perhaps the future Doge Andrea Gritti, as Rodini suggests) brought the work back to Venice in the late fifteenth century, it might well have made its way into the palazzo of a prestigious Venetian family. Here Rodini uses the family of Pietro Zeno as a placeholder (even though the historical link between family and painting cannot be substantiated) to illustrate the type of social setting and viewership amongst which the portrait may have existed. In another scenario, refuted by Rodini on formal evidence, the painting is absorbed into the portrait collection of the historian and biographer Paolo Giovio in Como. Giovio's *Elogia*, a text accompanying the Como collection, attributes his portrait of Mehmed II to Bellini. However, in a version of *Elogia* illustrated with woodcuts by Tobias Stimmer, the image of Mehmed II bears little formal resemblance to the painting at the center of Rodini's study. A third trace comes from Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, grand vizier to Sultan Murad III and sponsor of the *Şema'ilname*, an illustrated book of sultan's portraits. In 1578, Sokollu requested from the Venetian *bailo* copies of a series of sultan's portraits believed to be housed in Venice. When those portraits could not be located, new images were fabricated in Venice and shipped to Istanbul, where – although they have little formal relation to the images in the *Şema'ilname* – they seem to have constituted an important link to the historical memory of the cross-cultural encounter between Mehmed II and Bellini. Rodini's short overview of the circumstances of the commission and production of the *Şema'ilname* felt a bit clipped but set up important questions about shared aesthetic values negotiating physiognomy, likeness, memory, and the real, which continues to play out in chapter 6.<sup>4</sup>

A portrait assumed to be the Bellini (re)appeared in Venice in 1865, when it was purchased by the Englishman Sir Austen Henry Layard, an amateur archaeologist who served for a time as the British ambassador to Istanbul. In chapter 5, Layard is framed as an embodiment of British imperialist control at a time when Orientalist outlooks were shaping international diplomacy. His ownership and display of Bellini's Mehmed, Rodini argues, is thus an “entanglement” through which power is negotiated by the European gaze.<sup>5</sup> To this end, the reader is provided with a brief overview of Layard's biography, which at times felt as if it could have been briefer. Layard's role, while pivotal, is that of one node among a loose web of connections through which we, as modern reader-viewers, may construct the portrait's meaning.

4

For a more detailed account of the cross-cultural exchanges leading to the production of as well as the transcultural models present as formal traces within the *Şema'ilname*, see Emine Fetvacı, *From Print to Trace. An Ottoman Imperial Portrait Book and Its Western European Models*, in: *The Art Bulletin* 95, 2013, 243–268.

5

Rodini borrows this usage of the term from Mary Roberts, *Istanbul Exchanges. Ottomans, Orientalists, and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*, Berkeley, CA 2015.

Layard, as well as others who have come face-to-face with Bellini's Mehmed, have left physical traces of their encounters imprinted upon the portrait-object in various forms of damage and restoration. The portrait's painted surface, in particular the face and clothing of the sultan, sustains considerable damage and evidence of later repainting. Here Rodini cogently argues for treating artifacts of interaction (such as damage, restoration, and conservation) as records of material history by engaging in a sustained examination of the portrait's objecthood. She points out that in cases where a narrow definition of authenticity linking a work's value closely to the artist's hand remains a privileged indicator of significance, opportunities to engage in rich cultural and historical dialogues can be overlooked.

In 1915, the painting found itself once again as a tool of international diplomacy, though under the vastly different circumstances of prewar Italy. Layard had bequeathed his collection ("except portraits") to the National Gallery in London, but while on deposit at the British Embassy in Rome, the Bellini portrait became the subject of claims related to national patrimony. Though the painting had faced doubts of attribution (particularly because of the repainting), its associations with the famous figures of Bellini and Mehmed II made it a culturally valuable artifact to Italy, which resisted the portrait's export. To further complicate the situation, Layard had stipulated in his will that portraits were to be inherited by his nephew, Arthur Henry Layard, whose lawyers made the case that the Bellini belonged to the same category as heirloom portraits of family members. Here, as Rodini draws out, the ostensibly simple question of "what is a portrait?" becomes a complex negotiation of likeness, representation, and recognition. Distinguishing between family portraits, from which the owner derives sentimental and mnemonic value, and those portraits valued more for their authorship produced concrete legal ramifications in the case of the Mehmed II portrait, which remains in the collection of the National Gallery today (though it has been put on long-term loan at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London since 2009).

This book consistently reminds the reader of its greater relevance within developing fields of visual studies. This relevance takes on an urgent tone in chapter 9, where Rodini addresses the dynamic ways in which Mehmed II's image has lived on in Turkish cultural imagination. The physical portrait-object first returned to Istanbul at a time when Turkey was still actively supporting its bid to join the European Union. The canvas received a warm reception over two consecutive exhibitions: a solo show sponsored by Yapı Kredi in 1999 and an exhibition of Ottoman sultans' portraits at Topkapı Palace in 2000. At the time, the portrait was held up as an exemplar of cross-cultural production, international cooperation, and mutual respect. Since the stalling of Turkey's EU membership bid and the rise to power of the current political regime, the conservative AKP (Justice and Development Party), among other political and economic factors, a shift towards inward-looking ethnic nation-

alism has gained traction. The rise of Neo-Ottoman ideology has signaled a concurrent shift away from the republican, secular Kemalist ideology introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. According to interviews and surveys conducted by Rodini, these major changes across political, cultural, and religious realms have coincided with a splintering of the popular reception of images of Ottoman-era glory, including the portrait of Fatih in all its iterations. Rodini's on-the-ground research reveals that people living in Turkey today respond to Mehmed II's image with a range of emotions including cultural pride, nostalgia, anger, and even indifference. Others are wary of the propagandistic power of such images.

The cultural significance of Mehmed II's image made itself known once again just as Rodini's book was published. In June of 2020, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality purchased a painting including a copy of Bellini's famous portrait from Christie's Auction House of London. The million-dollar purchase stirred controversy, yet many across the political spectrum expressed excitement about the return of Mehmed II to Istanbul. However this reception continues to develop, the new painting will complicate the ambiguous meanings of the image at the center of Rodini's book. As Rodini has urged, we should embrace the ambiguity of the image in flux, ever keeping an eye to shifting meanings as new contexts arise.