

Framing the East: Cultural Representation in Contemporary Turkish Product Design

Bahar Emgin

Abstract

With the impact of globalization, national industrial design styles have emerged focusing on history and tradition as a source of innovation and differentiation in the global market. In this context, generating a Turkish design style has recently been on Turkish designers' and industry's agenda in order to attain and sustain international market success. While numerous exhibitions and fairs are organized to promote Turkish design both in Turkey and abroad, a Turkish design discourse prevailed in well-known design magazines of Turkey. As a result of this inclination, Turkish design style has been defined as a meeting place of two cultures – East and West - focusing on the value of differentiation.

As an apparent methodology, elements from Turkish culture and tradition (water pipe, tulip-shaped tea glass, Ottoman motifs and symbols, Islamic elements, etc.) are extracted and adapted to modern production methods and aesthetic understanding in the name of modernization or westernization. These new elements address questions of identity, hybridity, differentiation and transculturation as well as oppositions like Orient / Occident or East / West. The focus of this paper is on contemporary Turkish design products with special emphasis on the tea glass named “eastmeetswest” by Erdem Akan, in order to explore the relationship that is constructed between East and West in contemporary Turkish design.

Key Words: Turkish design, national culture, cultural representation

Introduction

Contemporary design discourse is widely built upon an assumption that links the practice of industrial design to culture resulting in the emergence of national design styles such as Scandinavian or Dutch design. These national styles facilitate utilization of culture as a means of product innovation and differentiation in the market. And once the field is categorized in such a way, these styles become representative of the specific culture that they are considered to belong to, as in the way that American design is associated with “American exuberance” and Scandinavian design with “powerful social ethic” (Kaygan, 2006, p.27). Similar to these approaches, debates on generating a Turkish design style have emerged in Turkish designers' agenda recently as a result of increasing interest in industrial

design both in industry and society. As a product of this inclination, discursive and visual frameworks of Turkish design have been constructed through the works of designers and depiction and promotion of these works through the media. It has been underlined that the idea of Turkish design should first of all be considered as a means of marketing that acts in constructing Turkey as a brand and Turkish-ness as a quality (Kaygan, 2006). Following this plotline, exhibitions organized both in Turkey and particularly abroad gain the prominent role of promoting Turkish identity. A very recent example of these exhibitions that is held during the design week in Milan named “ilk in milano – Turkish touch in design” is considered as a very important one in promoting Turkish designers and thus Turkey, since it is accepted to gather designers that objectively reflect the current profile of Turkish designer to present their work to the most elite and selective group of the design field for the first time (Er, 2007). Gathering the works of leading Turkish industrial designers together,

“the ‘ilk in milano exhibition will be one of the first opportunities for the global design community to see this recent creative development coming out of Turkey and by Turkish designers from around the world. The products shown in ‘ilk in milano’ will show the harmonious synergies of the richness of Anatolian heritage transformed into contemporary design through the leading-edge technologies and manufacturing processes.”
(Turkish Touch to design, 2007, p.136)

As evident in this informative statement about the exhibit, Turkish design discourse is built upon an approach that requires reinterpretation of culture and tradition adapting them to contemporary technology and aesthetic understanding. This can be considered as an oxymoron since technology implies future development as opposed to the connotations of tradition with backwardness. However the oppositions revealed are not limited to the binary opposites of progress and tradition, but also points to the binary of East - associated with tradition- and West -associated with progress- addressing questions of identity and cultural self-representation. Thus, the main focus of this paper will be on interpretations of Turkish culture through the works exhibited in ‘ilk in milano’ to discover the relations constructed between East and West.

Transforming the East

‘ilk in milano’ was organized to show that Turkey, which is considered to be continuing contract manufacturing by Europe, indeed has recently witnessed an awareness of design and could design good products in

various realms of manufacturing ranging from furniture to automotive. It is further emphasized that, with the motto 'Turkish touch in design' they wanted to put an emphasis on style that derives from the great heritage expansive geography of Anatolia. It is the setting itself that gives the products designed in Turkey their characteristics, rather than an attempt to nationalize design (Gökyay, 2007). However, despite the attempts to avoid issues of nationality, such an approach still implies the existence of a specific national culture and requires reduction of it to some stereotypical objects. The concept of Turkish culture utilized in product design practice is summarized as an eclectic and yet anachronistic one containing influences from different periods, regions of the geography of Anatolia and Ottoman influences in particular, in addition to the attributions to contemporary practices such as soccer or the ritual of drinking tea (Kaygan, 2006). Thus, appropriation of traditional elements in a modern context becomes the tool to offer product innovation and differentiation in the global market.

After working in Turkish context two distinct approaches regarding utilization of culture in industrial design practice in Turkey was observed by curators of the exhibit, both of which were in a search for contemporaneity but one informed by personal vision and the other by cultural aspects and historical awareness. And thence the exhibit is divided in two groups regarding the participant designers' time and place of work, the first under the name 'Turkish designers' and the second the 'global Turks.' The former group is constituted of designers working in Turkey and sharing a common line of 'geometric abstraction' (Karakuş, 2007). The members of the former group display two different approaches. The first shares a common line of 'geometric abstraction.' As described in the exhibition catalogue,

“...the unifying factor amongst all these 'Turkish' designers is the application in design of a thoroughgoing practice of geometric abstraction with roots both in the rational and this is important, a vague synthesis of autochthonous epistemologies originating from the regions shamanistic, nomadic, Islamic, Ottoman, Byzantine and other resident cultures” (Karakuş, 2007, p.23).

These Turkish designers borrow an exotic form to reflect the local color while the materials, production techniques and aesthetic of these objects relate to a modern or Western context qualifying as a cross-cultural design. Kunter Şekercioğlu's "Nar" –redesign of waterpipe- and "Cezve" – redesign of Turkish coffee pot- and Gamze Güven's Yeni Rakı bottle can be counted among examples of Turkish designers' work (see figures 1,2,3). All these examples have a common approach of redesigning elements that are

peculiar to Turkish rituals such as smoking nargile, drinking coffee or raki. According to Cohen (1985) rituals, being symbolic entities, have a prominence in the construction of borderlines of a community and thence manipulation of these symbols helps intensifying cultural borders and their expression. Thus all these objects, by transforming the rituals into a more contemporary practice regarding the changes in technology, lifestyles and aesthetic understanding, put an emphasis on Turkish-ness by claiming to be symbolic representations of Turkish culture. The second group of designers, whose work is grouped within the title of 'Turkish designers,' uses traditional forms such as Ottoman and Islamic motifs in a direct manner that includes no reinterpretation except for contextualizing these forms in different materials. The works of Erdem Akan, Pinocchio Design and Ali Bakova can be counted as distinct examples of this approach. For example, Pinocchio Design's Hamamlamp that reproduces ocular windows found on the domes of Turkish bath's with a new-age material corian or Bakova's use of fez as a decorative element on a felt carpet can be counted as examples (see figures 4, 5). It is also possible to follow the same approach in Erdem Akan's works who explains his design philosophy as follows:

"My design philosophy is based on tension between all opposites: such as fabricated vs. hand-made; natural vs. artificial and new vs. old, but especially between eastern culture and western culture. For me design should balance or amplify this tension. Playing with clichés and provocation are the methods I like. I believe in necessity of Turkish Design ecologie and therefore currently conduct research and design contemporary products with Turkish and Islamic culture flavor" (Akan quoted by Karakuş, 2007, p.91).

Akan's design philosophy can be followed through his "Hadji Turkish Delight Bowl" on which Islamic calligraphy is incised and "Istanbul Alphabet Ornaments" which reproduces elements of Ottoman architecture as table top ornaments (see figures 6, 7).

On the other hand, group of "global Turks" is composed of Turkish designers who continue his/her design career or who has been trained abroad, particularly in Europe and United States. This group has the claim to offer an alternative perspective to the former with their direct relation with Western rationalism that is the opposite of the geometric abstraction (Karakuş, 2007). For example, Ayşe Birsnel's "The Resolve Series" for Herman Miller is defined to have attributions to nomadic qualities that are considered to belong to Turkish culture since the form of the office system resembles nomad's tents (see fig.8) (Karakuş, 2007). However, these

attributions are never as direct as in the works of ‘Turkish designers.’ On the opposite, the office system is distinctive with the way it questions office furniture and comes up with a striking alternative. As another example, Can Yalman’s “RepTile Wall Series” is introduced with an emphasis on organic geometry that has Western influences, and İnci Mutlu’s “Potsink” is counted as an example of her design approach, which is an example of simple and basic forms (See figures 9, 10) (Karakuş, 2007). Thus works of ‘global Turks’ being representative of Western understanding of design intensifies the difference between logical east and traditional west with having almost no connotations to a cultural context while works found among ‘Turkish designers’ directly utilize traditional Eastern motifs.

Othering the East

The dualist structure of the exhibition dividing designers into two groups of ‘Turkish designers’ and ‘global Turks’ emphasizes the antagonism evident in Turkish design discourse since the works of the latter group is defined in terms of individualistic approaches and rational geometries while ‘Turkish designers’ is assigned with the representative role of national culture which is defined as follows:

“The work of these designers exhibits a modernism based on geometric rationalism that merges informally with local qualities that have roots in the lifestyle of Istanbul, and to a lesser extent, Anatolian Turkey, Ottoman history and indirectly nomad culture. This relation is by no means direct. What I am speaking of is a cultural approach to design that still retains immediate and present, qualities of handicraft and domesticity that is a de facto approach to working with design objects in Turkey. Furthermore due to the way objects are manufactured, by a mix of factories and artisans, the way they are used, by a society with one foot in the Modern world and the other in pre-industrial agrarianism and all the shades in between, we see that the way design is produced in Turkey no matter how much organized by western ways of rationalism will always retain a palpable degree of sensational and symbolic abstraction that makes it unique” (Karakuş, 2007, p.26).

With respect to the cultural framework drawn in this statement, it is possible to summarize Turkish culture expressed through these works as one including influences both from the East and the West. In the Turkish context, the claim of industrial design becomes achieving a balance between traditional elements coming from the east and a rational geometry referring to

the West. This basic concept of Turkish design being based on the cultural distinction between East and West, however, brings to the foreground the risk of Orientalisation. As explained by Said (1985), Orientalism, is premised upon exteriority whose principal product is representation. This representation supplies the library of Orientalism with stable, stereotypical characteristics determined for the East to domesticate the differences. As it can be observed in Pinocchio Design's "Turkish Delight Ottoman," -a reproduction of Turkish delight as a piece of furniture directly making gestures to stereotypical depictions of East (see fig.11)-, ends in a situation in which "the Orient's actuality receded inexorably into a kind of paradigmatic fossilization" (Said, 1997, p.131). Although Turkish design is constructed upon the claim to dissolve these oppositions, this example remains in the Western discursive constructions of the East. In addition, these representations of Turkish culture, attempting to transform cultural heritage through a modern understanding actually results in a post-modernist attitude, superficially depicting so-called Turkish culture in an irrelevant context. Utilization of traditional, ritualistic elements of Turkish-ness, such as the redesign of the traditional tulip-shaped tea glass "eastmeetswest" by Erdem Akan (see fig.12), is another distinctive example of the utilization of archetypes as definitive of Eastern tradition. Akan states that:

"Maybe no form is as 'Turkish' as the tulip shaped tea glass. This glass, which is the main actor of Turkish tea rituals, is known to be of here, no matter from where and how it has come. It is one of us to such an extent that we forget its quality and it often seems natural and normal to us, until 'the foreigner' once again reminds us of how beautiful and special this glass is. Despite our mostly western outlook, thank God, our feelings and thought are still Eastern. How could this unusual state in between be better expressed than a hybrid form with a straight exterior and a tulip shaped interior" (Akan quoted by Kaygan, 2006, p.66)

By his statement Akan indeed strictly forces the distinctions between East and West in an essentialist manner associating the emotional east with a curvilinear form while defining the west with strict forms that may relate to rational west. However, the visual discourse of the tea glass acts in an opposite manner. With replacing the representations of eastern culture within a context that is representative of west, namely by framing the East with West, he indeed emphasizes the fact that East is a Western construct rather than depending on a natural distinction.

“eastmeetswest” also points to the borders that are drawn for representations of East by the West. The representation of East suspended within a strictly defined Western frame displays the restrictions of western representations of Eastern while revealing the necessity that both need each other to be defined as a identity category.

The East Framed

Turkish design discourse and “eastmeetswest” in particular is acknowledged to be representative of Turkish culture, which is considered to be influenced by both eastern and western aspects. The definition of Turkish culture as a crossroad of two cultures indicates some binary opposites like East and West, modern and traditional or rational and emotional. The main objective of Turkish design is claimed to dissolve these oppositions through the transformation of extracted elements that belong to Turkish rituals. Much of the time this transformations end in a position that privileges the so-called Western values of modernity and rationality. On the other hand, pointing out essentialist approaches regarding Eastern and Western culture, Turkish design style actually plays an important role in definitions of Self and Other and thus representing Turkish identity. At this point, a third approach within ‘Turkish designers’ which is built upon an awareness of constructions of the East by West, rather than taking East as an inert natural fact can be defined. Akan’s work stand out in this respect as it is not in conformity with the approaches that aim to synthesize Eastern and Western attributes. Actually, Akan intervenes the discourses regarding construction of the Other parallel to suggestions that supports conflation of two voices in order to generate a “self-serving constructions of the other” (Biln, 1997, p. 27).

Akan, in design of “eastmeetswest” uses this self-construction of Otherness in order to de-privilege all Eastern discourses constituted by Westerners. Akan conflates two voices in eastmeetswest, framing the so-called east within west. This multiplicity of voices emphasizes that East is a Western construct, allowed to stay within the borders that West offers. Furthermore, the project suggests the necessity for an under-privileged other for West to exist as an identity category as well as recognizing its position within that western discourse. By self-representation of this otherness, the project puts into display all exclusions that the West requires to constitute itself by subtly exhibiting the East within its borders. Akan, adopting a cleverly defined metaphor, simply depicts how East is constructed regarding cultural difference and thus becomes digestible. Thus, eastmeetswest neither belongs to the self-privileging economy of West nor ends in a difference as alterity. It stands as a distinct example in Turkish design discourse struggling with all binary oppositions, disrupting and deconstructing all identity categories, labels of Self and Other, East and West.

References

- Biln, J. (1997) (De)forming self and other: toward an ethics of distance. In: Nalbantoğlu, G. & Wong, C.T. ed. Postcolonial Spaces. New York, Princeton Architectural Press, pp.25-37
- Cohen, A. P. (1985) *The symbolic construction of the community* (in Turkish). Ankara, Dost Kitabevi.
- Er, A. (2007) İlk'in Düşündürdükleri. XXI, No. 55, April, p.30
- Gökyay, G. (2007) Interview by Tuçe Yasak. XXI, No. 55, April, pp.38-40
- Kaygan, H. (2006) Evaluation of products through the concept of national design: a case study on Art-Decor magazine. M.Sc thesis, Middle East Technical University
- Karakuş, G. (2007) *Turkish touch in design: contemporary product design by Turkish designers worldwide*. İstanbul, Tasarım Yayın Grubu.
- Said, E. (1985) *Orientalism*. London, Penguin Books.
- Said, E. (1997) Orientalism reconsidered. In: Moore-Gilbert, B. et al. ed. Postcolonial Criticism. Essex, Addison Wesley Longman Limited, pp.126-144
- Turkish touch to design (2007). *Tasarım*, 170 (2007/04), pp.136-145

Figures



Figure 1. “Nar” by Kunter Şekerciöđlu



Figure 2. “Cezve” by Kunter Şekerciöđlu



Figure 3. “Yeni Rakı Bottle” by Gamze Güven



Figure 4. “Hamamlamp” by Pinocchio Design

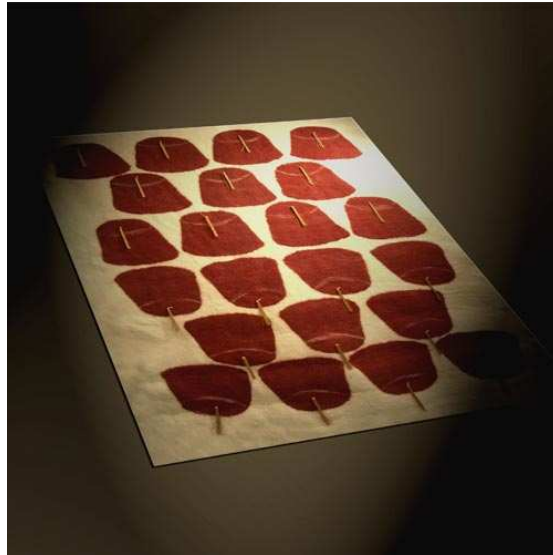


Figure 5. Carpet by Ali Bakova



Figure 6. "Hadji Turkish Delight Bowl" by Erdem Akan

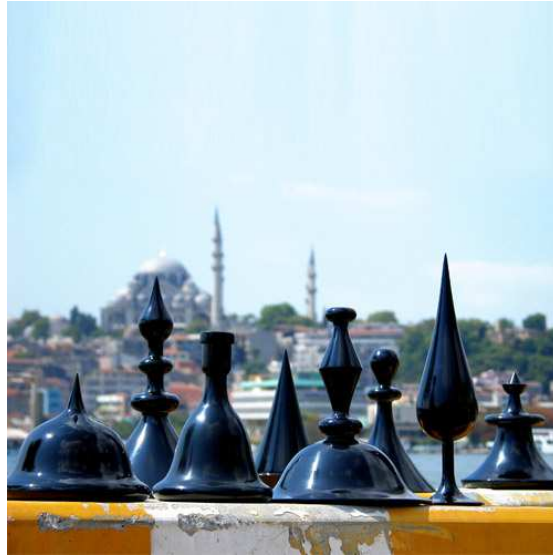


Figure 7. "Istanbul Alphabet" by Erdem Akan



Figure 8. "The Resolve Series" by Ayşe Birsel



Figure 9. “RepTile Wall Series” by Can Yalman



Figure 10. “Potsink” by İnci Mutlu



Figure 11. “Turkish Delight” Ottoman by Pinocchio Design



Figure 12. “eastmeetswest” by Erdem Akan