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| The Group of Ten (Onlar) |
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| The Group of Ten (*Onlar*) was formed by ten students under the tutelage of prominent artist, critic, and poet Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu while at the Istanbul Academy of Fine Arts. Composed of Mustafa Esirkuş (1921-89), Nedim Günsür (1924-94), Leyla Gamsiz (1921-2010), Hulûsi Saptürk, Fahrünnisa Sönmez, İvy Stangali, Turan Erol (1927--), Orhan Peker (1927-78), Mehmet Pesen (1923--), and Fikret Otyam (1926), the group was Active from 1947 to 1955. The Group of Ten argued that contemporary Turkish artists should engage with traditional Turkish folk and decorative arts including textiles, calligraphy, and architectural design. In doing so, the Group of Ten differed significantly from their immediate predecessors and contemporaries (the D Group and the Newcomers Group) with whom they had a common educational background from the Istanbul Fine Arts Academy and various Paris studios, including those of André Lhote and Fernand Leger. The D Group and the Newcomers charged themselves with reconciling local social realities with artistic styles associated with Western modernity, including Impressionist, Fauvist, and Cubist painting techniques. In contrast, the Group of Ten argued that Turkey’s storied decorative arts tradition had earned it an integral place within a history of world civilisation, and that such decorative modes should be carried through to art-making in the modern period. |
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The D Group and the Newcomers charged themselves with reconciling local social realities with artistic styles associated with Western modernity, including Impressionist, Fauvist, and Cubist painting techniques. In contrast, the Group of Ten argued that Turkey’s storied decorative arts tradition had earned it an integral place within a history of world civilisation, and that such decorative modes should be carried through to art-making in the modern period.  The Group of Ten advertised their inaugural exhibition with a poster juxtaposing a traditional Turkish woven carpet with an El Greco painting. In doing so, the poster visually expressed Eyüboğlu’s argument that twentieth-century Turkish artists could claim their place in an emergent modern art history by appealing to the East’s eminent history as the ‘unrivalled homeland of the decorative arts.’ ‘Our homeland never got pleasure out of the visual art that Westerners call *peinture*,’ argued Eyüboğlu. ‘But we produced every strain of decorative art, rivalling the greatest masterpieces of Western painting — ceramics, textiles, calligraphy, ironwork, and engravings.’ Although Eyüboğlu suggested that the decorative arts belonged to Eastern cultures more generally, he and the Group of Ten took a highly specific view of Turkey’s own history. Theirs was a territorial view, which saw Turkish cultural identity as rooted in the land. By the mid-1950s, this perspective was widely shared amongst a broader community of intellectuals associated with the concept of Anatolian Humanism or Blue Anatolia [*Mavi Anadolu*], including the prominent figures Sabahattin Eyüboğlu (brother to Bedri Rahmi), Azra Erhat, and Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı [The Fisherman of Helicarnassus]. The Group of Ten emerged contemporaneously with this strain of thought, which moved away from an early Republican interest in racial genealogies as a source of national identity to argue that the natural conditions of Turkey’s Anatolian heartland united the many cultures that inhabited the land throughout history.  This emphasis on a Turkish cultural identity rooted in the land translated into a focus on rural scenes and domestic life. Artists such as Gamsiz and Peker’s bodies of work centred largely on figures within domestic and pastoral environments. Erol, for his part, widened the frame to show ramshackle village settlements and harbour-side shipbuilding. Günsür and Pesen developed distinctive styles that were especially representative of the Group of Ten’s formal program. Pesen adopted the format of miniature painting, producing flatly painted scenes of Turkish village life (particularly holiday processions and celebrations) where countless tiny figures busily enacted various activities. Günsür, for his part, portrayed idealised leisure scenes — picnics, outdoor fairs, kite-flying — in optimistic colours and minute detail, cultivating a deeply naïve aesthetic. Such modes of perspectival flattening, the use of strong outlines, and a palette of bright, unblended colours were hallmarks of the group. These bold graphics, naïve modes, and evocations of local artistic traditions such as Anatolian embroidery, textiles, and rugs were associated with an idealised view of Turkish village life as the surviving expression of an earlier, simpler time.  The Group of Ten abandoned the theme of direct social engagement with the Turkish *halk* [people] that had been so important to the D Group and Newcomers Group, instead positioning the general population as the subject of their work and the source of their formal strategies. Nevertheless, in these artists’ emphasis on folk culture one can still identify the impulse to provide remedial attention to a society in flux, as the Republic of Turkey neared its first quarter century. With the Homeland Tours [*Yurt* *Gezileri*] of the late 1930s and early 1940s, urban artists directly encountered Turkey’s rural life for the first time. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, the idealised pastoral life they so recently discovered seemed to be dissolving. As unprecedented numbers of provincial migrants made their way to Turkey’s cities, hybrid cultural forms — whether music, handicrafts, or cuisine — challenged the notion of ‘pure’ Turkish folk culture and gave expression to growing societal tensions rooted in rapid urban growth and economic change. The Group of Ten’s idealisation of a Turkish decorative tradition as something shared by *all* Turks, and their suggestion that such a tradition had continuing pertinence for the contemporary moment, positioned their art as an antidote to the social upheavals of the time. At the same time, the Group of Ten’s decorative aesthetic and palatable subject matter would also have been appealing to a small but growing urban public and the nascent art market of the 1950s. The urban population explosion stimulated the construction of countless new buildings — banks, hotels, and municipal buildings chief among them — and a corresponding demand for artwork to fill them. Not only the Group of Ten’s main mentor Eyüboğlu, but individual members of the group such as Günsür, would go on to produce commissions for these new public spaces —decorative signifiers of Anatolian folk culture lodged within the new edifices of Turkish modernism. |
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