Domesticating the avant-garde in a nationalist era: Aesthetic modernism in 1930s Turkey

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Abstract
This paper investigates the rise of aesthetic modernism in Turkey’s early republican era (i.e., the late 1920s and the 1930s), with an emphasis on the influence of international cultural currents on Turkey’s intelligentsia. The paper concentrates on the modernist ideas and works of the D Group, who advocated a high modernism in the plastic arts, and the literary modernism of the socialist poet Nâzım Hikmet (Ran). Firstly, it addresses the historiographical argument that aesthetic modernism in Turkey was a derivative enterprise, a low-grade replica of European modernism. Secondly, it argues that the early republican intelligentsia found itself in a dilemma with regard to modernist currents. For them, aesthetic modernism was a sign of the modern epoch, but it also carried a radical potential for a critique of bourgeois modernity. Aesthetic modernism not only promised change, functionality, and renewal, but also manifested such disturbing symptoms of modernity as individualism, melancholy, degeneration, and restlessness. The paper reaches the conclusion that figures such as the D Group artists and Nâzım Hikmet translated the avant-garde international currents of aesthetic modernism into the early republican context, opting for positive and optimistic versions of modernism rather than adopting its more alienating, pessimistic, and despairing features. Through their works, an intellectual debate on aesthetic modernism was initiated in early republican Turkey.

Keywords: Aesthetic modernism; nationalism; internationalism; Nâzım Hikmet; D Group; republican Turkey.

Turkey’s early republican encounter with aesthetic modernism in the 1930s was fragmented, hesitant, and paradoxical. “Early republican art was seeking
‘life’ as opposed to ‘death,’ optimism as opposed to negation,” wrote the cultural critic Ahmet Oktay. This is why the intelligentsia opted for optimistic, invigorating, and hopeful interpretations of modernism.

The altered international environment created in the aftermath of World War I permitted nationalism, European imperialism, and revolutionary socialism to exist side by side. In both old and new states, nationalist art and culture existed next to various forms of aesthetic internationalism. While, for example, Western metropolises such as Paris became the site for “avant-garde cosmopolitanism” (i.e., Cubism, Surrealism, Dadaism, etc.), the revolutionary capital of Moscow was home to a “socialist internationalism” (i.e., leftist Futurism, the revolutionary avant-garde, and Constructionism).

The present paper will elucidate the ways in which aesthetic modernism was taken seriously and debated theoretically among artists and literary figures in a nation-building context. The broad term “aesthetic modernism” is used here to refer to the prevailing internationalist taste of the period from the 1890s to 1939, and was arguably the strongest cultural current in Europe after World War I. Inspired by Raymond Williams’ seminal article, the paper will raise the question “when was Turkey’s modernism?” and search for the answer in Turkey’s early republican context (1923–1945).

One major field where modernism was widely accepted and used in early republican Turkey is architecture. A number of recent studies have analyzed in detail how modernist architecture left its stamp on public and civil construction during these years. However, modernism in the plastic arts and literature has not yet received comparable attention. In this paper, I would like to shed light on the artistic and literary modernism of the early republic, two areas that have been understudied by scholars in the social sciences.

More specifically, this paper will analyze the contributions of the art group called the D Group and the poet Nâzım Hikmet (Ran) to the debates on aesthetic modernism in early republican Turkey. The D Group and Nâzım

1 Ahmet Oktay, Toplumcu Gerçekçilik Kaynakları (İstanbul, BFS Yayınları, 1986), 402.
2 Raymond Williams, “When Was Modernism?” The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 32–33. Williams argued that an exact periodization of the rise of modernism as an aesthetic, artistic, or literary current is difficult, both because of the rather elusive connotations of the term “modern,” and because of the various continuities and breaks in the history of culture and the arts, which defy strict periodization. Indeed, since there is a sense of newness and contemporaneity inherent in the concept of modern, modernism might, in a broad sense, correspond to anything new and creative in the contemporary artistic and literary scene. Geeta Kapur also asked the same question with regard to India in When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000).
Hikmet stand out as the most radical figures in their respective fields, and they have inspired generations of artists and poets. This is why the present paper takes them as representative figures of two different modernisms; namely, a bourgeois high modernism (the D Group) and a socialist modernism (Nâzım Hikmet). The paper hopes to demonstrate that Turkey’s nation-building context, along with intellectuals’ ideological convictions, ensured that they would opt for particularly optimistic and positive versions of the European aesthetic modernism of the late 1920s and the 1930s.

In this way, the paper aims to question the “cultural Westernization” paradigm that has dominated the historiography of Turkey’s early republican era (1923–45). There is now a considerable academic literature concerning the authoritarian practices and elitist tendencies of what has been called “Kemalism” and its political, economic, and cultural practices. However, the interaction between the intelligentsia of the early republic and contemporary international cultural currents have usually been reduced to a broad and simplistic concept of “cultural Westernization,” observed especially in life styles, education, clothing, and legal reforms. “Cultural Westernization,” in turn, has frequently been studied along an axis of imitation versus rejection. Yet it has gone unnoticed that, in the period following World War I, Turkey’s intellectuals experienced the simultaneous effects of nationalism, avant-garde cosmopolitanism, and socialist internationalism, creatively adapting all of these views to the republican context.

Recently, a number of studies on early republican architecture have moved beyond the “cultural Westernization” paradigm to reveal how the early republican encounter with European modernist architecture can be read as an act of “translation.” This paper agrees with Bozdoğan and Akcan that there is a “need to abandon the very idea of a central, singular and canonic modernism or ‘a European master narrative’ claiming distinction from its allegedly lesser, derivative extensions in peripheral geographies.” Like Bozdoğan and Akcan, who concentrate on “trans-national exchanges,

4 Some classic works on the subject are Mete Tunçay, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti’nde Tek-Parti Yönetimi’nin Kurulması (1923–1931) (Ankara: Yurt, 1981); Feroz Ahmad, The Making of Modern Turkey (London: Routledge, 1993); Taha Parla, Ziya Gökalp, Kemalizm ve Türkiye’de Korporatizm (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1993); Füsun Üstel, Imparatorluktan Ulus-Devlete Türk Milliyetçiliği: Türk Ocakları (1912–1931) (İstanbul: İletişim, 1997).


7 Bozdoğan and Akcan, Turkey, 9.
encounters and ‘translations’ between Turkey’s modernist architects and their Western counterparts, in this paper I attempt to trace “a cultural translation” with respect to the plastic arts and literature.

**The paradox of aesthetic modernism**

Modernism in the arts and culture is to a great extent the product of the period starting with the second half of the nineteenth century and extending through the 1950s. In painting, its beginnings lie in the rise of Impressionism in the 1860s, later to be superseded by post-Impressionism and Cubism, while in literature it commenced with the rise of the Symbolist poets in the 1880s, to be followed from 1910 onwards by Imagists, Surrealists, Futurists, Formalists, and Constructivists.

Broadly, it can be said that the modernist aesthetic is constituted by the city and the urban existence, the individual, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the camera, and cinema. Modernists wanted to renew artistic perception through the “formal dislocation” and “defamiliarization” of the principles of art and aesthetics. Starting in the late nineteenth century, the rise of photography, cinema, radio, and television, as well as developments in the techniques of reproduction and recording, seem to have changed aesthetic perceptions. This was also a historical era when the metropolitan cities of Europe, which were “centers of new imperialism,” were also becoming “transnational capitals of an art without frontiers.” The aesthetic modernism born in these metropolises deliberated over such new concepts as the “crowd of strangers,” “the lonely individual isolated within the crowd,” the “agonized consciousness” and the alienation of this individual, and “the impenetrability of the city.”

The modernist artist was usually a figure revolting against his/her own bourgeois background by retreating into artistic form and a personal aesthetic experience. The sense of nihilism and despair and the loss of grounded values inherent in the modernist aesthetic ultimately resulted in a critical contemplation of modernity itself. However, at the same time, those same crowds, that same individual, and all those new technologies promised thrilling change, the upheaval of old social norms and conventions, and a democratic mass society. The modernist sentiment thus contained a built-in paradox, since on one hand modernist works could rejoice in the revolutionary potential of the

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8 Ibid.
9 Williams, “When Was Modernism?”, 32–33.
12 Ibid., 42.
13 Ibid., “When Was Modernism?”, 34.
new age, the city, and the machine, while on the other they could reflect the
feelings of alienation, uncertainty, and vanity that the new age had brought. In a
similar manner, aesthetic modernism could either celebrate the use of reason or
seek the sources of artistic creativity in the irrational.

Built on this paradox, aesthetic modernism took a number of different
forms and shaped itself in terms of competing political ideologies. With their
emphasis on destroying tradition, for example, the Italian Futurists’ calls
overlapped with socialist calls to “destroy the existing social order.” Their
glorification of war, however, differentiated Italian Futurists from leftist
avant-gardists advocating anti-militarism. In post-World War I Europe,
aesthetic modernism could thus associate itself with different political
movements in different countries. In France, for example, Surrealists, the
avant-garde, and the leftist avant-garde could come together in a broad
anti-war, anti-fascist coalition, whereas in Britain literary modernism could
move to the right and end up in right-wing nationalism. In Germany, while
Expressionism and its critique of bourgeois society and war had once
dominated, the arrival of Nazism spelled the decline of Expressionism,
with a number of Expressionists moving to the ranks of the fascist right.

In the next section, I will argue that the rise of aesthetic modernism in early
republican Turkey should be rethought, taking into consideration the para-
doxical meanings it carried within the nation-building context. When the
Republic of Turkey was established in 1923, the Turkish intelligentsia of the
new republic found themselves in the chaotic international environment
that had emerged after World War I, and I will demonstrate that, while
nation-building was their prerogative, they also wanted to partake a world of
internationalist taste and culture; i.e., of modernism.

Translating aesthetic modernism: The early republican dilemma

Marshall Berman observed that, outside the West, the meanings of modernity had
to be “more complex, elusive and paradoxical.” In these geographies, “the anguish
of backwardness and underdevelopment” lived side by side with the energies
and desire for economic and social change. This is why the rise of modernity in
non-Western areas was rather fragmented, unequal, and piecemeal.

14 Ibid., 53.
15 Ibid., 60–61.
17 Ibid., 175.
18 As is well known, Berman saw in nineteenth-century Petersburg the complexity of Russian modernity.
For him, nineteenth-century Petersburg represented “a politics of enforced backwardness in the
midst of forms and symbols of enforced modernization.” The Russian modernism that Berman
Indeed, the question of the rise of modernist aesthetics in non-Western geographies has either been avoided or answered far too easily. The common view is that, since modernity in these geographies was belated, the modernist avant-garde would also arrive much later than in Western contexts, and only in an imitative manner. This rather simplistic account of aesthetic modernism in non-Western areas has been questioned in studies on the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America, India, and Japan for some time. Such studies have argued that, rather than treating aesthetic modernism as simply transported in from Europe or North America, it is a much more fruitful academic enterprise to study how actual changes were experienced, within a particular geography, as well as how art and literature responded to changes under given social, economic, and ideological circumstances.

The prevailing view in the field of cultural history is that aesthetic modernism arrived in Turkey late and only in an imitative fashion. It is argued that the rise of artistic and literary modernism had to wait until the 1950s, and even then, it only developed in a hesitant and piecemeal fashion. Orhan Koçak wrote that “[m]odern art […] started out as a sign, an instrument, and a mirror of Westernization, of catching up with the West, and continued through the 1950s always accompanied with a sense of belatedness.” The widespread feeling among the intelligentsia was that they were always behind their contemporaries in Western metropolises. This “sense of belatedness” or of “not yet” became a leitmotif in early republican intellectual history, at times driving the republic’s intelligentsia to the point of despair and hopelessness. Most critics agreed that it was only in the 1950s and 1960s that a sense of self-confidence and freedom came to be observed in modern Turkish art. While I agree that modernism was only described was painful, anxious, and hesitant, but also very subversive. The October revolution carried Russian modernism to a new level—that of the Soviet avant-garde. It had now turned into an optimistic, Constructionist, and hopeful leftist internationalism. Ibid., 193.

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unleashed and became widely accepted among intellectuals in the 1950s, the present paper argues that aesthetic modernism of different ideological shades had already been adopted in the 1930s by a number of major republican intellectuals. I will call this intellectual attitude “the short-lived avant-garde of the early republican era.”

The roots of artistic and literary modernism in Turkey go back to late Ottoman attempts at cultural renewal. Late Ottoman intellectuals were exposed to contemporary currents, as a considerable number either travelled in Europe or were in contact with European artists and literary figures employed at the palace or in the empire’s educational institutions. As a dissipating empire desperately tried to initiate reforms, Ottoman society became particularly open to global changes and to the cultural and philosophical currents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. An early version of aesthetic modernism emerged in the symbolist poetry of a group of late Ottoman poets gathered around the journal and literary movement called Servet-i Fünun (Wealth of Knowledge), and there was a group of late Ottoman painters who employed impressionistic techniques.

The rise of the Young Turks and their coming to power in 1908 with the Union and Progress Party (İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti) introduced a new cultural agenda. Under the guidance of Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924), the party sought to establish a national culture and art, placing particular emphasis on the origins of the Turkish language and Turkish art and aesthetics. From 1923, the new Republic of Turkey’s cadres carried the nationalist cultural project even further by stressing the imperative of modernization (Westernization). They declared that in the new nation-state, art and culture should serve the purposes of socialization, mobilization, and the education of the masses into a culturally refined, national collectivity along the lines envisioned by the new regime. Not surprisingly, state

23 I borrow the term “the short-lived avant-garde of the early republic” from Edward Timms and Saime Göksu, who used the phrase to refer to the campaign led by Nâzım Hikmet against the literary establishment in the journal Resimli Ay; see Edward Timms and Saime Göksu, Romantic Communist: The Life and Work of Nazım Hikmet (London: Hurst & Company, 1999, 2006), 85.

24 One of the first groups of modern painters in the late nineteenth century consisted of military figures, the so-called Asker Ressamlar or “Soldier Painters,” like Şeker Ahmet Pasha. Later, a group of civilian painters gathered around what was called the Society of Ottoman Painters (Osmanlı Ressamlar Cemiyeti) and were called the “1914 Generation” (1914 Kuşağı); see Kaya Özeszgin, Cumhuriyetin 75. Yılinda Türk Resmi (Ankara: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 1998); Nurullah Berk, Modern Painting and Sculpture in Turkey, trans. Belinda Bather (Ankara: Turkish Press, Broadcasting and Tourism Department, 1950).


authorities preferred works of art that would represent the new nation’s people, the national landscape, and the modernizing reforms being enacted.

Still, a number of republican intellectuals were able to step outside the limits of the nationalist model and envision the Turkish experience of modernization as part of an international wave of decolonization and modernity. Their engagement in the cultural, philosophical, and artistic developments taking place in Europe was not in terms of a simple transportation or imitation of European ideas, and in fact they were very cognizant that Turkey, like the rest of the world, was undergoing a great transformation and was part of a broader wave of modernity.

A good number of the prominent intellectuals of the era—such as Peyami Safa, Necip Fazıl (Kısağır), Nazım Hikmet, and Yakup Kadri (Karaosmanoğlu)—referred to a worldwide philosophical/existential crisis (buhran) in their writings. Yakup Kadri, for example, noted the chaotic and fragmenting atmosphere of the new age, with its constant but useless search for peace and order.28 For Necip Fazıl, on the other hand, the post-World War generations had discarded the values inherited from the nineteenth century and were left with “a disturbed, agonized soul.”29 The presence of a prevalent sense of crisis is rather surprising for a nation-building intelligentsia. Apparently, their contributions to the nation-building project were an attempt to soothe the feelings of cultural uneasiness and homelessness brought about by the radical changes the world and their own society were undergoing. In other words, their modernist anxieties were balanced with their nationalist commitments.

In the same manner, a triumphant aesthetic modernism of various shades and tendencies often existed side by side with a “nationalist realist aesthetic” in postwar Europe, depending on the particular political and intellectual context. Most of the time, nationalist regimes and fascism pursued an uneasy relationship with aesthetic modernism, yet did not automatically reject it. It was only in the second half of the 1930s under the Nazis and around 1933 under Stalin’s regime that aesthetic modernism was explicitly condemned. As David Elliott has argued, “[a]ggressively modernizing, [the European dictators] were modern but hated modernism.”30

These authoritarian regimes tended to associate modernist currents with cultural cosmopolitanism, Jewish intellectuals, and moral and social decadence. As a panacea, they propagated fascist art and culture (Italy, Germany) or

27 Ibid.
socialist realism (the USSR). With its emphasis on order, morality, and the nation, fascist realism questioned a world devoid of values, while socialist realism would accentuate class struggle, the working classes, and the cult of Stalin. Aesthetic modernism was gradually eliminated in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, yet it continued to survive in Italy, albeit under the regime’s supervision.31

In Turkey, the republican elite compared the country’s new regime with the authoritarian regimes in Europe and perceived them as “contemporary” or “coeval” historical developments. While Falih Rifki (Atay) compared Ankara, Turkey’s new capital, with Moscow, Athens, and Tirana, for example,32 Yakup Kadri compared the new capital to Rome and Moscow.33 Such elites seem to have been partly inspired by the social engineering capacities of European fascism, but the Soviet model provided them with a fresh and positive alternative model as well. The writers at the journal Kadro, it seems, felt closer to the socialist realism of the Soviet Union, finding the alienating and pessimistic tone of other modernist currents perilous for nation-building.

If there is one sector where early republican anxieties about “under-development” or “belatedness” could be resolved quickly and in a concrete manner, it was architecture. As such, one of the first undertakings of the new republic was the construction of official sites, roads, factories, dams, and residences. Through extensive construction projects that utilized modernist architecture, the republic was both celebrating science and rationality and introducing new aesthetic styles that emphasized the modernity of the new nation. A series of modern state buildings and low-cost housing projects were thus designed to reflect the new life style of the republic as well as its reforms.34 According to Bozdoğan, “[f]or a brief period in the early 1930s, modernism was the ‘national style’ of Kemalist Turkey.”35 A number of European architects and city planners who were invited to contribute to the rebuilding

31 Italian fascism was more tolerant of modernism, and thus several Modernist writers and artists continued to live and produce their works under the limits defined by the Mussolini regime. In fact, Italian Futurism was interpreted so that it could serve the ideology of fascism with its celebration of war, machines, and a futuristic revival; see Roger Griffin, Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2007); and Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
32 Falih Rifki, Moskova, Roma (Ankara: Muallim Halit Kitabevi, 1932); and “Faşizm Havası (Roma, Tiran, Atina),” Hakimiyeti Milliye, 1931.
35 Bozdoğan, Modernism and Nation-Building, 295–296.
of urban spaces left their stamp on the early modernist architecture of Turkey. Herman Jansen’s master plan for the city of Ankara, Clemens Holzmeister’s “Viennese Cubism” in government buildings, and Ernst Egli and Bruno Taut’s projects for the Ministry of Education all attest to the negotiated nature of early modern Turkish architecture, where modernism had to merge with local needs and functions.36

In architecture, the modernist style was broadly designated as “Cubism,” and such buildings came to represent the “modern zeitgeist” in their healthy, functional, comfortable, and undecorated aesthetic. In fact, the term “Cubism” seems to have become very popular among republican intelligentsia in the 1930s, at a time when its creative phase was over in Europe. Abidin Dino, a member of the D Group, mentions how, in 1930s Turkey, Cubism almost became a “folk Cubism,” spreading to furniture stores and even to the interior decorations of the pudding shops in Beyoğlu.37

İsmail Hakkı (Baltacıoğlu), for example—as one of the intellectuals who believed that architectural modernism could serve the ideological purposes of building a modern, bourgeois society—categorized all sorts of modernist currents under the term Cubism,38 claiming that Cubism was the art of “modern democracies.” Against those who criticized the Cubist current, Baltacıoğlu claimed that Cubism was a healthy and refreshing approach and did not necessarily correspond to decadence and sickness, although some versions might at times go to extremes.39 The criteria for the contemporary building arts should be the health, comfort, and particularity of the individual, while religious conventions, class considerations, and the influences of traditional schools should be obliterated. Clearly, Baltacıoğlu moved beyond a purely nationalist viewpoint by combining the aesthetic features of architectural Cubism with social concerns and the needs of mass democracies. He insisted that the new architecture be part of a global cosmopolitan modernism: “There is only one route for the Turkish architect: to be a Cubist, like all the new architects of the world.”40

36 See Bozdoğan and Akcan, Turkey, especially Chapters 1 and 2.
38İsmail Hakkı, Demokrasi ve Sanat (İstanbul: Kanaat Kütüphanesi, 1931), 53–69.
39Ibid., 71.
40Ibid., 142. Just as in Turkey, modernist currents influenced the architecture, interior organization, and decoration of the homes of the Japanese bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jordan Sand showed how it was possible for Japanese architects to come up with models of “domestic modernism” whose avant-garde spirit was not necessarily antagonistic to middle-class domesticity; see Jordan Sand, House and Home in Modern Japan: Architecture, Domestic Space and Bourgeois Culture, 1880–1930 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), especially chapter 9.
Ironically, when aesthetic modernism had gained acceptance in Turkey by the 1930s, it was beginning to be contested in the authoritarian regimes of Europe and the Soviet Union. Gradually, in Turkey as well, aesthetic modernism came to be questioned by some nationalists and bureaucratic figures, though the regime’s resistance was never as strong as in Nazi Germany or as in the Stalinist USSR. Here, I argue that Turkey’s intellectuals and policy makers found themselves in a dilemma with regard to artistic modernism in between the two world wars: they acknowledged that modernist currents reflected contemporary and avant-garde perceptions of the age, but they also realized that such extreme modernist currents as Cubism, Dadaism, Surrealism, or Futurism, if taken too far, could easily challenge and criticize the bourgeois-nationalist worldview they were trying to build. In other words, the early republican bureaucrats and cultural policy makers felt themselves trapped in a dilemma. Their nationalist background warned them against modern artistic and literary movements, yet they also realized that, in Western democracies, modernism was a sign of modernity and contemporary international taste.41

In what follows, I will trace the development of high modernism in the plastic arts and outline the efforts of the D Group to tackle the paradox of modernism.

The plastic arts and the high modernism of the D Group

The rise of modernism in the plastic arts was almost an unexpected outcome of the cultural encounters with European art of late Ottoman and early republican artists. Both the late Ottoman state and the early republican regime supported the training of talented art students in such European metropolises as Paris and Berlin.42 Most members of the D Group had chosen to study in the ateliers of independent French art teachers rather than in the Fine Arts Academy, and it was in this manner that they were introduced to Cubism.

A modernist aesthetic was already pronounced in the 1929 exhibition of a group of young Turkish artists trained in Paris called the Müstakiller (Independents), who were inspired by the French movement “Indépendants.” While the Müstakiller emphasized “anti-academism” and openness to contemporary styles, their modernism was to remain limited and linked to the official agenda of the new regime. It was the D Group, born out of the Müstakiller, whose activities, works, and writings between 1933 and 1951 introduced Turkey’s art scene to aesthetic modernism and the concept of

41 Bozdoğan, Modernism and Nation-Building, 150.
“living art.” In the words of one of the D Group’s members, Abidin Dino, the name of the group referred to the initial letter of the word dört (four), alluding to the fact that they were the fourth plastic arts group in Turkey. Their actual aim was to find a striking name that would evoke curiosity and surprise. Years later, Dino wrote that “[t]he D Group was an act of pilgrimage, where naughtiness and uncertainty were mixed—consciously or unconsciously—in the midst of conflicting social influences.”

The members of the group stressed the intellectual foundations of their works of art, underlining the primacy of form, technique, and the intellect while also deemphasizing theme and content. The group joined a series of state exhibitions starting in 1933, in addition to staging their own exhibitions. Stirring a great deal of excitement, the D Group’s exhibitions inaugurated debates about Cubism. In the official publication of the Ministry of Culture, Güzel Sanatlar, the D Group was depicted as presenting the revolutionary potential of contemporary European art currents to Turkey, “making Turkish painting co-partners in world art history.” Describing the difficult circumstances of the early republican artists, Dino also noted the enthusiastic atmosphere surrounding the modernist art of the day:

The conditions of artists were not good [...] they could barely survive, so few paintings were sold. Given these negative circumstances, there was a huge optimism inside us [...] The glorious, historical city of İstanbul had never seen such excitement as this [...] Atatürk was still alive [...] Turkey was living fast and free.47

In his opening speech for the D Group’s 1935 exhibition, the poet Necip Fazıl emphasized the arrival of a new age and a new human experience with the coming of twentieth century. In his view, the common spirit of the age was one of skepticism, unbelief, and anxiety. The new individual of this era could just as well be a savior as a sick person. According to Necip Fazıl, over the previous 50 years, the Turkish intellectual had come face to face with a new life, and so needed to construct a new art. In the journal Kadro, Yakup Kadri

43 The members of the group were the painters Nurullah Berk, Elif Naci, Zeki Faik, Abidin Dino, and Cemal Tolu; the sculptor Zühdî Mürüdoğlu; and the writer Fikret Adil; see Zeynep Yasa Yaman, “Sanat Tarihimizde Eski Bir Konu: Müstakil Ressamlar ve Heykeltraşlar Birliğimi, d grubu mı, d grubu mı?”, in Türkiye’de Sanat 20 (September - October, 1995): 37–38.
45 Ibid., 397.
also repeatedly stressed that, in the present age of whirling reforms and mechanical production, traditional artistic tools and scales could no longer be employed.49 Overall, most artists and critics were convinced that artistic expression of the new life and the new soul of the century required higher intellectual skills, and the D Group became a symbol of this intellectualism in art: “Artistic taste is a luxury of the intellect and is the characteristic of a developed mind [...] The bourgeois seeks a correspondence with nature in painting and sculpture, but modern art is an intellectual and aesthetic affair; it has nothing to do with nature.”50

Prominent figures like Necip Fazıl, İsmail Hakkı (Baltacıoğlu), and Nâzım Hikmet praised the avant-garde potential in the D Group’s exhibitions, while bureaucratic figures and artists with nationalist anxieties were more critical of their modernist art as an imitative and passing fad. The latter criticized the group’s high modernism for being too elitist and distant from the realities of the common people.51 Nâzım Hikmet, on the other hand, blamed those who attacked the 1935 exhibition, saying that they were sticking to dogmatic views of art and not opening their minds to change.52 Similarly, Baltacıoğlu stated that “our traditional [aesthetic] education is an obstacle to understanding Cubism. Many respectable colleagues still seek representation, documentation, and craftsmanship in a Cubist painting [...] To understand higher works, you need higher skills.”53

The journal AR served as a platform where the theoretical background of the D Group’s aesthetic modernism was elaborated. Most of its writers were either artists—like Nurullah Berk, Turgut Zaim, Malik Aksel, and Elif Naci—or critics like Suut Kemal Yetkin and Peyami Safa. In an article entitled “Sanat ve Devlet” (Art and the State), Nurullah Berk observed that both Marxist and fascist states were opposed to abstract art. Both types of regime perceived art as a collective and non-individualist enterprise, rejecting the possibility that art could, at times, involve “play.”54 In contrast, Berk defended the autonomous nature of art, arguing that “the reality of art is not the same reality painted by regimes as they wish.”55

51 Ibid.
52 Quoted in Dino, “D Grubu Üzerine,” 400.
53 Baltacıoğlu, Demokrasi ve Sanat, 127. For an account of criticisms of modern art in the early republic, see Nilüfer Öndin, Cumhuriyet’in Kültür Politikası ve Sanat, 1923–1950 (İstanbul: İnsancıl Yayınları, 2003), 160–186.
55 Ibid., 2.
Admitting the inevitably social and collective nature of art, he stated that “[e]ach plastic work—regardless [...] of its content—is an expression of society.” 56

On the other hand, a number of other writings in AR warned against the dangers of extreme currents within modernism. A hesitant, cautious attitude was quite common among many intellectuals of all sorts. The artist Bedri Rahmi, for instance, warned that such recent currents as Dadaism, Futurism, and Surrealism carried the Cubist model to an extreme, destroying its sincerity and freshness. 57 Indeed, even such decidedly modernist artists of the D Group as Nurullah Berk were certain that their art carried within it the spirit of the nation. However, the modernist artists of the D Group overwhelmingly refused “engaged” or “state-directed” art, while nevertheless welcoming the financial support of the state. The group’s members, without exception, took part in state exhibitions, state competitions, and state-sponsored painting tours of Anatolia. 58

The D Group artists were frequently blamed for imitating works of Western modernist art, especially Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, and Georges Braque. But while acknowledging their indebtedness to French models, the group still claimed that each work of art reflected a particular society’s own concerns. Zeynep Yasa Yaman rightly draws attention to one famous work by one of the D Group’s more prominent members, Zeki Faik İzer’s 1933 painting İnkalap Yolunda (On the Road to Change). İzer’s work, which was clearly inspired by Eugène Delacroix’s famous 1830 painting La Liberté guidant le peuple (Liberty Leading the People), takes Delacroix’s painting into a new context: that of the Turkish nationalist revolution. Yaman argues that Zeki Faik has reinterpreted and almost recreated Delacroix’s painting, making it his own. While the parallels with the French Revolution are there, the specifics of the Turkish revolution and a wholly new sensibility make Zeki Faik’s work original. 59

The D Group had radical claims and intended to shake up Turkey’s art scene through its provocative artistic stances, especially between the years 1933 and 1936. One indication that aesthetic modernism in the plastic arts was now

56 Ibid.
59 Like Partha Mitter, Yaman draws attention to the fact that inspirations from non-Western primitivism were also commonplace among Western modernists. Yaman points out that, although Van Gogh was inspired by the Japanese painter Ando Hiroshige, his painting The Bridge, which is a virtual copy of a Hiroshige print, must be regarded as belonging to Dutch art; see Zeynep Yasa Yaman, “Türk Resminde Etkilenme ve Taklit Olgusu I,” Türkiye’de Sanat no. 14 (May–August 1994), 34.
officially acknowledged came in 1936, when the two artists invited to work as directors in the painting and sculpture departments of the Fine Arts Academy, Léopold Lévy and Rudolf Belling, publicly expressed their artistic indebtedness to Cézanne and Cubism. As the members of the D Group found themselves accepted by the regime and employed in the Fine Arts Academy between 1937 and 1940, they slowly became a mainstream artistic current. After the early 1940s, several group members turned towards primitive or native art and became involved in debates concerning Turkish folk and traditional arts in line with the spread of “anti-modernist” trends across Europe, while other members turned to more socially concerned art. By the early 1950s, the group’s high modernism had become an established, mainstream école in the plastic arts of Turkey. The so-called “derivative” stages of modern Turkish art had finally resulted in a mature, self-confident, and contemporary art.

Regardless of their modernist credentials, these artists were impelled to remain within the ideological limits of the nation-building project and to seek ways in which artistic taste and refinement could be spread to the wider masses. Given such aims, it can be argued that their art was modern and individualistic, but also carried inherent social and collective concerns. In time, the stress on high modernism gave way to an artistic pluralism and a growing focus on Anatolian folk aesthetics both among the group members and at the Fine Arts Academy.

Opposing “propaganda art” but acknowledging the social responsibilities of the artist, the D Group not only revolutionized Turkey’s plastic arts, but also responded to the inherent paradox of modernism. It was through their efforts that aesthetic modernism was accepted and domesticated. The following section will elaborate Nâzım Hikmet’s contribution to early republican modernist aesthetics.

The arrival of the leftist avant-garde: Nâzım Hikmet

Aesthetic modernism entered Turkey through the socialist modernism of a number of intellectuals, like the poet Nâzım Hikmet (1901–1963), the theater and movie director Muhsin Ertuğrul (1892–1979), and the novelist Sabahattin Ali (1907–1948). Among these names, perhaps the most significant was Nâzım Hikmet, whose entire career was shaped by the revolutionary modernism he encountered in Moscow in the 1920s. Nâzım became an international figure beginning in the 1930s and remained so until his death in Moscow in 1963.
making him perhaps the first figure in Turkish literature to be broadly acknowledged internationally before Orhan Pamuk was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006. Nâzım’s socialist modernism differed from the high bourgeois modernism of the D Group in that it was based on a deeply critical, anti-imperialist, and anti-bourgeois political stance. As such, his socialist modernism was deemed doubly dangerous by the official ideology, since it challenged not only aesthetic and literary conventions, but also the politics of nation-building in early republican Turkey.

Nâzım Hikmet’s poetry and plays were widely known among the leftist intelligentsia of Europe and the Eastern Bloc from the 1930s to the 1960s. He was one of the prominent figures of “leftist” internationalism and took up the mission of translating the revolutionary modernism of the arts to the vocabulary of the early republican period. Nâzım did praise republican modernity, but he also presented the inequalities, conflicts, and hierarchies inherent in the new regime. Arguably, he provided an entirely new vocabulary for the early republican intelligentsia, one which was deemed too dangerous by the regime. In the words of his friend Abidin Dino, a member of the D group, the early republican regime experienced a deep ideological dissonance because “Nâzım was in prison, while the Russian marshal Voroshilov was hosted in national day celebrations.”

Nâzım Hikmet’s leftist modernism was deeply inspired by the years he spent in Moscow and at the Communist University for the Toilers of the East (KUTV) from 1921 to 1924 and from 1925 to 1928, where he studied and practiced the revolutionary poetry and theater. He was exposed to the great names of the Soviet avant-garde, like the Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose influence Nâzım always acknowledged. Among the other figures in theater who shaped Nâzım Hikmet’s modernism were Konstantin Stanislavsky, Alexander Tairov, and Bertolt Brecht. Reciting verse with Mayakovsky at poetry readings and establishing the student theater atelier METLA under the guidance of Meyerhold and his assistant Nikolai Ekk, Nâzım was not simply an observer but took an active part in the revolutionary modernism of 1920s Moscow.

62 Abidin Dino, “D Grubu Üzerine,” 397. Kliment Voroshilov (1881–1969) was a Soviet marshal who had joined the October revolution and who advised the Ankara government during the Turkish War of Independence. He visited Turkey in 1933 to take part in the celebrations for the tenth anniversary of the republic.
He later confessed that “[t]he influence of Soviet theater on my poetry is stronger than the influence of Soviet poetry”:63

I really owe a lot to the Meyerhold Theater. I returned to Turkey in 1925 and established the first workers’ theaters in one of İstanbul’s industrial neighborhoods [...] I felt that Meyerhold presented new opportunities to reach and mobilize our audiences [...] We had to produce plays that invited people to struggle, and we did that [...] There is no doubt about the impact of Meyerhold on Turkey’s progressive theater.64

Meyerhold’s internationalist stance, which brought together Western and Eastern performing arts as well as a critique of colonialism, deeply attracted Nâzım:

Meyerhold adored the great traditions of folk theater, its rhythms, the rhythmic pluralism of Eastern theater, the surprising congruity with the principles of painting and music [...] How can I ignore these? Because here is [...] a deep internationalism [...] In the bourgeois world of reactionary racism, they find the influence of Eastern, Asian, and African cultures on Western culture harmful. The reason why Hitler’s advocates hated modern art and its great masters was because they had incorporated Asian peoples’ experiences.65

When Gogol’s play The Government Inspector was staged in İstanbul, inspired by Meyerhold’s avant-garde version, it was cancelled after only a few shows. Nâzım states that the play was found unacceptable by the authorities because everyone had understood that what was being criticized in the play was not Russia, but Turkey: “This is Gogol’s genius. He is both national and universal.”66 Nâzım himself also intended to write works that could be both national and universal. He attempted to create a Turkish poetry that would connect the grievances and joys of his country’s people to the concerns of the toiling, suffering masses of the world. It is for this very reason that he surpassed the nationalist paradigm in Turkish literature at a very early date. The need for a new poetic language and form imposed itself on him, since he wanted his poetry to address modern economic and political concerns.

Another major literary figure who had a great impact on Nâzım’s poetry was the futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. He has stated that, because he did not know

63 Nâzım Hikmet, Yazılar 1 (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2002), 326.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 310.
66 Ibid., 311.
Russian, he could not understand Mayakovsky’s poetry, but that nonetheless he was very much influenced by its moving sound, its stairway structure, and by the poet’s use of free verse.\textsuperscript{67} At times, when he was accused of being an imitator of Mayakovsky, Nâzım explained that he had been greatly influenced by the Russian poet but also came to differ from him as he matured:

In the beginning, as I did not know Russian […] I was imitating his verses climbing in the stairway form […] My poetry is similar to Mayakovsky’s in some aspects: we both have transcended the dualities between poetry and prose and the differences among various styles (lyrical, critical, etc.), and we both have introduced political language into poetry […] However, I use different forms. He is my teacher, but I write differently.\textsuperscript{68}

While confessing his indebtedness to Mayakovsky and Meyerhold, Nâzım demonstrates how “intellectual influence” should not be equated with “imitation.” Indeed, there is hardly any feeling of belatedness in Nâzım’s words: he simply needed “to forget traditional poetry,” and Russian Futurist poetry became the vehicle through which he could find a new, modern voice.\textsuperscript{69}

Perhaps the most striking feature of Nâzım’s modernist poetry is that it was explicitly political. His socialist worldview caused Nâzım to criticize not only world capitalism, but also the dilemmas to be found in his own country’s republican experiment. Nâzım clearly observed the “divisions inside […] modernity”,\textsuperscript{70} that is, the conflicts, inequalities, and hierarchies of Turkey’s early years of modernization. He thus created the first poetic

\begin{quote}
Gradually hoofbeats die away,
the riders are lost in the sunset.

Horsemam, horsemen, red riders,
horses wind winged
horses wind wing…
horses wind…
horses…

Life passed like the wind winged horsemen.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{67} Memet Fuat, Nâzım Hikmet (İstanbul: Adam=Yayınlam, 2000), 52.

\textsuperscript{68} Quoted in Mehmet Fuat, Nâzım Hikmet, 57. The famous verses of his 1928 poem “Weeping Willow” (Nazım Hikmet, Beyond the Walls: Selected Poems, trans. Ruth Christie, Richard McKane, and Talat Sait Halman, [London: Anvil Press Poetry and Yapı Kredi Yayınlan, 2002], 27) demonstrate the revolutionary structure and sound of his poetry:

Gradually hoofbeats die away,
the riders are lost in the sunset.

Horsemam, horsemen, red riders,
horses wind winged
horses wind wing…
horses wind…
horses…
horse…

Life passed like the wind winged horsemen.

\textsuperscript{69} Orhan Koçak, “Yahya Kemal’le Nâzım Hikmet Arasından Nâzım Hikmet,” in Kopuk Zincir: Modern Şiir Üzerine Denemeler (İstanbul: Metis, 2012), 18.

\textsuperscript{70} Marian Aguiar, “Nazım Hikmet’s Modernism of Development,” Journal of Modern Literature 30, no. 4 (Summer 2007), 115.
counterculture of the republican era. This radical poetry was the reason why he was never acknowledged by the official cultural establishment and had to spend his life in prison and exile:

...and then my people,
ready to embrace
with the wide-eyed joy of children
anything modern, beautiful and good –
my honest, hard-working, brave people,
half full, half hungry,
    half slaves...

(İstanbul House of Detention, 1939)\textsuperscript{71}

After his return to Turkey in 1928, Nâzım concentrated on his literary career in Zekeriya Sertel’s magazine \textit{Resimli Ay} (Illustrated Monthly) and wrote a poetry using free verse and everyday spoken (and even street) language. In the poem “The City Which Lost Its Voice,” Nâzım supported a one-day strike of taxi drivers in İstanbul. References to the city, to traffic, to crowds, and to the sounds of industry had become an integral part of his poetic world, but they were very new to the ears of Turkey’s literary public:

I live in a four-storey wooden house,
my room’s on the fourth floor.
Across from my window
is a twenty-storey reinforced concrete block of flats.
Twenty lifts work every moment
from roof to basement,
from basement to roof.
But I –
a man who wants to set an engine in his belly
and fix a couple of screws to his tail –
every evening
climb eighty steps of a wooden stairway.
[...]
I believed ...
machines would be ours
and that I would become a machine.

(To Become a Machine, 1929)\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{72} Beyond the Walls, 31.
Nâzım confessed that his Futurist tendencies softened on his return to Turkey, but he always insisted that the new age had to be written through a radically new poetry. In an article in *Resimli Ay* dated September 1930, he declared that literary writing had gone through a revolution and that the new literature should fight against and ultimately conquer traditional literature, which had become a bourgeois literature. Already in 1929 Nâzım and some friends had started a campaign against traditional poetry and against the more famous figures of the literary establishment. The campaign was called “Putları Yıkıyoruz” (Breaking the Idols), and it basically targeted such well-known figures of Turkish national literature as the poets Mehmet Emin (Yurdakul) and Abdülhak Hamit (Tarhan). In time, as figures close to the establishment like Hamdullah Suphi (Tanrıcı) and Yakup Kadri started to attack the campaign, they too were declared as idols to be destroyed. In response, Yakup Kadri, a central figure of the literary establishment, would write: “[I] think Nâzım Hikmet’s poems have no place in today’s Turkish society. Because, in our country, dense waves of human masses who can listen to the hellish sound of this orchestra have not developed yet, and are unlikely to develop in the near future.”

The city, machines, factories, poverty, and starvation were frequently seen and their sounds heard in the poetry Nâzım published in *Resimli Ay*. Usually, the poet depicted himself as also a part of this, wandering and feeling the city, touching its rapid transformation, its noise, its mechanization. In his poem “Regarding Art,” he clearly describes his poetry as inspired by “wings made of steel” and speaks of the “I-beams / of my suspension bridges,” saying that the language that speaks to him “are Beethoven sonatas played / on copper, iron, wood, bone, and catgut.”

It has been stated that—like the work of Charlie Chaplin, Sergei Eisenstein, and Pablo Picasso—Nâzım Hikmet’s work was a witness to the twentieth century’s wars, human condition, and tragedies. Indeed, Nâzım’s poetry


74 Mehmet Fatih Uslu has argued that the campaign led by Nâzım Hikmet was actually serving “a double polarization […] one between old and young men of letters, and the other […] between the oppositional and conformist ones.” Özgür Sevgi Göral rightly observed that the campaign’s harshness brings to mind the “idol-breaking” attitudes of the Russian Futurist avant-garde movement against the classic names of Russian literature; see Mehmet Fatih Uslu, “*Resimli Ay* Magazine (1929–1931): The Emergence of an Oppositional Focus Between Socialism and Avant-Gardism” (master’s thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2004), 106; Özgür Sevgi Göral, “Patlamaya Hazır Bir Şimdi: Putları Yıkıyoruz,” *Toplum ve Bilim* 94 (2002): 189–211.


76 Uslu, “*Resimli Ay* Magazine,” 108–110.

typically brings together the Anatolian peasant with “the fishermen of the
Pacific, the Spanish resistance, or the French partisans,” 78 or “the coffee-
colored Javanese whore” 79 with “the slant-eyed yellow Burmese cabin
boys.” 80 I argue here that, at a very early date, Nâzım’s leftist inter-
nationalism introduced into Turkish literature both a cosmopolitanism
and a critique of imperialism. The majority of Turkey’s intellectuals had to
wait until at least the 1960s and 1970s to develop such a comprehensive
anti-imperialist, internationalist discourse.

Nâzım’s famous poem Gioconda and Si-Ya-U tells the story of the woman in
Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting. The poem begins in the Louvre Museum
in Paris and ends up in Shanghai in China, where La Gioconda finally meets
her Chinese love and, following his assassination, becomes a revolutionary
herself. The poem exemplifies Nâzım’s capacity to move across vast geo-
graphies, cultures, and languages—Florence, Paris, the Arabian Sea, the Indian
Ocean, Mumbai, Indochina, Shanghai—and attests to his leftist inter-
nationalism. When La Gioconda escapes from the Louvre to go to China,
Nâzım is alluding to the imperialist history that lies beneath the political and
cultural domination of Western art.

In China, da Vinci’s work becomes a painting in a bamboo frame. La
Gioconda has lost her smile, and now her eyes are burning with revolutionary
fervor. She is ultimately sentenced to death and burned by the French military
court because of her revolutionary crimes. The poem is an amazing reflection of
Nâzım’s theory of art, as he has the painting move to Shanghai, physically
giving it a new meaning in a new setting and thus deconstructing the Euro-
centrism of Western art. In this manner, a classic masterpiece of art becomes a
metaphor of the anti-imperialist struggle as well. 81

Nâzım Hikmet wrote in a modernist sensibility not only during the
so-called “short-lived golden age of the Turkish avant-garde” 82 in Resimli Ay,
but also later, as he turned to his country’s human landscapes. Several
commentators have considered Nâzım’s epic poem Memleketimden İnsan
Manzaları (Human Landscapes from My Country) to be a work of

78 Göksel Aymaz, Nazım Hikmet ve Memleket: Kalabalığın İçinde Kalabalıkla Beraber (İstanbul: Yasak
Meyve, 2013), especially 318–320. Human Landscapes was written between 1939 and 1961 as a kind
of encyclopedia recording the lives of ordinary Turkish people, workers, peasants, and housewives.
79 Poems of Nazım Hikmet, 22.
80 Ibid., 23.
81 Marian Aguiar rightly observed that Nâzım Hikmet inherited a number of literary techniques from
both Western (i.e., British modernist) and Eastern (i.e., Russian Futurist) modernists. Nâzım’s
modernism carried within it the seeds of a critique of modernity since, for Aguiar, it was an aesthetic
and cultural response to modernization; see Aguiar, “Nazım Hikmet’s Modernism of Development,”
109–11.
82 Göksu and Timms, Romantic Communist, 85.
“classic modernism.” Aguiar found in Nâzım Hikmet the prototypical “modernist writer in a developing country,” one who could see the “divisions,” “barriers,” and “internal divisions” within that modernity. In this long poem, the “railway” becomes a metaphor of this modernity, permitting Nâzım to contemplate such issues as imperialism, war, and the interior worlds of ordinary people. In a letter to his friend Kemal Tahir, Nâzım clearly stated what he hoped this epic would contain: “I want the reader to pass through this apocalypse swarming with people [...] With the help of Turkey’s people from various classes, I want the reader to meet the social realities of Turkey at a certain historical period [...] I want to convey the world’s situation around Turkey at that time.”

Through his criticisms of the republican experience of modernity, Nâzım Hikmet’s works were in fact connecting the early republican model to worldwide developments in capitalism, industrialism, and imperialist wars. Nâzım’s leftist or “optimistic” modernism elaborated upon the fragmentation and pain introduced through the disruptive changes brought on in the twentieth century, but still carried the hope for a better world. Nâzım’s modernism, in this sense, presents a sharp contrast to that Baudelairean modernism characterized by pessimism, fear, and vanity, with its bohemian escapes into aesthetic beauty or nostalgia for the past. Instead of such modernist nausea, boredom, and flânerie, Nâzım lived in a world of optimistic struggle.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have tried to show the different ways in which aesthetic modernism was adopted in Turkey in the late 1920s and the 1930s, translating it into a “healthy,” optimistic cultural movement.

The post-World War I environment and the emergence of the new republic plunged Turkey’s intellectuals into a world where they encountered aesthetic Modernism. They perceived that aesthetic modernism carried the potential to destroy conventions and received traditions and replace them with the freedom, mobility, and productivity introduced by the use of reason. On the other hand, they also realized that modernism, if taken too far, could easily turn into a destructive, anti-bourgeois movement. Since the republican elite were seeking an optimistic and refreshing art and literature that would assist them in their

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83 See, e.g., Aymaz, Nazım Hikmet ve Memleket; and Aguiar, “Nazım Hikmet’s Modernism of Development.”
85 Nâzım Hikmet, Kemal Tahir’i Mapusaneden Mektuplar (İstanbul: AD Yayıncılık, 1996), 121. The letter in question is dated March 20, 1942.
86 Aymaz, Nazım Hikmet ve Memleket, 262–263.
nation-building efforts, they could not afford the destructive effects of a modernist avant-garde. The modern state of mind, emphasizing both the freedom and the homelessness of the individual, presented dangers for Turkey’s nation-builders, who championed a bourgeois modernization.

Against this background, a range of opinions about modernist currents existed among the intelligentsia—there was both acceptance and reluctance. The official view was not monolithic, either, as several bureaucrats expressed their suspicion of the new trends while others admitted that contemporary arts around the world were moving in the direction of modernism. Those artists and authors who were more open than others to global trends advocated modernism.

The paper focused on the plastic arts of the D Group and the poetry of Nâzım Hikmet, discussing how, in both cases, the paradox of modernism in early republican Turkey was resolved in favor of a “positive” modernism. The D Group stood at the crossroads of a high bourgeois modernism and a nation-building project. Beginning as a radical arts group, they ended up as an influential modernist école of the plastic arts. Nâzım Hikmet, on the other hand, merged the socialist avant-garde with a critique of bourgeois modernization. His modernism differed from that of the D Group in its revolutionary, anti-bourgeois potential. Among all the modernist efforts of the early republic, Nâzım’s anti-bourgeois revolt appears to have mounted the most serious challenge to the early republican regime.

Finally, the paper has argued that the non-Western modernist works of the early republic should be taken as originals in their own right. Regardless of their imitative and derivative manner, always riddled with tension and with a “lack,” these works reflect the historical processes through which they came to be produced. One should not seek the classic Western history of art behind them, but rather the beleaguered political and cultural history of their own non-Western settings.

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