It is difficult to be an artist because it is necessary to have something to say and that is hard to find until life has been lived. In a new Turkey, the visual arts were overshadowed by the struggles of the Republic and painter after painter strove loyally to express his country's rebirth in one way or the other. There were two themes which they felt to be denied other people. The first was that of the Westernization of Turkey which led to the study of the new world of Paris. There, young artists were influenced by Matisse, who himself owed a debt to Islamic culture, Léger or by Braque among others. Even so relatively little known a painter as Dufy was copied, if not assimilated. The better of the Turks who became involved in Paris remained there and rarely, if ever, came back.

The second theme was that cult which Jean Giono represented in France; that is to say the cult of the peasant. For some, Zola's La Terre had made peasants and the soil something incalculably noble and with the Turkish national resurgence it seemed that the hope of the land was the solid, enduring stock who wrestled with the mud and dust of the Anatolian plateau. Their ideas were the eternal ideas, their patterns the enduring basic patterns. The artists painted their eyes like those of Byzantine ikons, incongruously enough; big, all-seeing eyes which stared out of the Soul.

It did not matter that these same peasants were flocking to the cities to escape the tyranny of the land, that they were prompt to abandon the toil of making vegetable dyes from roots and the stamen of flowers in favor of commercial products. Nor did those who sought inspiration from them look critically at those handicrafts that the women still produced else they would have been alarmed at the marked decline in quality. The rugs, the kilims, the embroidery which comes out of Anatolia today cannot compare with the work of less than a century ago.

It should not be expected that it would. The concept of the noble peasant is as false as that of the noble savage and is certainly one that the peasant himself refutes. Like most people today, his passion is money and how to preserve it if he ever achieves any. Those painters who took peasant patterns in order to make semi-abstract compositions and peopled their pictures with donkeys walked down a cul-de-sac. Those who tried to compound peasant and pattern and cubism, because the genuinely large eyes of Picasso seemed to brood over all modern art, erected their own ugly gravestones. The backgrounds of these men were urban and they were wrong to imagine that they could go scavenging experience from a plateau which they never understood. The more their peasants looked like peasants, the less they were true; they were middle class images of what peasants ought to be. Similarly, the more these painters sought to make their art Turkish, the more it became nothing at all except a patchwork quilt of formal shapes and colors belonging to every culture and to none.

For what was Turkish art? What has it ever been? Where did it start? Like every other art it has been an accumulation of experiences, a slagheap of dead civilizations, successes and false attempts. The most Turkish thing about Turkish art in 1930 was its Islamic calligraphy which was precisely that symbol of reaction that the young Republic wished most to destroy. It represented obscurantism and all that prevented Turkey from becoming an eager and progressive nation in the van of 20th Century ideas.

What could be done?

The answer was, as always, that nothing could be done. To consciously struggle to create Turkish art was folly. If it were to be born it would come out of living experience and maturity. It would come from real feeling and respect for the past with all its faults and suppurating sores. And when it did come it was born into that environment where one would most expect creative art to be born; that is to say, it came in a household long steeped both in Ottoman and Western cultures and with an over-riding zest for life. Aliye Berger-Boronai is the daughter of Shakir Pasha and his Cretan wife. There is no truly old Ottoman family; but this one goes back through Grand Vezirs and Viceroys to teachers and sheyhs who lived in Afyon Karahisar at least 200 years ago and probably longer. It is a family, like so many, that at the turn of the century was immensely rich and had great possessions which have now all disappeared. There was the mansion on Prinkipo or Büyükada with its grotto in the salon and forty velvet chairs in the dining room. In the garden where the cab horses graze today are the first Seville orange trees planted in Turkey. Their leaves still flavor Madame Berger's vodka. When I slept in the house some years ago, its last guest in a borrowed bed, roses rambled through holes in the ceiling and birds flew in with the morning. Across a vast landing a makeshift salon looked out onto the garden of the papal legate where the household once watched the late Pope John XXIII strolling while a young monsignore played Italian country music.
dances on a fiddle. The ghosts of English and German governesses and memories of childhood accidents and disasters lingered all around. A trunk full of family papers was open and neglected: it was never suggested that the fading chairs might still fetch a good price or that the valuable documents might be auctioned. These things had been used and had to be discarded because new creation is built on the detritus of the old.

The strikingly beautiful blonde girl of the 1920's had no thought to be an artist nor a writer like her sister or her brother, already well-known as the Fisher­man of Halikarnassus. He had been a painter in his youth, with a debt to the miniature—for his work has great delicacy of line and infinite detail; but it also has the fin-de-siècle spirit of the Yellow Book and nothing of the long, wan afternoon of the Pre-Raphael­ites. Aliye Shakir at that time was a hedonist without a destiny except friendships and experience and the possession of a prodigious memory. She also had great strength of character, for it was very difficult, and still is, to be an independent woman in Turkey. She had absolute faith in her family and its place in the forefront of power and this was not falsely based. Her eldest sister, for example, was married to Emin Pasha, a general who stood close to Atatürk. She took art and culture for granted, as she did economic hard­ship. There were still fine possessions which young artists were later to purloin from her studio—splendid baroque silver vases, clay Cretan figurines and the yet surviving throne of her father.

The girl became a woman of passion, a woman who to the last degree was feminine and who had no truck with the symbols of emancipation. She did not want the freedom to change her sex and to sacrifice the power of being a woman: she wore chiffon, not slacks, and was doubly emancipated because of it. And she fell passionately, hopelessly in love with the Hungarian violinist Charles Berger-Boronai. They moved into the apartment in the main street of Pera, now Beyoğlu, where she has lived ever since because it was their home together. Charles Berger was not an easy man to love and hold but she loved and held him until suddenly he died. Now it can be seen that hers was a life with two acts only: the past which led up to that black hour and the present which will go on until she herself is dead.

The Shakir Pasha family quarrels constantly, is dragged apart by life, exiled for long periods from each other, but is still united with that Ottoman unity which came from generations of power and the fight to exist in an autocratic society. In her moment of perpetual night, Aliye Berger was rescued by her sister, the Princess Fahrül-Nissa Zeyd-ul-Hüseyn, whose gay and charming husband was then Iraqi Ambassador in London. In that grandiose em­bassy in Kensington Palace Gardens, the widow had to fight suicidal despair; but with that understanding that the family instinctively have one for the other,

"I feel," she said after the second fire descended through her ceiling from the rooms above, "a little like Jeanne d'Arc!" But then she smiled that most feminine of smiles, for she is not by temperament a martyr; her voices and her visions have been trapped by life and art.
Princess Zeyd used the full force of her personality to turn her younger sister to creation and away from death. It was not that art was not an obvious diversion, the genius lay in suggesting engraving which is firstly a hard and absorbing craft and, secondly, what was most needed, a severe and uncompromising discipline. There is no rubbing out. It was discipline which Aliye's total femininity needed most.

Those first engravings have more of Samuel Palmer than of Turkey because it would never occur to a serious artist that she had consciously to belong to any other country than a wide world which is common to every creative mind and eye. Moreover, she had English teachers who were rewarded by a most remarkable student. Her earliest works are of her lonely bed, of an intimate orchard or garden frequented by the ghost of a man and a violin which sometimes were hinted at only but sometimes materialized amongst the blossom of a significant spring. Significant, of course, because a new woman was born out of the old. Social life was taken up again and the embassy must have been a little less stately, sometimes even startlingly gay, for when she came to a reception even Krishna Menon smiled. The months passed and Aliye Berger found her great gift. She had long been sympathetic to her sister's remarkable paintings on the grand scale but she could now appreciate the mature authority with which Princess Zeyd employs form and paint, because she herself now had maturity and the authority given true masters of a skill. She could safely go home.

Apart from the famous skyline and the water, Istanbul is not an easy city to like. It is grey and mildewed and visitors are often glad to leave. Those who stay become aware of a tyrannical hold and for artists this is a demon to wrestle with. Aliye Berger during the first period after her return succumbed to the city and its splendors. Fine engravings of a romantic Golden Horn were inevitable. Then she began to look harder. The mosques and minarets and towers which had piled up like the coiffeur of a grande dame were analyzed. A wooden house with all the projections and cantilevering which had fascinated Le Corbusier before World War I was selected for dissection, or a scene of wood being unloaded from one of the Bell-bottom takkas—almost Chinese in manner—which ply up and down the Bosphorus. The climax—some ten years ago—of this period in Aliye Berger's life, is an engraving of her kitchen which is filled with every significant symbolic detail of her life and personality.
Pigeons fly in through the open window and flimsy, frilly curtains flutter. All is confusion and pots and pans, herbs and candlesticks flow over the shelves, tables and floor. The lines are fine and the passages of light variated over a small surface so that engraving seems three dimensional and much larger than it is. It is a work of which Rembrandt could not have been else than proud.

In a sense, it was too good. There was nowhere else to go. The natural dissatisfaction of the creative eye nagged. By chance, she was urged to paint in oils for the first time because within a week there was to be a large exhibition to which an international jury had been invited. In the little, cliquish world of Istanbul, intensely provincial in its jealousies, complacent “masters” lent canvas and paint. The victim of their little jest, with more elan than technique, used them obediently but found that time was short. Moreover, she arrived late at the Sports Hall and had to wheel her way in with her canvas still wet. The mistakes of art juries encumber the history of painting; but not in this case: to the fury of the jesters, one of whom is resentful to this day, Aliye Berger won the prize.

She was not to be happiest as an oil painter although she fought with the medium. She has attacked canvases with palate knives and her nails, flung vodka at them, drenching them in it, and splattered paper over them in an attempt to bend them to her will. Only one of two have emerged as completed works, the rest have remained memorable but unattainable ideas. But these encounters led to her experimenting with new materials for engraving, involving a new struggle with her cumbersome press. This ancient hulk was becoming more and more difficult to manage, and to print her work at all, Madame Berger had to call in her nephew; but he now lives in Side on the idyllic southern coast in the small hotel which his parents have created out of the ruin of their fortune, and where the best food in Turkey is eaten. There Aliye Berger will retreat in moments of despair to renew strength in the sun and the sea; and to Anatolia. The peasants of Side, as grasping as the rest, are of Cretan origin like her own mother. Thus it is that her most immediate successes; but it was when she recalled the mysticism of the dervishes from her long family association with the now suppressed orders that the series on the Mevlevi order, silhouettes with tall hats and flowing gowns, was created, again out of cutouts. The most successful among these engravings— if such by now they could be called—are infused with the spirit of that most poetic of sects; a sect which, as can be seen at the Mevleva Museum at Konya, only tolerated near perfection in the arts of calligraphy, weaving or metalwork. Being Aliye Berger, she did not become immersed in a false piety or mysticism which she certainly did not feel. Mysticism happened to be one small fragment of her heritage, like the almost sacred violin and portrait of her husband. There is too much of the real earth in her makeup to permit of visions. The clay of Afyon is noted for its quality and when on the sludge of the March highway the car skidded off the road in the middle of the night, she did not complain of losing her shoes in the deep mud but instead scooped up a large handful to give her sister, the potter Füreya. At nowhere more romantic than Eskishehir, which is usually associated with its marshalling yards and junction, she inveigled the owner of a hamam to conceal her in an upper room so that she could draw the bathers, for she found

In Istanbul in the mid-'50's she was trying out new surfaces. Emery paper, in the manner of Jean Miró, was suggested and she was interested in the effect that it had on color. It was not a good medium for her because it was too rigid: she found instead a more difficult material still which sometimes breaks up under pressure. This is butchers’ paper made in Istanbul from rag and other waste. It has a soft but furrowed, brown surface flecked with color which forms a sensitive background to the picture which she imposes. Her first experiments with emery paper had awakened an interest in color engraving produced by a most unorthodox technique invented for herself. The colored inks are squeezed out onto the plates on which designs are only sketched and pressure spreads the inks over the paper. With butchers’ paper this process came in time to be remarkably controlled and resulted in works of both tenderness and strength.

The next step was the use of cutouts which she had also used when painting in oils so that the delineation of the figures was clear and clean. She used this medium at the time of the military coup d'état with consummate wit involving village bands and barnyards and she extended this approach to produce ironical protests of modern living: her derricks have eyes and mouths and dance. Dancers were some of her most immediate successes; but it was when she recalled the mysticism of the dervishes from her long family association with the now suppressed orders that the series on the Mevlevi order, silhouettes with tall hats and flowing gowns, was created, again out of cutouts. The most successful among these engravings— if such by now they could be called—are infused with the spirit of that most poetic of sects; a sect which, as can be seen at the Mevleva Museum at Konya, only tolerated near perfection in the arts of calligraphy, weaving or metalwork. Being Aliye Berger, she did not become immersed in a false piety or mysticism which she certainly did not feel. Mysticism happened to be one small fragment of her heritage, like the almost sacred violin and portrait of her husband. There is too much of the real earth in her makeup to permit of visions. The clay of Afyon is noted for its quality and when on the sludge of the March highway the car skidded off the road in the middle of the night, she did not complain of losing her shoes in the deep mud but instead scooped up a large handful to give her sister, the potter Füreya. At nowhere more romantic than Eskishehir, which is usually associated with its marshalling yards and junction, she inveigled the owner of a hamam to conceal her in an upper room so that she could draw the bathers, for she found
that peasant women had most beautiful skins because they are always protected from wind and sun. And hers were no languid odalisques by Ingres but lively personalities enjoying the luxury of steam and nakedness.

Meanwhile, Princess Zeyd had been experimenting with china ink and brought a quantity with her on a visit to Istanbul, during which she painted a remarkable portrait of her sister. Aliye Berger was immediately excited by what to her was a new medium which proved infinitely more sympathetic than oils. Her first work retains all the exuberance of her first approach and some hint of the power which was to follow, but it is formless when compared with the later pictures. In such paintings as The Yoghurt Seller, Bursa Bazaar and, above all, in The Wedding Dance, form is not submerged although she builds up overwhelming intensity of color and depth of tone until the red in a fire glows out of the frame at one. She was not trammeled by red; one of the finest pictures in the series is a thorough exploration of the blues in the summer sea and browns and yellows are also favored.

Nor did she stop working on engravings; the last years have seen a number of works which are remarkable for their size and for the undiminished power of her line. She had always been interested in the use of height in perspective and this was most expressively employed in The Cobbler’s Shop, which is a portrait of human detail unsubdued by the towering tenement block above. Cranes and derricks are recurrent themes as are the tall masts of fishing boats, not so much for their own sakes as for the sense of space created below and about them. She still occasionally turns to oil painting but it is now unlikely that she will abandon engraving and china ink. Her experiment with pottery was a comedy which she immensely enjoyed, rejuvenating but not to be continued. Her only experience of sculpture is the assemblages of gifts, such as buds and walnuts and beads, in beribboned pots or baskets which, these days, alas, are all too rarely seen.

There have been disasters, including two fires in her apartment from which the violin and portrait of her husband were rescued but in which many engravings were damaged and other treasures lost. She has remained remarkably cheerful but then she has fire in her blood. “I feel,” she said after the second fire descended through her ceiling from the rooms above, “a little like Jeanne d’Arc!” But then she smiled that most feminine of smiles, for she is not by temperament a martyr; her voices and her visions have been trapped by life and art.

Here, then, is a most remarkable woman and a most distinguished artist. Her work is unmistakably Turkish and this is not because she uses so many varieties of red and that shocking pink which are so much the colors of her country. It is because she came to work

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\[\text{the cobbler}\]

\[\text{aliye berger}\]
cross-stitch are absent from her work. But the real people are there because it has taken Aliye Berger to prove that these are real people, not peasants seen through the eyes of a journalist like Zola or a sentimentalist like Millet, bathed in a golden sunset. From her first visit she brought back a crude wooden toy made of two flat pieces of wood and four bottle caps. It represented a green car and a white driver with fine moustaches, his face painted on both sides of his flat head.

Along with her awareness, her work is fundamentally feminine in its delicacy of color here or fragility of line there; she may sometimes be elegant although always judiciously; but the force of her femininity is equal to the strength of any man. Her success has been due to her inner strength. She studied her techniques and perfected them and then set out on her own. She is not blind—she can extol a Picasso or a Kandinsky—but she has no need of their ideas at second hand or to burrow for tradition in a tousled carpet. Her works live in their own right and all that she has to say is her own. So it is that she speaks with an authority of which, it must be confessed, she herself stands a little impishly in awe. But then, the queen may laugh at the queen.

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