Bird Houses in Turkish Culture and Contemporary Applications

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Abstract

With their unique ability to fly, birds have always amazed man from the beginning of time. They have been a constant source of artistic and spiritual inspiration. Birds have always been symbols of peace, freedom, wisdom or sometimes, power. People have commonly included birds in their living premises. Initially, mere holes or coves were used to protect them from predators or bad weather. In time, these have evolved and the spectrum has reached bird houses and even bird palaces, with rich architectural and decorative elements. In Turkish culture, bird houses can be seen as early as the 15th century, but the most elegant pieces appear in the 18th and 19th century Ottoman palaces and mosques. Houses were built for sparrows, finches, pigeons, storks or swallows. These were usually made of sun-dried bricks, stones, wood, marble or terra cotta and were installed in high and safe parts of buildings, usually on sunny and wind-shielded sides. Many exquisite examples can be seen most commonly in Istanbul, Bursa and Edirne, as well as in most other cities. However, many of these buildings are at least partly damaged, due to harsh weather conditions, neglect and lack of renovation. Bird houses are the footprints of affectionate people who have shown great respect to all living creatures and supported wild life. They are an original part of our artistic and cultural heritage and should be revived and maintained. Reinterpretation by contemporary artists and building bird houses with currently available materials may help propagate this elegant tradition.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Key words: Ceramics, birds, bird houses, bird palaces, Ottoman architecture.

1. Introduction

Man has always great curiosity and interest in birds and flying creatures throughout the history. The reason of this of course the flying action. The ability of birds to resist gravity and fly freely caused them to be regarded as the closest creatures to God in many cultures. Therefore, many societies attributed a divine meaning to birds. Man feared of some bird species but generally identified them with meanings like power, peace, freedom and wisdom. That’s why birds have been liked, respected and protected. Birds have been mentioned in tales, songs, poems, pictures and sculpture namely in written and verbal cultural productions. “Sometimes a pigeon with an olive branch it its mouth heralded the end of a typhoon, sometimes a pair of crane brought news from the beloved
one, doves were protectors of love and storks were pilgrim birds travelling to and from Meccah.” (Oruç, 2009, p.2).

Another important point with birds which drew the attention of man is the migration. Birds migration has always been an interest of man, especially scientists. Human beings have always been impressed by the shapes, movements, organs, flying skills, migration, geometrical shape of eggs, webbed feet of water birds, sharp cutting claws of predatory birds, colour and shape of their feathers, voices and many other features of birds. This interaction caused the creation of strong bonds between birds and men and therefore birds have always been an important part of the human life. The meaning of birds for men has been reflected in the scientific and artistic works focusing on birds of different times, different societies and different fields. Birds have always been an indispensable part of human life.

Birds have left deep traces in the history of culture and remained as a decisive element in art which is one of the most important expressions of man. It is remarkable that almost in every society there are various folk stories, mythological heroes, fairy tales, genesis legends, symbolic narrations and religious motives about birds. In addition, bird figure has been handled in different times and in different branches of art sometimes as a subject, sometimes as plastic element or an abstraction, as an instant image or a stylized shape. In short, it has always found an important place in all fields of art.

2. Birds and bird houses in Turkish culture

Although the time and way of its origin is not known, there is a production about birds in the Turkish culture and architecture not witnessed in any other geography. This is the bird houses and bird palaces. Malik Aksel, a prominent man of art and thought, has many studies about the bird houses in the Turkish culture and Ottoman architecture. İleri supports this idea with these words: “Some laughed at me when I said that only our architecture had bird houses. Then they looked up in encyclopaedias and they apologized. But Malik Aksel made a point of bird houses, bird villas and bird palaces much before the modern encyclopaedias.” (İleri, 2013)

“Birds have been regarded holy and auspicial according to ancient beliefs in the Turkish culture. For example, it is believed that the doves represent loyalty and love, that pigeons are the symbols of peace and loyalty to family in the Islam faith, that the swallows protect the houses they nest in from fire, that birds nesting near a house bring abundance. There are also beliefs that breaking down birds’ nests would bring misfortune to the concerned person and infertility to the family. It would be appropriate to consider that these beliefs are the basis of actions in the places where Turks live like allocating areas for birds and assisting them in making their nests” (Onur Erman, 2009) In this framework, some parts of the structures in the Ottoman architecture were allocated to birds, bird houses and palaces were built for their shelter and small but eye-catching bird pools were constructed. Bird houses which were constructed in an artistic and aesthetic approach were also the basis for structuring an architectural element in the Turkish culture. The earliest examples of the bird houses were found in the 14th century and became very popular in the 18th century. Edeer’s study includes the following information: “Installing bird houses to the frontages of the buildings and decorating them with bird houses were seen in the classical Ottoman architecture of the 16th century. Until the end of the 19th century, these bird houses were improved by the skilful fingers, fine taste and masterful composition skills of the Turkish craftsmen and made the most remarkable detail of our national architecture. Usually, bird houses were built in the frontages of buildings which received much sun light and which were protected from hard and cold winds, at a safe height away from human hand or animals like cat and dogs. They were also built in styles conforming to the spirit of the building.”(Edeer,1992) Bird houses had a privileged place in the Ottoman architecture until the mids of the 19th century. “Even there was a foundation called Gürabähane-i Laklakan which was regarded as the first animal hospital to take care of the injured or migration-exhausted storks. (Oruç 2009,p.2)
“Ottoman bird palaces are usually found in huge buildings made of stone and brick like mosque, madrasah, inns, houses, bridges, library and tombs. This type of examples can be seen in many cities like Bursa, İstanbul, Edirne and Doğu Beyazıt. There are simple types consisting of several small holes allowing entrance of only birds. There are also eye-catching examples resembling a palace with much detail and decoration. The most important examples are found in the Ottoman Mint building opposite the Topkapı Palace. Another bird palace is located in the external facade of the Selimiye Mosque in Üsküdar which is remarkable with its meticulous workmanship (Image 1, 2.. 6). The bird palaces were made in the 19th century by stone carving resembling a mosque model with minarets at both sides.” (Özőzlü, 2000)

Interesting examples of the bird palaces can be seen in provinces other than Istanbul like Doğu Beyazıt, Tokat, Amasya, Kayseri, Niğde, Antakya, İzmir and Tekirdağ. “Bird houses can be divided into two groups in terms of their way of construction and architectural composition. The bird houses in the first group are several individual or adjacent small holes specifically left between the cladding of the masonry buildings. These can be resembled to the caves carved from rock where ancient people used to live. Usually they don’t make a projection in the frontage. The best examples of this group are seen in the Süleymaniye and New Mosques in İstanbul. The bird houses in the second group are like projected chambers and look like single floor villas projecting like bay window, frontage decorated with arched windows, top covered with roof or small domes.” (Önç, Y. 1992) In his book about the bird houses, Cengiz Bektaş describes the stages of bird houses in the classical, baroque, new classical areas in the field of architecture. Besides Bektaş mentions about the fact the people created these works escaping from selfishness while modern man gets more and more lonely and loveless and adds: “Thinking about the bird houses which emerged from the wish of protecting the others without seeking any interest may remind us what is already forgotten.” (Bektaş, 2003, p.12)
When mentioning about the bird houses in Turkish culture and art, one shouldn’t forget the pigeonries in the Cappadocia region. While Fairy Chimneys emerge through geographical events, people carved houses and churches inside the fairy chimneys and decorated them with chimneys. “The traditional carved houses and pigeonries of Cappadocia reflect a unique aspect of the region. These houses were built from cut stones on the slopes or on the rocks in the 19th century. Stone is the only architectural material of the region and can be easily processed as it is soft when it is taken out of the quay due to the volcanic structure of the region and it becomes hard after being exposed to air and turns to a very solid construction material. Since the material used is abundant and can be processed easily, the unique stone craft of the region has improved and become an architectural tradition. The pigeonries in the region are small structures build in the 19th century and in the end of 18th century. The surface of the pigeonries has been decorated by the artists of the region by rich decorations and scripts” (image: 7, 8) (İşçen, 2004)

![Image 7: Example of pigeonries in the Ihlara Valley in the Cappadocia Region. (İşçen, Y. 2004)](http://www.turkishairlines.com/en-int/skylife/2006/february/articles/uchisar.aspx) (12.02.2012)

![Image 8: Example of decorated pigeonries in the Cappadocia region.](12.02.2012)

3. Bird houses and modern ceramic interpretations of today

Most of the bird houses, sparrow palaces and pigeonries which are among the important products of the Turkish culture and art have been destroyed due to rain and adverse weather conditions. They face cracks, fracture and chipping due to various reasons like lack of attention and care, obstruction in the water drainage due to accumulated manure. Those made of wood in the external facades of wood villas and seaside residences have been destroyed because of fire, weather conditions and lack of care and couldn’t reach to present day. It is unfortunate that we have the last remnants of the bird houses. Today the decorative bird pools in some parks and gardens, bird nests hung in trees or fixed to the external facades of houses maintain an old tradition but don’t have any architectural and historical value.

Today some craftsmen attempt to reinterpret the bird houses to maintain our rich cultural heritage with material like stone, wood and clay. Clay is more important than the other material with its comfort in shaping. In the works and life of Füreya Koral, the pioneer of the modern Turkish art of ceramics, her affection for birds and love has always been underlined. A ceramic exhibition called “Hello Füreya Hello” on “Living Bird Houses” in the memory of artists in her 100th birth anniversary. Many ceramics artists from different provinces of Turkey came together with their ceramic works depicting old bird houses. This exhibition has been an artistic initiative organized for the purpose of reviving and sustaining the bird houses, which are our old cultural heritage. Another example of modern interpreters is Cihat Burak who originally studied architecture and become famous with his painting and ceramic works. “Cihat Burak focuses in his Beyler Sarayı Deniz Köşkü Bird House with sharp roof and made of red soil on bird houses which have a unique place in the Turkish architecture. The work, as an interpretation of its original, is a miniature interpretation of the bird houses which are among the important documents of our cultural heritage” (Atalık, 2006, p. 26). (images 9,10)
Deniz Onur Erman frequently includes bird figure in her ceramic works and she has added her unique interpretation to bird houses by different mud like porcelain, red clay and stoneware. (images 11,12,13)

4. Conclusion

Very few of the bird houses which are among the important examples of our cultural and artistic heritage have survived until today. It is believed that the bird houses are unique and valuable field of artistic production which needs to be protected and sustained after being restructured. Ceramic creates a valid area for the applications in this sense with its ease of shaping and getting resistance by being baked. An emphasis is made on the importance of realizing bird houses by modern artists of ceramics with contemporary applications and unique designs. This is believed as an important factor in sustaining our established cultural tradition and conveying it to next generations.

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