

Objects of a Memory Loss: Dining Tables as a Cultural Agent in Late Ottoman Istanbul

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Abstract | The Late Ottoman Era's material culture and design repertoire has been hardly included throughout the canonical Turkish design history. However, many advents and transformations through culture, production, and even design have taken place in this era. Internalizing (or not internalizing) Western dining etiquette, eating manners, and consumption of dining tables have a tremendous significance for discussing Westernization in the context of everyday life patterns. Because the transition was about the abandonment of the centuries-old tradition of floor tables and trays derived from the yurt-living and nomadic lifestyles. Considering the memory loss, watching the currently popular television serial, Payitaht (The Capital), we see that Sultan Abdülhamit II often has his dinner with his family members, all seated around a proper dining table. These scenes mediate a notion that it was such an established practice to dine in such a modern manner in the Late Ottoman Dynasty. However, having meals with trays that servants brought and sitting on cushions had been a resilient practice throughout both Palace residents and Muslim Ottoman middle-class and upper-middle groups. The administrative secretary of Yıldız Palace, Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil, who had already internalized Western eating practices in his own everyday life, mentions how much he had struggled to construct a dining suite in a separate dining room within the palace in the 1910s. The mentioned transition was also addressing the different demographics in Istanbul. While the Armenians, Levantines living in Galata and Pera had decorated their homes with the dining suites, Muslim groups in Fatih still sustained the floor table practice in their homes. This study inquires how the Western dining table became a cultural agent and how the transition from floor table to dining table varied according to different demographics, specific periods (like Ramazan), cultural capital, and various occasions.

Keywords: blind spots in the memory of design, alternative genealogies, collective memory

In the 19th century, significant changes such as the Industrial Revolution, the development of capitalism, and colonial races in the Western geography affected the Ottoman Empire politically and socio-culturally. These effects and reflections, which also guided the Westernization movements, were experienced very intensely in the capital city of Istanbul. Cultural transformations that started to appear in the previous century bring about accelerated changes by incorporating traumas and internal contradictions. After Sultan Abdülmecid ascended the throne, the Tanzimat Edict was published in 1839. In 1856, the Imperial Palace was moved from Topkapı Palace to Dolmabahçe Palace, built on the model of European Royal palaces. This transition is one of the essential Westernization aspects of the period. Tanzimat means the reorganization of the military, political and social sphere according to Western standards. With new trends and participation from different religions and ethnicities, new ways of seeing, entertainment culture, cultural taste, and spatial practices occur in society (Kaya, 2016). The changes in the socio-cultural field and Westernization movements that started with the 19th century have also been changing the floor table / sini tradition that has been going on for centuries. Eating by sitting on chairs around the dining table instead of the floor table has become a new and vital agenda.

In the modernization process after the Tanzimat, the French culture was taken as a model for social life reorganization. The social groups that realized Western styles in their life were firstly the palace and upper-class families. Non-Muslim groups in Istanbul – Greeks, Jews, Levantines – were quicker and more prone than Muslim elites to accept the changes and live Western lifestyles. As a Westernization practice, the transition from the floor table to the dinner table has not been realized by society as a monolithic block. It is not performed throughout the fragments simultaneously. Different fractions have responded differently to domestic Modernization. In this research, the dynamics of the dining table practices of different segments will be examined, and appropriate depth and nuances will be provided on the routes of Westernization.

2. Influence of Non-Muslim Groups in the Context of Modern Eating Forms

In the 19th century, after the Tanzimat reforms, a predominantly non-Muslim bourgeoisie emerged. The concept of Ottoman citizenship is brought to the fore by shaping a new multi-religious ruling bureaucrat class, mostly Muslims. The settled population in Pera and Galata, predominantly non-Muslim Ottomans, is the part that was most affected by the Modernization process of Istanbul since the beginning of the 19th century. In the Beyoğlu region, the symbol of economic power, the service sector, fed with economic resources, has started to be organized in almost every aspect of daily life. The service organization, founded with the name of the Sixth Municipal Office, based on the municipality of Paris, first started its activities in this region – Pera, Galata, and Beyoğlu. The fact that non-Muslim groups were far from the political center (Palace) was also effective in the rapidly adopting Western practices. Towards the end of the 19th century, Beyoğlu took on the appearance of European cities. The same European image was also found in interior decorations. The notables of Pera have a highly developed social life. Various meetings and night parties were held in these upper-class houses. For example, the General Manager of the Ottoman Bank and such affluent families hosted their friends at their homes on certain days of the week on the occasion of tea or card games. In these meetings, conversations are held, music and dances are organized, and fashionable fancy dresses bought from Paris were exhibited. The orchestra, bright lights, and fancy dresses were on stage at the invitations organized by upper-class Non-Muslim households to their family friends. This way of life required large, ornately decorated interiors. It is known that French and Italian furniture was highly sought after by the elites in the region, and the decorative objects used with this furniture were almost a symbol of development and status. Even in the middle of the 19th century, furniture decoration advertisements used the expressions "new style dining room and halls" (Öncel, 2010).

In the Pera and Galata regions, domestic invitations, social life, and related practices have created new style dining rooms as a substantial demand. Thirteen large-scale furniture workshops established in Istanbul between 1913 and 1915 were officially registered. Pysalty Furniture Store, established in 1867, and Narlıyan

Furniture Factory (1893) are some of them. Decoration and Pсалты stores, located at the corner of Nur-u Ziya Street and Istiklal Street, were among the most well-known furniture stores of the period. Most of the antique furniture exhibited in the shop windows of the Decoration store was designed by a Florentine decorator. Focusing on classical styles, 'Arts and Crafts' and 'Viennese' styles, the Pсалты furniture workshop has furniture for the bedroom, dining room, lounge, and study. Besides purchasing, renting furniture, dinnerware, and silver cutlery were also possible for large-scale domestic events. Most of the large-scale furniture workshops were run by Ottoman minorities. In addition, furniture produced in some local workshops could be displayed in the showrooms of Pсалты, Kalinikos, and Baker stores. Located in the cosmopolitan streets of Beyoğlu, these stores had also become symbols of modern life. Kalinikos had been successful in Art Deco style production by following current trends. These workshops both provided furniture to Beyoğlu elites and produced furniture designs of famous architects and designers. For example, Pysalty Furniture Store made furniture for interior decorating the architecture projects of famous Turkish architects Sedad Hakkı Eldem and Vedat Tek. Finally, with many performances and practices, non-Muslim social groups, primarily located in Beyoğlu, brought the way of life according to Western standards, including domestic culture and daily life practices, to Ottoman social life and played a leading role in the adoption of changes by the society.

3. Ambivalences Between Local and Western Ways of Eating

The daily life of Ottoman society developed in two different times and places during the 19th century between Muslim and non-Muslim settlements. Over time, both the physical and mental distance between traditional spaces and modern spaces has been tried to be closed. The roads connecting the old quarters to the Golden Horn piers were expanded. Contact points were created to introduce the introverted neighbourhood life to the active life on the quays. The Golden Horn Bridge, which was put into service in 1836, was functional for the Muslim population to intermingle with the Levantine world and meet a lifestyle unique to the European countryside. Both with the effect of economic inadequacies and the highly increasing population in the traditional Muslim settlements, the Muslim population of Istanbul moved to the Galata-Pera region, where non-Muslims settled, an important trade center. Therefore, daily life gained a more polycentric appearance. The living styles of ethnic groups got intermingled with each other and formed the texture of daily life. Many institutional innovations of Ottoman modernization were developed around Beyoğlu, the symbol of economic power, where foreign embassies were located (Işın, 2014).

Beginning with the Tanzimat reforms in 1839 and continuing in the following years, Europe, more specifically French culture, table manners, tastes, and bourgeois manners, permeated the homes of the Ottoman (Muslim) upper classes. Newspapers, magazines, and novels in the 1860s and 1870s mainly described the European style. The functioning of modern public spaces as a Modernization school was very typical in this period. The interior decoration of a patisserie or the new forms of eating and drinking in a restaurant was the most convenient observing new lifestyles. As Işın (2014) indicates, while a university student ate his dinner on the floor with his family elders, he was sipping his beer in a new pub in Pera. While the traditional floor table was enduring a culture where all kinds of food could be eaten with a spoon, individuals could find the opportunity to learn how to use cutlery at the banquet tables of modern public places.



PLATE 7/2
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Figure 1. Mediation of Western-Style furniture and objects, (Salt Research, Istanbul Households Archive).

Other media used to mediate Western practices were children's picture books, housekeeping books, and etiquette books. In Figure 1, in the children's book dated 1909, it is advised to use Western objects such as a dining table and a bed in the house arrangement instead of vernacular units. The first Adab-ı Muşeret

(Etiquette) book of the Tanzimat period was written by Ahmet Midhat Efendi (1894). In contrast, the last book written in Ottoman Turkish was Abdullah Cevdet's 'Guide to Perfect and Illustrated Manners' (1927). Ahmet Midhat (1894) recommends a Western living room arrangement in the context of home aesthetics. Unlike the traditional period, areas such as the living room and dining room, which are open to visitors from outside and make up the public space of the house, change the way of behaviour along with their decoration. When it comes to table arrangement and manners, Midhat Efendi has often defended the superiority and elegance of European dinner tables (1894). He compares the European dining room arrangement, which includes candlesticks, chandelier, and buffet, with the Turkish eating style. Ahmet Midhat highlights that in our culture, although tremendous attention has been paid to the taste of food since ancient times, the decor and form of eating are not given much importance (ibid.). Mithad Efendi (1894), who states that the term dining room is fifty-sixty years old, points out that it was difficult to talk about the dining room concept before the Tanzimat years. The novelist describes an old table setting as follows:

"For a long time in our country, the tables were set up in the rooms where people sit together. Aren't these rooms with three side panes? A stool with a height corresponding to the altitude of the cushion was brought to the corner where the two panes (kerevet) were engaged, and a tray was placed on it, and spoons, breads, and trivets were arranged on it." (Mithat Efendi, 1894, p. 36)

Mithad Efendi talks about the inconveniences and inadequacies of this style of Turkish table setting in terms of ergonomics, hygiene, and aesthetics. He says that knowing how to eat by following European manners is a measure of discipline and that people who do not acquire this fine art will be embarrassed. Even in his novels in which he satirizes the *à la français* style, he glorifies the *à la français* table setting and manners by giving details about their characteristics. In the novel 'Carnival,' it is mentioned that in Bahtiyar Pasha's apartment, the servant gives the dishes from the left side of the guest, complying with European etiquette. In his novel, 'The Young Turk,' he describes a European dining hall in Kazım Bey's house. After the servant has prepared the table, she invites the guest by ringing the bell, again as a convention of *à la français* hosting style. Admiring the European table rules and settings, Midhat Efendi, on the other hand, prefers Turkish cuisine and finds it superior when it comes to the taste of the dishes.

For example, Refik Halid Karay states that there were separate rooms for having meals in traditional mansions during the reign of Sultan Abdulaziz. However, these rooms still did not contain tables, buffets, chairs, but their usage as dining rooms was understood, as there was a vast marble faucet on one side. In these rooms, the sinis were always set, removed, and re-established at mealtimes. The table was not a place for conversation in this period. The meal would have to be finished as soon as possible, to be swept away like a chore. The way of eating from the common pot was in a structure that enabled haste. Karay lists three complex features of *à la turque* eating form: eating from a common bowl, eating by hand, and sitting on the floor while eating. He also adds to this list: the lack of personal cups for everyone, the hygienic inconvenience of eating from a shared bowl, and the fatigue of the arm reaching for food.

Karay points out the slow change in eating and drinking styles in the reign of II. Abdulhamid: Karay speaks about the middle and lower-middle dining rooms, which are sloppy and plainly decorated, such as a primitive linoleum cover on the table, trivet, (a common) jug, a sideboard with a glass top floor, and a cupboard on the bottom floor. Further attention is directed towards furnishing in the upper-class dining rooms. He provides an example that the Viennese originated ostentatious buffets are used, and linen covers are laid on the tables. The dishes were not brought to the table with copper plates anymore but in modern porcelain plates. Everyone would receive food on their plate in front of them. An additional modification was the start of the food conversation in the new table setting. In recent years, Walnut dining tables and buffets built by *Sanayi Mektebi* have helped increase the number of dining rooms in Istanbul and make them more and more habitable. However, many people did not give up their floor bed and floor table even then; and did not acquire forks. Members of the new generation would be disturbed if there was a conservative elder person at the table that ate with his fingers. Those who could not use the fork as a new object tried to consume every meal with a spoon so as not to be 'disgusting.' When lower-class families visit upper-class houses where the use of forks was now a routine, they lament whether they can taste the food by hand. They were also fearful of dropping the fork in front of them and cracking the plate. Some members of the newly affluent families also felt the longing of the floor table and the tastes of food by eating by hand. When there was no special occasion at home, these social groups would have their

servants set their floor table and eat a "meal with a taste" without any embarrassment.

It was customary to observe both dining tables and floor tables in homes. Cultural transformation is an unusual mixture of the new and the old, the Ottoman and the European standing side-by-side. Traditional habits remained within Ottoman houses, but there were also traces of Westernization. While describing the home of Said Bey, a typical example of a Europeanized Ottoman bureaucrat living in the late 19th century, in Aksaray, Istanbul, Paul Dumont states that the modern and the traditional are intertwined. Traditional ottomans and sedirs combine with sofas, armchairs, chairs, coffee tables, gramophones, and pianos to give the house a European feel. The domestic culture and daily life of Said Bey and the social group he represented exhibited an intriguing eclecticism of Western styles and old customs, habits, and objects.

In some homes, using tableware such as cutlery and even forks were experienced as a duty to be fulfilled. This is a usual situation, as the eating habits of Turkey and Europe (mostly France) were quite different from each other in the 19th century. Practices such as each individual eating from their personal plate, having their own space at the table, sitting in their chair have brought a certain distance, individuality, and formality to family relations after the habit of sitting on the floor and eating from the common bowl.

Religious factors also play an essential role in the duration of the sini or tabla practice so persistently. Eating on the ground may be paired and associated with a mystical modesty. For example, let us take a look at the eating patterns in Ramadan, which is a return to the source of identity that reveals the value, history, and space of Islam. In the face of changes that affect the life frame, behaviours, and customs, Ramadan takes on a form that we can call the strong resistance of tradition. This is very evident in the tradition of the iftar meal, even in the most Westernized families. Even families who adopt to eat by sitting on chairs arranged around a table, like Europeans, return to the Turkish style of eating by sitting cross-legged around the traditional tray placed on the ground due to iftar. It is observed that instead of using tableware (especially forks) adopted in that century, the iftar meal is again traditionally eaten by hand. With the advent of Ramadan, the cuisine oriented to a Western diet in the most modern homes regains Turkish local tastes and dishes. In short, iftar dinner traditions survive the age of modernization without much change; they show resistance to Westernization. Thus, while the acceptance of modern table manners is a factor in the disconnection between generations, these generations come together again to fulfil Ramadan customs (Georgeon and Dumont, 2000). Therefore, in the 19th century, when traditional Turkish and European dichotomies dominated the home life, the preferred eating style would have transformed from a modern dining table to a traditional floor table, especially in a period such as Ramadan, when religious feelings were intense.

4. Facts and Fiction About Dining Practice of the Palace

If we go back again to the popular television serial, Payitaht (The Capital), we see that Sultan Abdülhamit II is pictured as internalizing modern table manners as an everyday routine. Having his dinner with his family members (Episode, 2), or congregating with his admirals around a dining table (Episode, 3) are mediated as usual practices in the Late Ottoman Dynasty. However, having meals with trays that servants brought and sitting on cushions had been a resilient practice. In tabla practice, dishes, covered with covers carried by tablakars, were brought to the Sultan and other members of the palace in copper pans. Furniture and tableware, which belonged to Western food and table manners and provide design integrity, were mainly not included in the table setting. Rarely, in pictures of banquets, dishes of the upper class served in bowls and bowls of different shapes and sizes can be seen. While cutlery was not frequently used, the spoon was a private, personal item everyone carried in their pockets. Despite many Modernization practices (e.g. advents in lighting and heating systems, building a new Palace Theater, etc.) both functional and formal, we see that the traditional eating style does not disappear easily throughout the Palace life.

Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil, who was the administrative head at the Palace wanted to abolish the traditional eating order entirely and establish the European table manners. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for some fractions of the

Ottoman elite group, including Uşaklıgil, the dining table, tableware, personal dining area, and utensils had already become the norm. Uğur Tanyeli (2016) expresses that two different sets of cultural preferences occur at varying levels of modernity in the field of duty of Halid Ziya Bey. These are those of the Palace and those of an Ottoman elite. Although the Palace represented the highest quality in the Ottoman World in terms of luxury, comfort, and taste for centuries, the late Ottoman elites were closer to Westernization practices than the Palace. The distinguished families of the period participated in the entertainments and banquets organized by the foreign embassies where the Palace was not present, performing different modernism practices. Beginning with the reign of Abdulhamid II, the late Ottoman elite saw that they, themselves, were more educated, sophisticated, and modern than the Palace. The greatest example of the gap between this Western-oriented social fraction and the Palace concerning the style of eating and drinking could be perceived in the struggle of Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil to construct the first dining room of the Palace. It is possible to follow Uşaklıgil's state of distance and alienation from his critical approach to the tabla (traditional tray) practice that continues in the palace and his desire and effort to change this practice:

“Wouldn't it be possible to leave this tabla (traditional tray) style to create a proper dining table in various parts of the palace, to apply the table d'hote style to the eating practice in a new way, both clean and convenient?” (Uşaklıgil, 1965, p.24)

The last remnants of tabla practice in the Palace were now in question to be levelled. While the courtiers still maintain the traditional daily order, Uşaklıgil, who has more Western cultural preferences, wanted to remove the table system, which he did not find civilized and aesthetic. There are reasons behind Uşaklıgil's levelling of the table practice, such as preventing food waste caused by maintaining personal trays and solving the hygiene problem caused by eating from a shared bowl. Abandoning the tabla practice – which did not need a specific room – required a functional space for eating and dining. Finally, Uşaklıgil succeeded in constructing a dining room set up in the Mabeyn and furnished it with a dining table for twenty-four people and two cabinets with tableware. However, although it was reduced, tabla practice around the Harem – where primarily women and children were accommodated.

The interrogations about identity and taste come to the fore in a new way with the Westernization of the empire, most notably the Ottoman capital, in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Ottoman individuals could show some inconsistencies with the modern texture of daily life. It is seen that the phase difference emerged as an essential feature in the development of lifestyles that continued throughout the 19th century. The European myth has partially created confusion employing social and traditional values in society. For example, the dining table in the Ottoman house or the Palace has the meaning that was imported. Still, it also includes a meaning attributed to it by the Ottoman society in general and its meanings in a specific house. Each new object and practice is seen as a complex symbolic whole consisting of various layers of meaning. Even though the 'Europeanism' of new objects is celebrated in the symbolic plane, a certain adaptation period was needed in daily use and function. Western practices were performed to show that Ottoman upper middle classes are not behind in the social development of Europe. However, we can see that private acts like eating somehow still perpetuate themselves on a fundamental basis.

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