

MLA Style

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Ottoman Architecture History – Beylerbeyi Palace

The arts, including architecture, never take place outside of their socio-historical context. The creators do not operate in a vacuum but are influenced by the wishes of those who contract them and by the ideas of their contemporaries. Quite apart from the astounding beauty of the architecture, the frescoes, the gardens, the pavilions, and the setting overlooking the Bosphorus, in Beylerbeyi Palace we have a very interesting example of the way in which events in modern history influenced the art and architecture of the time.

Historically, in the West, the 17th century had seen the growth of an interest in creating ornamental palaces and gardens, the most important of which being Louis XIV's Palace of Versailles. Such places were symbols of power, but also of good taste. During the 18th century, artists, poets and musicians cultivated the patronage of the powerful. This time, good taste moved more to the East where Frederick II, who commissioned a number of buildings including the opera house in Berlin, and Catherine II of Russia, who commissioned the building of St Catherine's Cathedral in Kingisepp, seemed to vie for the recognition of being the most enlightened ruler. The Beylerbeyi Palace was built in the middle of the 19th century, between 1861 and 1865 by Serkis Balyan and his father, Karapet, for the sultan, Abdulaziz. It combines traditional Ottoman styles with the Western influences of the Renaissance and the Baroque.

The main building of a complex of buildings is the stone building of Berleybeyi Palace itself. Built on about 2,500 m² the palace has two floors above ground and a basement which contains kitchens and storage rooms. The building is rectangular, 72m in length stretching along the shore of the Bosphorus and 48m in width. The heights of the floors above ground vary between 6m and 9m, while the basement heights are between 1.5m and 2.2m. There are three entrances to the palace. The walls of the building are made up of masonry and timber slabs. In the basement, the walls are composed of lime mortar, brick and stones. The thickness of the basement walls varies between 1m and 2m. On the first (ground) and second floors, brick and lime mortar were also used for the walls, while marble was used for the columns. The width of the walls on the first floor is around 80cm, while on the second floor it varies around 60cm. The timber slabs are made up of oak and fir (Aras).

The walls were further strengthened with the use of cast iron clamps which have since deteriorated and are a cause of structural concern. The outside of the building is covered with limestone, while the interior surfaces are covered with stucco and lime plaster and wood



Figure 1. Traditional turquoise stone pillar with gilded Baroque capital (left). Gilded Baroque capital on church pillar Lecce, Italy (right)

paneling (Aras).

The floors are divided into state rooms, of which there are six, and 24 other rooms. The south side consisted of the Imperial “Mabeyn” – apartments where affairs of state would

be discussed, while on the north side, overlooking the Bosphorus, was the harem where the sultan's family resided, and the valide, the legal mother of the ruler, had her apartment.

The interior decoration is striking, although the Dolmabahçe Palace, built by Serkis' brother, Nigoğos, is generally recognized as being more striking in its beauty. Colors abound along with pillars made from traditional turquoise stone (figure 1). The word "turquoise" actually comes from the French word for "Turkish" because this stone is in abundance in Turkey. The central space on the ground floor is dominated by a *sofa* (a "central hallway and main living-space in an Ottoman house" (Freely 432)) surrounded by side spaces known as *eywans*. An *eyvan* is a "vaulted or domed space recessed from a central hall or court" (Freely 431). The central feature of the *sofa* is a baroque style fountain beneath a chandelier. Sixteen impressive marble pillars, gilded capitals, line the hall, which has a double set of winding marble stairs on one side (figure 2).

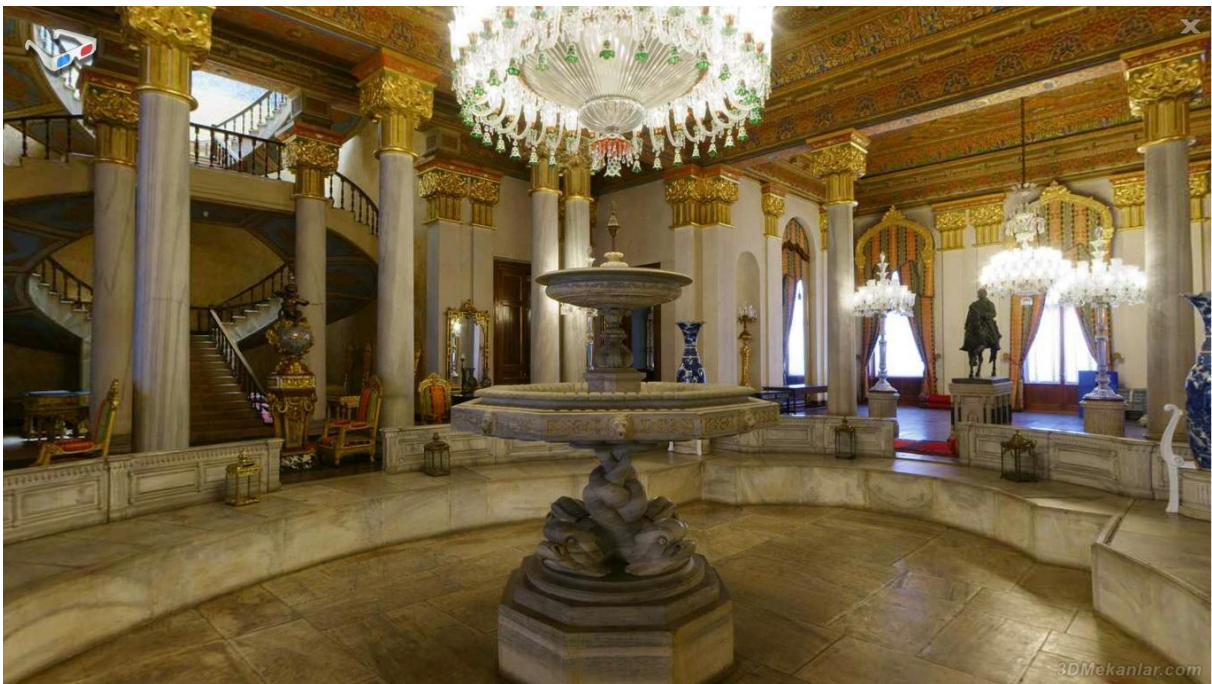


Figure 2. Sofa showing fountain, marble stairway, pillars with gilded capitals, and eywans

The 34th sultan of the Ottoman Empire's bedroom is, by contrast, a very simple affair. Apart from the ornamented ceiling, no work has been done to ornament the walls (figure 3).



Figure 3. 34th sultan's bedroom

Several authors state that, starting at the end of the 18th century, Ottoman architecture was undergoing a process of “Westernization”. Surer dates this process from the beginning of the reign of Sultan Selim III (1789) until the end of the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1909) (Surer). Gocek argues that the influence of Western art and Baroque and Rococo architecture, which had been felt at least since the 18th century, had, by the 19th century, come to dominate Ottoman art and architecture in both form and internal design: “following the new fashion in the West, wall paintings of the eighteenth century gave way to oil paintings on the ceilings and walls of Ottoman officials’ nineteenth-century residences” (42).

Freeley attributes the new modes of architecture from Western Europe which came into being around the middle of the 19th century to a number of events. First, a family of Armenian architects, the Balyans, trained in Europe. Subsequently, French and German architects were hired to work in Istanbul, and finally, many Turkish architects trained in France and Germany. Among the latter group were Hayrettin Bey, Vedat Tek, and Kemalettin Bey (Freeley). It was Serkis Balyan who, along with his father, designed the Beylerbeyi Palace.

Wharton describes Constantinople in the middle of the 19th century as “a cosmopolitan world of shops, cafes, intellectuals, expansion of the printing press, artists and salons, with an expanded European presence” (151). In addition, she points out that Armenian architects, such as the Balyan family, were some of the “most mobile figures in society” (151). Although they were not Muslims, from the beginning of the 19th century, the Balyan family had had a powerful influence over building in the Ottoman Empire. Karapet, the father of Nigoğos and Serkis, had sent his sons to be educated at the Collège Sainte-Barbe, Écoles des Beaux-Arts in Paris (153). This was a private school, run by Henri Labrouste, and one of the students who was to study there was Gustave Eiffel, so it is clear that the family enjoyed a great deal of prestige at the time.

In contrast to other palaces in Istanbul, the Berleybeyi Palace has a number of terraced gardens adjacent to the palace built on a slope with a number of tunnels stretching under them. The terraces were originally commissioned by Sultan Mahmud II in 1830. He also began the building of a number of “kiosks”: pavilions to increase the leisure function of the gardens, providing much needed protection from the sun. The shape of these garden pavilions seems to have been inspired by the shape of tents which would have been set up in Iran, Central Asia or Anatolia in military camps and ceremonies to provide protection against the sun. Their appearance in gardens may have been to enhance the feeling of relaxation and provide a covered resting place in the shade (Surer 2872). The first pavilion, the Serdab, built by Mahmud II, and five others survive to this day. The most impressive of these pavilions – the “sea kiosks” were constructed by Serkis Balyan in 1864 in the sea wall marking the edge of the Bosphorus.

The gardens of the Palace are surrounded by a high wall which was built to provide security and privacy. Simultaneously, the sea wall constitutes a visual barrier between the gardens and the Bosphorus. The two pavilions built by Serkis Balyan were erected in line

with the sea wall and serve to break the monotony of this structure while providing a belvedere from which to view the river (figure 4). One of the pavilions was for males, the *Selamlık*, the other for females, the *Harem*. The roofs take the form of an octagonal dome



Figure 4. Sea wall and pavilion overlooking the Bosphorus

with pointed arches reminiscent of the shape of an erected tent. On the garden side, cloisters are overhung by multiple arches supported by 12 columns to create a Moorish effect. The domes are divided into muqarnas, giving a kind of honeycomb effect which is typical of Islamic architecture. There are ornaments and paintings of animal figures on the insides of the pavilions (Surer 2873).

Wharton explains that the Dolmabahçe and the Beylerbeyi Palaces differ in that whereas the Dolmabahçe reflected the experience that Nigoğos had had at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, with an emphasis on Western ornamental styles, the Beylerbeyi marks an attempt to stress medieval styles, in particular Moorish and Arab decoration. In the Dolmabahçe Palace, the Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassical references predominate while the interior walls of the Beylerbeyi are dominated by Arab and Moorish patterns along with Ottoman calligraphic panels. There was “a new Islamic emphasis: inscriptions referred to the just governance of the sultan as Caliph, and the sultan as protected and directed by God, some referred to victory and stated that the sultan ‘enlightened the land like the sun’” (Wharton 158).

Another reason why the Beylerbeyi Palace is of interest is that it raises the question of Islamic versus Muslim architecture. Although these terms tend to get confused, it is

interesting to distinguish between them. “Islamic” may then be taken as referring to the process of building in accordance with religious precepts laid down in the Quran: “is he, therefore, better who lays his foundation on fear of Allah and (His) good pleasure, or he who lays his foundation on the edge of a cracking hollowed bank, so it broke down with him into the fire of hell; and Allah does not guide the unjust people” (FSTC Limited).



Figure 5. Beylerbeyi Palace (left). Alhambra Palace (right)

By contrast, Muslim architecture may be taken as referring to architecture carried out by Muslims. Secular buildings, such as palaces, are better described as being Muslim rather than Islamic. Beylerbeyi Palace clearly fits the description of being Muslim rather than Islamic, especially when taking into account the eclectic styles which have resulted from the Western influences. For example, the interior walls and ceilings are covered with decorative motifs, but they are unlike the decorations on the interior walls of religious buildings. Figure

5 contrasts the secular decorations of the Beylerbeyi Palace with the religious motifs and writings from the Quran on the walls of the Alhambra Palace in Granada, Spain.

The Balyan family, not being Muslims, must have felt more secure during the period of reform known as the Tanzimat (reorganization) era which began with the Edict of Gülhane in 1839, was consolidated by the Ottoman Reform Edict of 1856 and ended with the setting up of a constitutional European style monarchy in 1876. Both edicts are important as they attempted to introduce religious tolerance to non-Muslims. Cleveland and Buntun argue that the edicts were aimed at securing the loyalty of the Christian subjects in the empire as



Figure 6. Beylerbeyi (left) Baroque entablature with Ottoman coat-of arms and St. Paul's Baroque entablature and pediment

nationalist agitation was growing in the European provinces (Cleveland and Bunton 83). The Balyans fell into the non-Muslim category, so it is significant that their architectural works combine foreign influences such as Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo architectural elaboration with traditional Ottoman motifs. So, for example, we find on the southwest Seagate of the Beylerbeyi Palace the Ottoman coat-of-arms above a Baroque entablature. In figure 6 we can see how this mixture of styles compares with the English Baroque entablature and pediment of Christopher Wren's St Paul's Cathedral.

By the 1870s, the buildings constructed by the Armenians were coming to be seen as not reflecting traditional Turkish culture. Wharton describes how pre-1873 architecture, was

seen as “‘orientalist’, ‘pseudo-Islamic’, and carried out by ‘men of practice’” (153). The term “men of practice” was derogatory in the sense that it downgraded the Armenians from being architects to mere builders. There may have been some xenophobia mixed in with these sentiments as in the final quarter of the 19th century nationalistic discourses throughout the Ottoman Empire advocated a more traditional kind of architecture.

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