

New Typography, New Nation: Emin Barın, a Revolutionary Classicist Emin Artun Ozguner

In 1962, the seminal *Who's Who in Graphic Art* anthology justified the selection of the focused countries on their adoption of "Western industrial civilization" which would ascertain the "development of applied graphic arts".¹ While the second volume of the anthology keeps with this formulation, it does enlarge its scope with Turkey, Iran and Peru, amongst others, with an acknowledgement that a monolithic equation of design activity with industry from a Western perspective may have its pitfalls.² In this volume, the entry on Turkey, edited by bookbinder artist, graphic designer and calligrapher Emin Barın (Bolu 1913 – Istanbul 1987), concludes with the remark that the younger generation of Turkish graphic designers were now "applying Western techniques to the exploitation of the cultural heritage" in the broad context of Far East to Near East which summarises his design philosophy.³

The exploration of an aesthetic ideal, a synthesis between the principles of Western Modernism and local, traditional themes and heritage has long roots in Turkish modernity. In the 1930s, this presented a paradox for Turkish republican reformers who sought to negotiate international Modernism with the formulation of a new cultural identity, distinct from the Ottoman Islamic tradition. This was no less evident in type design. While new design actors were trained in Europe with the credo of Modernism, they were nonetheless expected to reconcile this training with local themes, crafts and materials on their return. It is perhaps no coincidence that most of these earlier state-sponsored designers were trained in Germany, a country that was equally grappling to tame the anti-historicism of Modernism with the evocation of a national spirit.

In this chapter, I examine how typography and a newly Romanised national script were instrumentalised in the discursive formation of Turkish cultural identity through the lettering works of Emin Barın. First, I investigate Barın's design formation as a state-led design actor by Jan Tschichold's opponent tutor Walter Tiemann. Although Barın's own ideas on Tschichold's *Die neue Typographie* (1928) remain obscure, as a student of Tiemann he must have been aware of Modernist discourses on typography. Second, I observe how Barın negotiated global tensions on elementary typography with local calligraphic traditions embedded in his practice, oscillating between the two.

Towards a National Script

Throughout the early modern period, Turkey had a peculiar relationship with the printing press. For the Muslim Ottoman elite and intelligentsia, Turkish-Ottoman script, using Arabic letters, preserved its sacrality. The

¹ Amstutz 1962: 13.

² Amstutz 1982: 11–12.

³ Barın 1982: 736. The reader must be warned against anachronisms here. The Turkish equivalent of "design", *tasarım*, was not a common word until the 1950s. The programmes within the Academy were called *atölye* as in *atelier* in French.

distinction between the vernacular and the official court dialects have remained stark well into the 20th century. This had significance in terms of the adoption of the printing press technology. The mechanisation of language through set type was legally banned for the printing of Koran, the most popular book of all. Consequently, early ventures of print capitalism in the 18th century have all but failed due to poor demand in other subjects. The political power of calligraphers also held considerable sway in this discourse, as it often clashed with modern reformers of the Ottoman Empire, who increasingly advocated for mechanisation beginning with the 1839 *Tanzimat* (Reforms) decree.⁴ It is no surprise that lithography remained a more favoured technology well into the 20th century for the printing of the word, as it allowed the direct transfer of the calligrapher's strokes and evaded problems of standardisation.⁵

As the Empire employed education, jurisdiction and legislation to claim the powers of a central state, the mechanisation and standardisation of a print language became an important debate for 19th century Ottoman bureaucrats and intelligentsia. This is particularly true for the Young Turks reformers, who had been considering the Romanisation option since the late 1860s. The main obstacle towards mechanisation with the Turkish-Arabic script was that of vocalisation. The lack of vowels in the Arabic alphabet was incompatible with Turkish phonetics, leaving Ottoman orthography unfit for mechanisation and the printing press. This had further hindered the span of education and cultural expansion.⁶ Indeed, in the entire imperial provinces literacy rates could hardly go beyond single digits, with drastic discrepancies between rural and urban areas, as well as genders. This scenery remained practically unchanged into the late 1920s.⁷

By 1923, Turkey self-assuredly rose out of the wreckage of World War I as a modern nation-state. In a set of prompt materially transformative reforms, including the civil and dress codes and a democratic constitution, the republican intelligentsia maintained that to avoid further imperialist plots, it was necessary to attain the level of Western civilization through a wholesale cultural transformation of the society.⁸ What followed in 1928 was the Romanisation of the Turkish-Ottoman script. This language reform did not only concern the aspect of language, but was also led by a purification of its contents, reinstating the vernacular as the official language of the nation-state. The Romanised Turkish script would also isolate the sanctity of the Arabic script to the private sphere, contributing to the dissemination of a secular national modernity.

The Turkish reformers were no less zealous than Tschichold in ridding communication from its historical baggage. That same year, in *Die neue Typographie* Tschichold also advocated for the abandonment of historical, national scripts, which he called "retrograde", for the sake of internationalism. While he acclaimed the Turkish move, he ridiculed the German obsession with Gothic type, which was for foreigners "virtually unreadable!"⁹ He was adamant in equating ornamentation in lettering to a childish primitiveness of the society.¹⁰ It is in this light that the training of Barın in Germany, in the footsteps of Tschichold, becomes more significant.

4 Gratien, Shafir and Wilson 2013.

5 Kabacalı 2000: 68–72.

6 Lewis 1968: 278–279.

7 Fortna 2011: 20.

8 Göle 2013: 57–63.

9 Tschichold 1995: 75.

10 *Ibid.*: 69.

From Bursa to Leipzig

Barın is one of the many Turkish design figures whose life has been influenced and remarkably transformed by the discourse on Turkish national

modernity. He was born as the son of a calligrapher and bookbinder in 1913, in a traditional Bursa household. This made him well-versed in these crafts as a teenager. He was only a middle school student in 1928, when the script reform was launched. In 1934, he started attending the new capital, Ankara's state-of-the-art Gazi Eğitim Enstitüsü (Gazi Education Institute) and trained in the fine arts. The skills from his home training as a calligrapher must have helped him pass the specialisation exam of the Ministry of Education in 1938, to embark on a new education journey in Germany.

In Germany, Barin's educational milieu was similar to Tschichold's training. In Weimar, he studied under Otto Dorfner (Kirchheim unter Teck 1885 – Weimar 1955) in the Fachschule für kunstgewerbliche Buchbinderei (Technical School for Artistic Bookbinding) for about a year. He then transferred to Leipzig, where he attended the Staatliche Akademie für graphische Künste und Buchgewerbe (State Academy for Graphic Arts and Book Production). Here he was taught by Walter Tiemann (1876–1951), who held the office of director from 1920 to 1946 and was Tschichold's former tutor, and Rudolf Spemann (1905–1947).¹¹

Barin's tutors in Germany demonstrated a variety of approaches to the application of Modernist principles. Tiemann had been an instrumental actor in modernising German typographic design at the turn of the century, against worries that photomechanical processes would deteriorate arts. Under his aegis as director, during which he opted for a rather classical pedagogy, the Leipzig Academy witnessed its most fruitful years. Tiemann was a fervent supporter of a strong manifestation of artistic intent in visual compositions and an opponent to the formulaic approaches of stylistic Modernism.¹² In his book designs he combined illustrative touches with functional typographic font solutions.¹³

Dorfner, who shortly ran the applied arts class at the Bauhaus, appointed by Walter Gropius between 1919 and 1922, had a slightly more methodical Modernist inclination. Advocating for the subordination of all graphic elements on the cover design to the contents of the book rather than to external stylistic influences, Dorfner had developed a personal style through linear abstractions. Instead of just adorning or decorating the bindings, he proposed a more systematic approach, aided by strict guidelines.¹⁴

Despite their cautious distance to the Reich and their less zealous adherence to a stylistic Modernism, or perhaps thanks to it, both Dorfner and Tiemann made it on the Ministry of Propaganda's Gottbegnadeten-Liste (literally "God-gifted list", or "Important Artist Exempt List"). This reactionary Modernism, as explored by the historian Jeffrey Herf, was common in the Weimar Republic collective consciousness.¹⁵ These actors, central to the Leipzig book design tradition, were consonant with a more classical approach to graphic design and wary of internationalist and Modernist inclinations. Unlike their colleagues at the Bauhaus, their use of Modernist principles, printing processes, mechanisation, efficiency in industrial output, did not necessarily

entail radically avant-garde, leftist political tendencies or an embrace of stylistic Modernism.¹⁶

This is well documented in the corollary aesthetic-political dispute

11 Müller 2017: 392

12 Hölischer 1968: 180.

13 Hübscher 1989: 66–113.

14 Eckardt 1960: 8, 12, 14.

15 Herf 1984: 1–6, 11.

16 Aynsley 1992: 55–56.

and escalating antagonism between Tiemann and his pupil Tschichold, between classical and Constructivist elementary (new) typography charged with wartime political trenches of the 1920s. Whereas the former sought diversity, richness, personality and beauty; the latter advocated clarity, efficacy in reading, objectivity and factuality. Inevitably, this alternative mode of modernity, less historical but nevertheless classical approach and a cautious attitude to the embrace of a sweeping international style must have informed Barin's design formation to a great extent.

An Official Design Actor

For Barin, the negotiation of this conservative German design pedagogy with the Modernist move of Turkish script Romanisation must have presented a paradox from early on in his career. Yet this must have been one he had learned to negotiate from the reserved approach of his German masters to Modernism. The overall ambitions of his earlier type designs are akin to a stripped-down classicism, in line with war-time aesthetic conservatism, with a keen eye on legibility and clarity.

Wrought by the war years, Barin completed his German education in 1943 and returned to Turkey to take a central role as a state-led design actor. He was immediately assigned to work in the state-of-the-art Milli Eğitim Basımevi (Printing House of the Ministry of Education). This facility, formerly known as the State Printing House, was able to produce the finest qualities of prints for official ephemera and international propaganda journals, including a facsimile of the 16th-century world map of cartographer Piri Reis, through colour separation technique.¹⁷ It was now ran by the visionary Minister of Education, Hasan Ali Yücel (1897–1961), a pioneering figure in spearheading the state-led humanism of the 1940s with the translation of world classics into Turkish, mostly from French and Greek literature.

In 1943, Barin also organised an exhibition titled *Yazı ve Cilt Sergisi* (Scripture and Binding) at the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts, where he exhibited his major projects as a student in Germany.¹⁸ These included a notebook, bound with parchment and gilded with a floral cornice, which was then gifted to the President of the Republic, İsmet İnönü. The successful exhibition must have cemented a new role for Barin among bureaucrats of cultural policy, as he was soon admitted as a lecturer to the Academy, where he remained for forty-four years.¹⁹ There he taught type design, compulsory for the Decorative Arts programme first years, including graphics, ceramics, textiles and interior design.²⁰

The Academy was also a place to explore continuities with calligraphic tradition. In 1936, following its dissolution, the former Şark Tezyini Sanatlar Mektebi (School of Oriental Ornamental Arts), which specialised in calligraphy, binding and marbling, was placed under the Academy's Turkish Decorative Arts programme (1933).²¹ Before embarking on his training in Germany, Barin had spent a year of internship at the School of Ornamental Arts. One of the prominent figures of this institution, calligrapher Kamil Akdik had required

¹⁷ Koloğlu 1993: 101, 193–194.

¹⁸ *Arkitekt* 1943: 237.

¹⁹ Karamani Pekin 2010: 102.

²⁰ Turan 2002: 41.

²¹ Karamani Pekin 2010: 111. The institution, founded in 1914 as Medreset'ul Hattatın (Calligraphy Madrasah) was shut down due to the 1928 law on the secularisation of national education and the work of calligraphers still having religious affiliations. The school then continued to operate as the Hattat Mektebi (School of Calligraphers) until 1928, shut down again with the law on Romanisation. From then on, it operated as the School of Oriental Ornamental Arts until its integration into the Academy.

Barın to take a vow to never abandon traditional calligraphy.²² Owing to this legacy, in 1955 Barın established a dedicated programme for lettering and bookbinding (Yazı ve Cilt Atölyesi) within the Decorative Arts programme along with his colleague Sacit Okyay. This was to be remodelled as the first national Graphic Design department in 1962.²³

Reconciling the East with the West

The Academy years were prolific for Barın in terms of state commissions. In 1953, he was called to design a total of ten commemorative marble plaques for the occasion of Istanbul's quincentenary conquest celebrations. Commissioned by the populist Istanbul Conquest Association, the plaques not only explored a continuity with the Ottoman dynastic epigraphic inscriptions, but also created a web around the old city where the imperial conquest could be rewritten in the collective memory of the modern nation through the new Turkish Roman characters. **(fig. 123)** For this task, Barın came up with a capital, serif letterform that had triangular flourishes at the ends of concave horizontal crossbars, subtly mimicking Ottoman calligraphic work. Of note is also his dismissive attitude to Tschichold's call for the abandonment of capital letters for the sake of sheer monumentality.²⁴

This plaque was followed around the same time by the gargantuan epitaphs for the mausoleum of nation's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, by architects Emin Onat and Orhan Arda. The mausoleum, called Anıtkabir, was to become an aesthetic synthesis of the earlier official meta-historical cultural identity postulations with loose interpretations of Hittite, Sumerian and Roman references meddled with folk motifs. Despite the sheer classic monumentality of the edifice, Barın's lettering design made use of elementary typography principles. **(fig. 124)** To optimise legibility on a height above human vision, Barın increased the letter size and kerning.²⁵ He also alternated the A letter by introducing varying swashes at their apex to balance the exaggerated kerning with neighbouring letters. This aimed to provide a smoother, uninterrupted reading experience from afar. At the same time, Barın was once again exploring the calligraphic tradition of *keşide*, the alterations in the composition of the letters by means of elongated swashes.²⁶

With these works, Barın placed the newly adopted Roman Turkish letters in a remarkable place, in continuity with and on the same level of competence as the Ottoman monumental epitaph tradition. He claimed that Turkish aesthetics differed from the rest of the Islamic world in its adherence to simplicity and abstinence to ornamentation, especially in architectural epitaphs.²⁷ In this claim he resonated with Republican nationalist art historiographies of the early 20th century, which were equally zealous in looking for precursors of modern form in historic craft practices awaiting discovery and praise by the modern nation. This was namely the case of Celal Esad Arseven, Barın's contemporary, who in his writings equated alleged self-moderated national attributes with aesthetic ones. In his writings, he asserted that, since

Turks were candid and despised deceit, so were their decorative arts and ornamentation; sincere and rational like the ancient Greeks.²⁸ In their endeavour to equate tradition with Modernism, the first generation of republican artists and art histori-

²² Turan 2014: 204

²³ Barın 1982: 733.

²⁴ Tschichold 1995: 79–80.

²⁵ Taşçı 2002: 23.

²⁶ Karamani Pekin 2010: 151.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 161.

²⁸ Esad Arseven 1927: 389–394.

ans were no less reactionary Modernists than their German counterparts. Yet, rather than the German exaltation of the national character, theirs was more borne out of a necessity to reconcile the international, Western world with the East. As Barin proudly put forward, here lay his originality.²⁹

A Revolutionary Classicism

Despite his success with the new Turkish script, towards the mid-1960s Barin felt that he could further this exploration of a new amalgamation of the calligraphic tradition with Modernist principles. For these early graphic design actors, including Sait Maden, calligraphy often lay at the foundation of their training and had to be reconciled with the modern and commercial functions.³⁰ In the 1930s, following the Romanisation law, the Turkish reformers and intelligentsia had a highly politicised type. The symbolic differences between Arabic and Latin letters were pitted against each other. Where the former came to signify a backward religious past and the latter the technically advanced future of national modernity.³¹ Yet, Barin's sensibilities were wary of extremes. As much as he resented the eminent loss of the calligraphic tradition, he was also critical of its orthodox resistance to change, which made it incompatible with shifting socio-cultural dynamics.³² Informed both by his traditional upbringing in calligraphy and his German training, cautious of the homogenising effects of internationalism, he set out to interpret the calligraphic tradition with modern Turkish letters and an abstract touch. This was a revolutionary take on the classical tenets of Turkish-Ottoman calligraphy.

It was for these reasons that Barin chose to work with *kufi* writing. As a pre-Islamic script, *kufi* had more secular roots and was therefore more flexible for new experimentations.³³ Its geometric layout also made it structurally more suitable to hybrid explorations with elementary typography. These are visible in his monogram, in which a central interlaced motif expands into bold lines filling the square composition with the repetition of his name on all four sides. (**fig. 125**) In these interpretations, as he called them, Barin not only used his modern training to create various new and different compositions, but also deliberately stepped out from the tradition of his calligraphy masters who, he argued, would merely repeat what their masters had been doing in a non-progressive way.³⁴

Like Tschichold, Barin too acknowledged the end of historic script, the Ottoman calligraphy tradition, which no longer served modern functions and thus could not be revived. He advocated for the exploration of new principles of typography with contemporary necessities and traditional skills.³⁵ Yet, his affinities were more in line with those of his master, Tiemann, who advocated for a high level of artistic feeling, than with Tschichold's mere "rules and

recipes", as Tiemann called it, or with a stylistic adherence to functional objectivism.³⁶ The manifestation of an individual character via function (effective legibility) and aesthetics (clarity and harmonious balance) laid the foundation of Tiemann's teaching. However, this individual character in type had its limits too, it could not be imposingly superficial or fashionable,

²⁹ Barin 1974: 30.

³⁰ Durmaz 2008. To avoid an anachronism here, until the 1950s, the figure of graphic or visual communication designer was often referred to as *matbaa ressamı* (print painter), similar to the Western designation of commercial artist.

³¹ Gencer 2013: 188–213.

³² Barin 1974: 30.

³³ *Dergah* 2014: 23.

³⁴ TRT Arşiv n.d.

³⁵ *Özpalabıyıklar* 2002: 16.

³⁶ Hübscher 1989: 76–79.



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fig. 123 Emin Barın, epitaphs for the quincentenary celebrations of the conquest of Istanbul, 1953. Photo by Emin Artun Ozguner



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fig. 124 Emin Barın, epitaphs for the mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, 1953. Photo by Emin Artun Ozguner



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fig. 125 Emin Barın, kufi style monogram with roman Turkish letters, 1970.

it had to be reserved enough to allow future uses for designers.³⁷ Barın's design philosophy resonated with this approach, as he sought for a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art in harmony with the whole composition, rather than the individual appeal of letters.³⁸

Conclusion

In proposing this new hybrid aesthetic form, Barın was somewhat responding to Tschichold's orientalisising discourse, that ornamental, historical, national type was a consequence of the primitiveness of the local culture not capable of change.³⁹ This zeal to reconcile ornamental craft traditions, abundant in Turkish culture, with modern principles of design, was consonant with the endeavours of design actors contemporary to Barın.⁴⁰ In the late 1930s, even Tschichold himself had taken a back step towards local character in type and had controversially reorientated his perspective to a more conservative and traditional approach in typography, likening the rigidity in *Die neue Typographie* to totalitarianism.⁴¹

Despite his state-endowed mission of creating a new canon of typographic designs with the Turkish Roman letters, Barın grew an empathy for the imminent decline of the calligraphic tradition. He aimed not at the revival of the old script, but at the exploration of how its creative principles could be explored with the Roman letters.⁴² He was taking a challenging attitude towards history, as much as Tschichold in *Die neue Typographie*, but he was nonetheless eager to explore methods to make his classical essence survive in modern Roman type. His particularity in these abstractions, compared to Western or Eastern artists, was his attention to the anatomy of the letters and an aversion to distortion that put legibility ahead of style or expression. He argued that this was thanks to his ability to amalgamate his classical upbringing in calligraphy with his modern technical training.⁴³ In doing this, he seems to have echoed Tiemann's response to Tschichold's partisan embrace of New Typography in the 1920s, that the artist had "other tasks than feeling the pulse of the *zeitgeist*".⁴⁴ Hence, for Barın, tradition and modernity were not mutually exclusive, they rather constituted two poles that needed equal taming and reconciliation.

37 *Ibid.*: 106.

38 Karamani Pekin 2010: 124.

39 Tschichold 1995: 69–74.

40 A similar figure advocating this idea was painter Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu.

41 Müller 2017: 299–300, 321.

42 Özpabıyıklar 2002: 16.

43 Emin Barın, in İpek, Ulusan and Budak 2013: 87.

44 Hübscher 1989: 79.

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