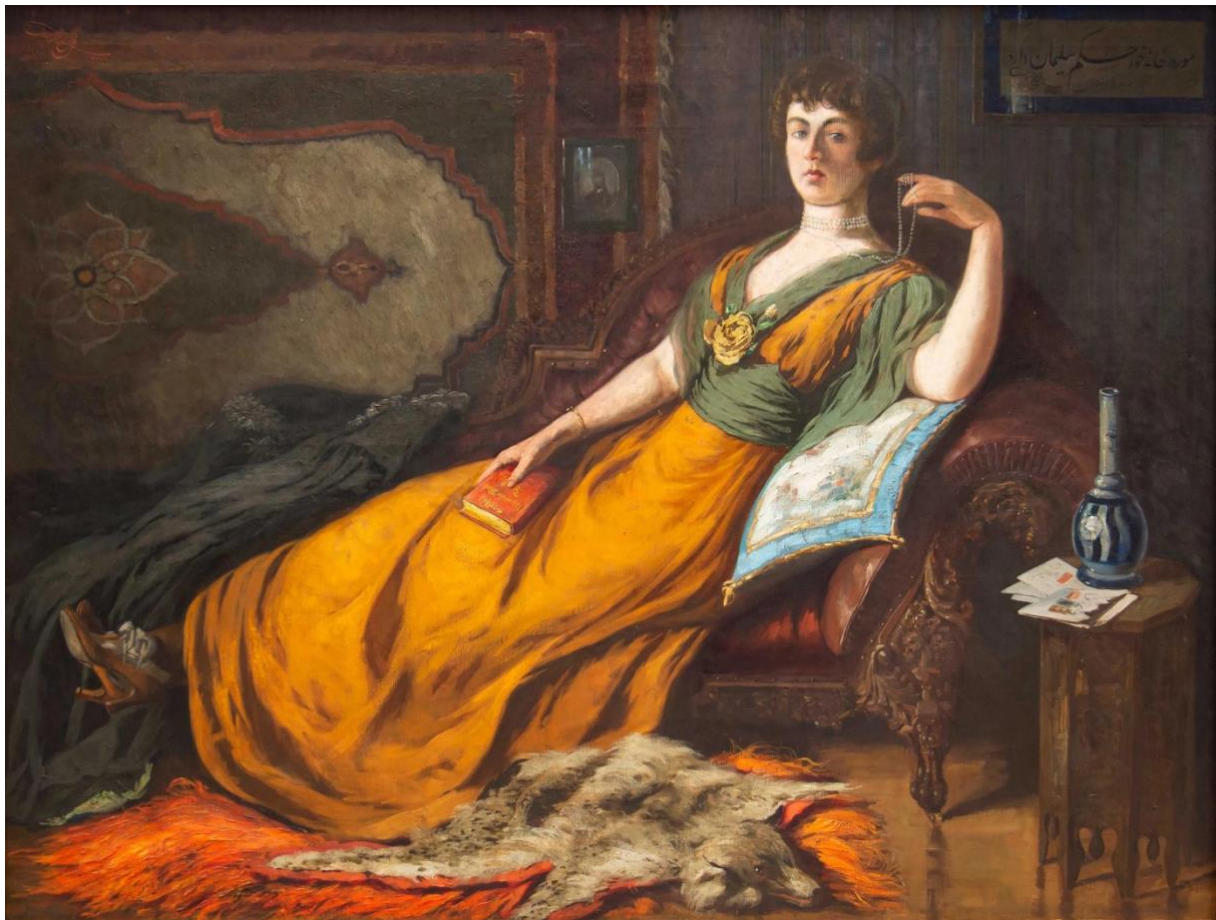


The Fabrication of the Modern Harem Woman: The Dissection of the painting “Goethe in the Harem” by Abdülmecid Efendi

Peter Burke, one of the most prominent historians alive, wrote a book in 1994 entitled *The Fabrication of Louis XIV*. The illustrious work explored how the image of Louis XIV, during his reign spanning over seventy years, was meticulously crafted in the light of political and societal developments, how he transformed from a crown prince to the Sun King, how intricate the relationship is between art and power, unfolding his narrative through sculptures, carpets, theater plays, even fireworks displays, fountains, gardens, and palace decorations. In crafting propaganda for Louis XIV, painting emerged as arguably the most formidable weapon; in his portraits, a plethora of elements meticulously came together to both introduce and subsequently fortify the desired image the King sought to instill in the viewer's psyche. I suggest analyzing Abdülmecid Efendi's painting, *Goethe in the Harem*, within this context, with a tongue-in-cheek reference to the propagandist nature of painting as exemplified in the fabrication of Louis XIV which relied on a collaborative endeavor involving politicians, writers and artists, and to explore how Abdülmecid Efendi individually achieved the creation of what I call the Modern Harem Woman, by drawing inspiration from the ideological and artistic background of European painting.



Abdülmecid Efendi, *Goethe in the Harem*, 1898-1917

Abdülmeçid Efendi, from his early youth, developed a strong interest in French painting and closely followed the artworks exhibited in Parisian salons. His mentor, Bertrand Bareilles, who oversaw his intellectual and artistic education between 1886 and 1891, portrayed Abdülmeçid Efendi as a modest and adorable student who possessed a deep interest in music and literature – he was especially fond of Victor Hugo's *Hernani* – while also displaying a natural inclination towards the art of painting.¹ To facilitate his exposure to artistic trends of the time, Bareilles arranged for his student's membership in newspapers such as *Figaro*, *Illustration*, *Temps*, *Revue des deux Mondes*, enabling him to stay updated, particularly through *Figaro Illustré*. As early as 1920, a newspaper described Abdülmeçid Efendi in the following terms: "Talented painter, distinguished composer (...) Prince Abdul-Medjid, with light, almost blond hair and thin mustache, is very European, even very Parisian, although he has never been to Paris."² Even after years passed and Abdülmeçid Efendi found himself in exile in Paris, his passion for painting remained unwavering. In an interview, he expressed that upon setting foot in Paris, he visited the Louvre Museum four times within a span of two months.³ The journalist conducting the interview referred to him as an "ex-sultan, painter, and democrat," and stated that one could encounter him at every concert and every new art exhibition. The French press embraced the image of the Artist-Prince and frequently described him using expressions steeped in Orientalism:

“He also painted, exhibited his works in Constantinople, and sent them to the salons of Paris (...) He still had a passion for gardens, designing his own parks and populating them with animals that he enjoyed taming. Isn't there a graceful legend, like an Oriental tale, that depicts him by the edge of his pond in Scutari, charming the rare fish that, at his call, would come swarming in a kaleidoscope of colours?⁴

The French influence in Abdülmeçid Efendi's art is most distinctly felt in *Women in the Courtyard*, where he combines five separate paintings into a collage and creates a potpourri-style painting in accordance with the latest French fashion. He incorporates Boulanger's pose of a woman from *Interior View from Pompeii* and a figure from *The Slave Market*, Gérôme's spatial arrangement in *The Terrace of the Seraglio*, Salvatore Valeri's carpet from *The Harem*, and even adds the canopy from his own painting *Zeybekler*.⁵ Especially, Boulanger's *Interior View from Pompeii* stands out with its influence on the background and composition of the painting.

¹ Paul Dubié, "Abd-ul-Medjid Intime", *Le Figaro*, 19 January 1923, 5.

² "Têtes de Turcs", *L'Afrique du Nord illustrée*, 14 August 1920, 3.

³ A.W, "Ex-sultan, peintre et démocrate, Abdul Medjid est à Paris", *L'Intransigeant*, 12 July 1938, 2.

⁴ Andrée Viollis, "Le Commandeur des Croyants vit paisiblement à Nice", *Le Petit Parisien*, 8 Juillet 1931, 2.

⁵ Zeynep İnankur, "Avluda Kadınlar", *Şehzade'nin Sıra Dışı Dünyası, Abdülmeçid Efendi* (İstanbul: Sakıp Sabancı Müzesi Kataloğu, 2022).



Abdülmecid Efendi, *Avluda Kadınlar*, 1899

Columns, a fountain, a pool, and statues complete the decor of this "so-called" ancient house. Starting from the mid-19th century, French painters who identified themselves as "Néo-grec," "Pompéiste," or "Néo-Pompéien" entered the Paris Salon⁶ and sought to create an idealized Greco-Roman culture, imagining lifestyles, dwellings, clothing, social behaviors, stylized decors and gender relationships they believed existed in that era. The *Interior View from Pompeii* indeed derives its name from the Pompeian House (Maison Pompéienne) owned by Jérôme Napoléon, which he had constructed in line with the Pompeian fashion of the time on Avenue Montaigne, a luxurious street in Paris. Abdülmecid Efendi employs the familiar Orientalist gaze, originating from the West and directed towards the East in *Women in the Courtyard* and layers this gaze by introducing a dimension of nudity that is absent in Boulanger's painting onto an Antique frame. In doing so, he merges Greco-Roman heritage, and elements belonging to the East in the same composition.

After exploring an example of the impact of European painting tradition on Abdülmecid Efendi, we can now delve deeper into the analysis of *Goethe in the Harem* (1918) and examine various artworks that likely served as sources of inspiration for the painter. By dissecting these works, we can gain further insight into the influences that shaped Abdülmecid Efendi's creative and ideological processes in creating his painting. One of those works is likely *The Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt* by Orientalist painter Georges Clairin, displayed at the Paris Salon in 1876, which Abdülmecid Efendi most likely had the opportunity to see.

⁶ Colombe Couëlle, "Désirs d'Antique ou comment rêver le passé gréco-romain dans la peinture européenne de la seconde moitié du XIX siècle, *Anabases*, 11 | 2010, 21–54.



Georges Clairin, *The Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt*, 1876

It is rumored that when the Salon opened, the painting garnered significant attention and fame, capturing the curiosity of the entire city of Paris.⁷ Sarah Bernhardt, the most successful representative of the "stardom" phenomenon that emerged in the 19th century, is portrayed in the painting wearing a white satin dress adorned with feathers. She confidently reclines on a couch, looking directly into the eyes of the viewer. The richness and colors of the fabrics, the ornate decorations of the mirror in the background, and the presence of a giant plant covering the entire left corner of the painting all contribute to a subtle Oriental undertone. The main composition of *Goethe in the Harem* closely follows that of Sarah Bernhardt's portrait in many aspects. Abdülmecid Efendi's subject is depicted reclining on the couch in a manner

⁷ Gold and Fizdale. *The Divine Sarah: A Life of Sarah Bernhardt*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 135.

reminiscent of the actress, her elbow is rested on a blue-green pillow mirroring the pose in the portrait. In the right part of the painting, positioned similarly to Bernhardt's portrait, a white dog sits at her feet on a rug adorned with fur. The only difference is that Bernhardt's dog is alive, while Abdülmecid Efendi's dog is depicted as a fur. Abdülmecid Efendi's model does not possess the same seductive gaze or mischievous smile as Sarah Bernhardt; after all, the intention here is not to "fabricate" a femme fatale, but rather to present a cultivated, confident, modern Ottoman woman who exists within the boundaries drawn by the harem throughout the centuries. Abdülmecid Efendi's model teasingly toys with her necklace and preserves subtle allusions to the enchanting nature of the harem and emphasizes concepts of adornment, idleness, leisure, and passive waiting. Yet, amidst it all, she exudes a self-assured aura, exhibiting a dignified demeanor, sealed lips and a serious expression, radiating a sense of poise, grace and composed dignity. It has been mentioned that in the painting, Abdülmecid's principal wife Şehsuvar Hanım is depicted, but her larger stature and overall facial features do not capture the elegance of the woman in the painting. It is also noted that the figure's face is mistakenly associated with Ömer Faruk Efendi's countenance, while her body is idealized.⁸ In my opinion, it appears that there is an effort to capture a resemblance between the figure and the slender physique of Sarah Bernhardt, whom the artist drew inspiration from. According to reports, Sarah Bernhardt achieved tremendous success with her performance in *Hernani*, which happened to be Abdülmecid Efendi's favorite work. The impact of her portrayal was so profound that even Victor Hugo, the author of the play, was moved to tears during the performance and gifted her a diamond tear drop as a token of appreciation.⁹ It is possible that Abdülmecid Efendi's profound admiration for Bernhardt's exceptional depiction in his beloved work fueled his interest. The most significant distinction between the actress and Abdülmecid Efendi's model however lies in what they hold in their right hands. Sarah Bernhardt elegantly waves a lavish, white feather fan that complements her attire, while the model in *Goethe in the Harem* cradles a book titled Goethe's *Sämtliche Werke*, which serves as the painting's namesake. This observation leads us to "prime suspect" that I believe served as an inspiration for Abdülmecid Efendi in the fabrication of the image of the harem woman.

⁸ Ömer Faruk Şeriflioğlu, haz. *Hanedandan Bir Ressam: Abdülmecid Efendi* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, Milli Saraylar, 2004), 71.

⁹ Sarah Bernhardt, *Mémoires de Sarah Bernhardt* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1907), 370-371.



Henry Caro-Delvaille, *The Beautiful Girl*, 1902

One of the most notable aspects of *Goethe in the Harem* is the model's captivating gesture of delicately winding one of the pearl strands around her fingers while looking at the viewer. It is highly likely that Abdülmecid Efendi did not originate this particular gesture himself but rather encountered it elsewhere. In fact, we can observe the exact same gesture in Henry Caro-Delvaille's painting *The Beautiful Girl*, which was displayed at the Paris Salon from 1899 onwards. It is worth noting that several other paintings by Henry Caro-Delvaille, whose artworks were frequently featured in magazines like *Figaro Illustré* and *Figaro-Salon*, depict models engaging in similar acts such as playing with their necklaces or bringing their hands to their necks. Abdülmecid Efendi, who was a subscriber to these magazines thanks to his mentor Bareilles most likely saw these paintings. *The Beautiful Girl* shares similarities with Abdülmecid Efendi's *Goethe in the Harem* in terms of its overall composition, the inclusion of a book and a dog, as well as the model's hairstyle and facial features. In my opinion, Abdülmecid Efendi's subject bears a higher resemblance to Caro-Delvaille's model rather than Ömer Efendi, who was suggested as the inspiration for *Goethe in the Harem*, with her slightly protruding eye sockets, her hair, and general facial features. The woman depicted by Caro-Delvaille also wraps one of her three pearl necklaces around her fingers and directs her gaze towards the viewer, accompanied by her dog in the bottom right corner of the painting. While a book is present in the composition, the title *The Beautiful Girl* likely provides enough explanation as to why the specific author's name is not considered significant and therefore omitted from the artwork. To provide an example of a portrait where the titles of books are considered significant, and to examine a painting that I believe played a role in shaping the ideological dimension of Abdülmecid Efendi's *Goethe in the Harem* and the production of the Modern Harem Woman, it is necessary to mention a marquise.



François Boucher, *Madame de Pompadour*, 1759

When François Boucher created his renowned *Madame de Pompadour*, his aim was to bestow respectability upon the woman who held the official position of mistress (*maîtresse-en-titre*) to King Louis XV for many years. The Marquise's position as a mistress was indeed problematic, as the heir to the throne, Louis de France, still referred to her as the "whore

mother.”¹⁰ Her family background was not respectable either; she had no connection to the aristocracy, and even the identity of her biological father was unknown due to her mother's numerous lovers. In order to protect the position she had attained through her physical beauty and social abilities, which had gradually waned over time and faced threats from her enemies, she had to rely on the practice of "self-fashioning." This involved meticulously shaping and refining her public image to maintain her influence. Falconet wrote about her: “She loved the arts, which she had neither the time nor the talent to cultivate; but she paid well, and one worked well for her.”¹¹ Although there may not be a consensus on Marquise de Pompadour's aptitude for art, it is a fact that painters like Boucher and de la Tour depicted Pompadour in line with an ideal and unchanging concept of beauty, and more importantly, they highlighted the marquise's cultural ambitions. In a painting by Boucher called *Madame de Pompadour with her Hand on the Keyboard Harpsichord* (1750), her fingers grace the keys of a harpsichord embellished with drawings, engravings, and decorative accents, while a globe rests at her feet. In another painting by Quentin de la Tour entitled *Madame de Pompadour in her Study* (1749-1955), she occupies a chair, her hair styled simply, wearing a pastel-colored dress, her head and neck devoid of jewelry. Surrounding her are a guitar, a sketchbook, and a multitude of books. With a serene expression, she gazes wistfully into the distance. The names of the books in the study are specifically mentioned: Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, Voltaire's *Henriade*, and a volume from Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopedia*.

If we examine Boucher's *Madame de Pompadour*, which I believe may have served as inspiration for Abdülmecid Efendi, we see the Marquise portrayed in a manner that strongly resembles the model in *Goethe in the Harem*. She is depicted reclining on a couch, with her left arm resting on a pillow, while her right hand holds a music notebook. Instead of adorning her neck, the pearls encircle both of her wrists. Positioned by her right foot is a small black dog, accompanied by engraving tools, musical notes, rolled-up plans, and sketches spilling out from a sketchbook. On the right corner of the sofa, a sealed letter intended to be sent rests on top of a small chest of drawers, while a few books are selected on the lower shelf. Even in the intimacy of the cozy study, the marquis is surrounded by music, art, and literature, and the letters, which serve as an indication of his interest in the outside world.

In light of these comparisons, and upon a closer examination of Abdülmecid Efendi's *Goethe in the Harem*, it becomes apparent that we are facing the deliberate construction of an image. Indeed, Abdülmecid Efendi is well-acquainted with the practice, as he actively engages in "self-fashioning" by consciously presenting himself in various settings such as libraries, study rooms, or workshops. These portrayals feature him surrounded by bookshelves, wall-mounted maps, newspapers, and architectural drawings, all carefully curated to project an image that resonates with his desired persona as an "intellectual prince."¹² The image of the Modern Ottoman Woman, as depicted in *Goethe in the Harem* is undoubtedly not the result of a single painting, but rather a concept that is developed throughout Abdülmecid Efendi's body of work as a painter. Through the depiction of women from his immediate circle, such as his daughter, in Western attire and poses, as well as the portrayal of Ottoman palace women participating in intellectual activities and engaging with music alongside men, as seen in *Beethoven in the Harem*, Abdülmecid created a puzzle that, when pieced together, forms a modern image.

¹⁰ Robert Muchembled, *Madame de Pompadour* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), 127.

¹¹ Etienne Falconet, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Dentu, 1808), 231.

¹² Edhem Eldem, “Tarih Dersi’nden Haremde Beethoven’e: Hırslı ve Burjuva Bir Şehzade”, *Şehzade’nin Sıra Dışı Dünyası, Abdülmecid Efendi* (İstanbul: Sakıp Sabancı Müzesi Kataloğu, 2022), 53.

Nevertheless, within this puzzle, *Goethe in the Harem* stands out as the painting that impeccably fulfills its purpose. It includes the term “harem” in its title and establishes an atmosphere that aligns with its connotations, while it displays the name “Goethe” in a conspicuous manner, creating a highly nuanced portrayal, enhanced by additional elements. The way the model languidly reclines in fashionable attire and plays with her necklace indicates that she has not entirely abandoned her instincts as an Eastern harem woman. However, Abdülmecid Efendi effectively conveys that the era of indulging in Oriental pleasures such as parading half-naked, incessant hookah smoking, endless coffee drinking, and performing belly dances has come to an end. In the new harem paradigm, women also nurture their minds, reading “novels, bad books”¹³ and classics in their original German versions, engaging in correspondence with others, and residing not under a “pleasure dome” - in Coleridge’s words- but in a modern world where they stay abreast of current trends. Moreover, Abdülmecid Efendi's portrayal of the harem woman diverges from the traditional “La Liseuse” image as well; his model is neither a naked reclining woman as seen in the works of Henner and Roussel, nor is she solely engrossed in the enchantment of the book, as depicted by painters like Fragonard, Blanche, and Monet. In her portraits, Marquise de Pompadour also differs from the mentioned portrayals; her gaze is directed towards the distance, as if pondering over the book she holds or attempting to recreate the melody of the notes in her mind. The marquise before us is not lost in daydreams; she contemplates calmly and wisely, reflecting on an idea or a work of art.

In contrast, Abdülmecid's model, is neither lost in the pages the book that she holds with excitement, nor absorbed in thoughts about the literary work as she gazes into the distance. She looks directly at us as if conveying the message: “Look, do you see? Observe what I’m reading!” and in doing so, she reflects perhaps the pride of her creator, Abdülmecid Efendi, in bringing forth this vivid and newly emerged Orientalist image: The Modern Harem Woman.

Biography:

I am Bihter Sabanoğlu, an art critic based in Istanbul, born in 1980. My educational background includes attending Notre Dame de Sion French high school and studying English Literature at Istanbul University. I pursued further studies in Paris, where I obtained my master's degree in English Literature from Paris III Sorbonne. During my time in Paris, I had the opportunity to attend various courses at Ecole du Louvre, focusing on classical art history, Byzantine art, egyptology, and summerology. Additionally, I worked as a literary translator. In 2017, I permanently returned to Istanbul, and in 2020, I embarked on my career as an art critic. My writings have been published in various Turkish media outlets such as Art Unlimited, Manifold, Sanat Kritik, Toplumsal Tarih, as well as academic publications like the Annual of Istanbul studies. I cover a wide range of subjects, including classical and contemporary art, urban history, and literary history.

¹³ “Ah! always busy at what? Reading novels, bad books, works against religion, and in which they mock at priests in speeches taken from Voltaire.” Quote from Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, in Project Gutenberg. Chicago: Project Gutenberg, 2004. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14155>