

WOMEN ARTISTS IN THE MURAL PAINTING ART OF TÜRKİYE

TÜRKİYE'DEKİ DUVAR RESMİ SANATINDA KADIN SANATÇILAR

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Abstract

Mural paintings are an important art form that has developed with the unique aesthetic values of each period. Although there are numerous academic studies on this field, publications on wall paintings from the Republican era are relatively scarce. Moreover, existing publications generally focus on male artists. This article aims to highlight the mural painting productions of female artists in Turkey. In this context, the works of Semiha Sumer, Gülsün Karamustafa, Figen Aydıntaşbaş, Nevhiz Tanyeli, Zehra Aral, and Dilek Ulusoy will be examined. The identified artists will be discussed chronologically, and their works will be evaluated. Furthermore, the impact of the political and social events of the period on wall paintings will be analyzed through concrete examples.

Öz

Duvar resimleri, her dönemin kendine özgü estetik değerleri doğrultusunda gelişmiş önemli bir sanat dalıdır. Bu alanda birçok akademik çalışma yapılmış olmasına rağmen Cumhuriyet dönemi duvar resimleri üzerine yapılan yayınlar oldukça sınırlıdır. Mevcut yayınlar ise genellikle erkek sanatçılara odaklanmaktadır. Bu makale, Türkiye'deki kadın sanatçıların duvar resmi üretimlerini gün yüzüne çıkarmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu çerçevede, Semiha Sumer, Gülsün Karamustafa, Figen Aydıntaşbaş, Nevhiz Tanyeli, Zehra Aral ve Dilek Ulusoy'un eserlerine odaklanılacaktır. Belirlenen sanatçılar, kronolojik bir sıralama ile ele alınarak eserleri analiz edilecektir. Ayrıca, dönemin siyasi ve sosyal olaylarının duvar resimleri üzerindeki etkileri somut örnekler üzerinden incelenecektir.

Key Words: Republican era mural painting, Republican era painting art, mural painting, female artists.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cumhuriyet dönemi duvar resmi, Cumhuriyet dönemi resim sanatı, duvar resmi, kadın sanatçılar.

Why is it that female mural painting artists in Türkiye remain largely unrecognized? Is this due to the predominance of commissions awarded to male artists, thereby limiting the opportunities for women to contribute to mural art? Or does this issue stem from the historiography of art, which has, over time, evolved into a male-dominated narrative?

This article seeks to critically examine the role of women artists in the mural art of Türkiye by identifying their contributions and analyzing their works to elucidate the extent of female artists' participation and influence within this field. While numerous studies have been conducted on murals in Türkiye, these investigations have traditionally centered on male artists or anonymous works. For the first time, this study will systematically assess murals produced by female artists, offering a novel perspective on their collective impact and presence in Turkish mural art.

The origins of women's art education in Türkiye can be traced to the late Ottoman period. During this time, affluent families often arranged for private tutors to educate their daughters at home, a practice referred to as "mansion education." This form of instruction included lessons in calligraphy, violin, piano, embroidery, and painting. Beyond private tutoring, certain female artists also received formal training in the studios of renowned painters in Istanbul. Notable early Turkish female painters include Müfide Kadri, Celile Hanım, and Mihri Hanım. Mihri Hanım, in particular, occupies a distinguished position in art history for her foundational role in establishing the İnas Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi (School of Fine Arts for Women), an institution pivotal to the Ottoman art World (Paşalıoğlu, 1996, p. 33-35; Alp, 1999, p. 186-194; Çakır, 2013, p. 303).

Founded in 1914 under the leadership of Mihri Hanım, the "İnas Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi" (School of Fine Arts for Women) represents the first official institution dedicated to providing women with formal art education in the Ottoman Empire. Beyond its pioneering role, the school is highly significant for its cultivation of influential female artists who would go on to shape the early art landscape in Türkiye, including figures such as Belkis Mustafa, Güzin Duran, Nazlı Ecevit, and Hale Asaf. With the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the institution transitioned to a coeducational model, marking a transformative shift with enduring impacts on the country's artistic and cultural development (Paşalıoğlu, 1996, p. 48-49; Alp, 1999, p. 194; Seyran, 2005, p. 28).

The process by which women gained access to art education, initially through private instruction in domestic settings and later through formal educational institutions, contributed significantly to broadening their artistic practices.

Within the realm of visual arts, it is well-documented that female artists in the late Ottoman and early Republican periods predominantly worked with portable mediums such as canvas and paper, rather than engaging in mural painting. It is only from the 1940s onwards that the production of murals by female artists in public spaces can be more clearly identified and documented.

Women artists in Türkiye have produced works in a variety of media within public spaces, with ceramic and mosaic panels emerging as the most prominent artistic forms (Can, 2018, p. 46-48). While there is a significant body of research and documentation regarding women's contributions to ceramics and mosaics, their work in mural painting has received limited scholarly attention. Indeed, many of the artists selected as case studies in this article are key figures in the history of Turkish art. However, despite the detailed exploration of their other artistic productions, their mural works have either been completely overlooked or superficially acknowledged. This phenomenon has led to the systematic disregard of the mural contributions made by female artists in Türkiye.

Through archival research, field studies, and oral history investigations, evidence suggests that Semiha Sumer is among the earliest female artists to have produced works in the field of mural painting. Despite her significant contributions, no comprehensive academic study has been conducted on the artist thus far. This article represents the first systematic study of her life and oeuvre within an academic framework.

Semiha Sumer was born in Istanbul in 1919 and was admitted to the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts in 1934. During her time at the academy, she attended various workshops under the guidance of prominent instructors, receiving education in design and watercolor from Edip Hakkı Köseoğlu, in decoration and poster design from Philipp Ginther, and in oil painting from Feyhaman Duran. Sumer's successful academic trajectory culminated in her introduction to mural painting in 1940, following her marriage to Ayetullah Sumer.¹

Ayetullah Sumer founded the fresco workshop at the State Academy of Fine Arts in 1933 and is considered one of Türkiye's significant mural artists. Through her marriage, Semiha Sumer was introduced to mural painting, a medium in which she had limited opportunities for practical experience during her academic training. Archival documents from the family collection indicate that the artist became actively involved in mural projects from the mid-1940s onwards (Fresk Atölyesi, 1934, p.5; Sumer, 1977; Karaaslan, 2024, p. 19, 42).

¹ The information about Semiha Sumer's life was obtained through interviews conducted at different times starting from 2021 with the artist's daughter, Nazan Sumer Akpınar, and her grandson, Hasan Aslan Akpınar.

Semiha Sumer's engagement with mural production initially began through her role as an assistant to her husband, Ayetullah Sumer. Over time, the couple collaborated on numerous mural projects. Among the earliest known buildings where the artist directly contributed to mural work is the Faculty of Medicine at Hacettepe University. In 1954, she created two murals in collaboration with Ayetullah Sumer. The mural featuring the artist's portrait is believed to have been primarily executed by her. The work, which depicted children playing, has unfortunately not survived to the present day (Fig. 1) (Karaaslan, 2024, p. 184-185).



Figure 1. *Semiha Sumer While Creating a Mural at Hacettepe University (1954).
Photo: Sumer Family Archive. Courtesy of Sumer Family.*

One notable building that features murals signed by the artist, created in collaboration with her husband Ayetullah Sumer, is the General Directorate Building of the Turkish Sugar Factories in Ankara (Fig. 2). This building houses a total of four murals, depicting the sugar production process, specifically the journey from the fields to the factory. A key feature highlighting the significance of these murals is the presence of sketch studies, which are currently part of the family collection. In three of these sketches, Semiha Sumer's signature is clearly visible, indicating her involvement not only in the production phase but also in the design process. The murals exhibit a clear influence of Ayetullah Sumer's stylistic approach, suggesting that Semiha Sumer adopted his artistic style throughout the creation of these Works (Türkiye Şeker Fabrikaları A. Ş. Faturası, 1957; Türkiye Şeker Fabrikaları A. Ş. Vergi Ödemesi, 1957; Karaaslan, 2024, p. 186-189).



Figure 2. *Semiha Sumer While Creating a Mural at General Direction Building of the Turkish Sugar Factories in Ankara (1957)*

Photo: Sumer Family Archive. Courtesy of Sumer Family.

Based on documents from the family archive and oral history interviews conducted with the artist's daughter, Nazan Sumer Akpınar, it has become clear that Semiha Sumer's mural works extend beyond those previously mentioned. In collaboration with her husband, Ayetullah Sumer, she contributed to mural projects for various branches of Yapı Kredi Bank, Turkish Philips Company, Anadolu Sigorta, and Petrol Ofisi. Some of these works were executed on dry plaster, while others were applied to portable materials such as wood (Karaaslan, 2024, p. 213).

A key point to note is the omission of Semiha Sumer's contributions to mural painting in art historical writings, with these works being solely attributed to her husband, Ayetullah Sumer. However, both archival documents and the signatures present on the surviving murals demonstrate Semiha Sumer's equally significant role in these artworks. While Ayetullah Sumer is undeniably one of the most prominent figures in Turkish painting, having made substantial contributions to mural art and supported his wife in this domain, his greater recognition within the Turkish art scene has led to Semiha Sumer's contributions being overshadowed. The male-dominated narrative in art history has consequently overlooked her contributions to the collaborative murals she produced with her husband.

Although mural works by Gencay Kasapçı have not been located, archival research has identified her as a significant figure. In 1959, she was awarded a scholarship by the Turkish Embassy in Italy, which enabled her to study in Italy. A prominent representative of the Zero movement, Kasapçı is best known in Türkiye for her ceramic panels in public spaces. However, it is also documented that she received training in fresco techniques during her time in Italy (Can, 2018, p. 190-191; Şerifoğlu, 2019; Karaaslan b, 2024, p. 35-36).

The diary found in the Kasapçı Family Archive contains valuable information about both the European art scene and the practice of mural painting. The document notes that Kasapçı created a mural in a clinic in Italy, indicating that she began working in the field of mural painting in the late 1950s and early 1960s.² At present, no murals by the artist have been identified in Türkiye. Nevertheless, this brief note in the family archive is significant, as it provides evidence of the artist's involvement in mural painting.

Festivals and exhibitions have played a crucial role in the development of mural art in Türkiye. Within the context of such events, artists aimed to produce murals with the goal of bringing art closer to the public. In 1976, as part of the 13th Antalya International Film and Art Festival, a Mural and Sculpture Symposium was organized. During this event, members of the Visual Artists Association created several murals across various locations in the city. Furthermore, the participation of artists from Germany, Denmark, Iraq, Sweden, Egypt, and Pakistan lent the event an international dimension (Demirkol , 1976a, p. 8; Demirkol, 1976b, p. 10; Demirkol, 1976c, p. 9). Among the muralists involved were Gülsün Karamustafa, Figen Aydıntaşbaş, Seniye Fenmen, Nevhiz Tanyeli, and Zehra Aral. Orhan Taylan highlighted that the works created for the 13th Antalya International Film and Art Festival were designed with a “content that is oriented towards the public” (Taylan, 1976, p. 11).

Among the artists who produced murals during the festival, Gülsün Karamustafa stands out as a prominent figure. Born in Ankara in 1946, she graduated from the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts in 1969, where she received painting instruction in the studio of Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu. Karamustafa has participated in numerous national and international exhibitions and has held academic positions at various universities. She is an artist known for experimenting with a range of techniques, one of which is mural painting (Aldoğan, 2003, p. 95). In 1976, as part of the festival, she created a mural at the Antalya Regional Museum.³ Although the mural no longer exists, it is documented that in this

² This information was obtained during an interview with Gencay Kasapçı's daughter, Yasemin Kasapçı Devrimci, on June 20, 2024.

³ The building known as the Antalya Regional Museum in the 1970s is currently used as the Antalya Archaeological Museum.

work, the artist established a dialogue between architecture and painting to convey the historical, geographical, and ethnographic features of Antalya to the viewer. It can be argued that the female and child figures in the foreground represent the local population through their attire, the sculptures in the middle plane reflect the city's archaeological heritage, and the mountainous imagery in the background evokes the city's geographical context (Fig. 3-4) (Anonymous, 1984, p. 24).



Figure 3. *Gülsün Karamustafa While Creating a Mural at Antalya (1976)*
Photo: Salt Research Archive. Public Domain.



Figure 4. *The Mural Created by Gülsün Karamustafa (1976)*
Photo: Salt Research Archive. Public Domain.

Another artist who contributed a mural to the Antalya Regional Museum during the same period was Figen Aydıntaşbaş. Born in Istanbul in 1946, Aydıntaşbaş graduated from the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts in 1970, where she studied under Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu. Based on photographs obtained

through archival research, her mural features sequentially arranged, figurative representations of figures holding nails and hammers. These figures collectively form an Ionic column. In front of the column, similar figures are depicted on a larger scale. Much like Gülsün Karamustafa's mural, Aydıntaşbaş's work establishes a dialogue between painting and architecture. The composition's allusions to ancient periods, as well as its reference to museum collections and the city's historical context, reinforce the thematic connection to Antalya's cultural and historical heritage (Fig. 5-6) (Figen Aydıntaşbaş Sergisi, 1983; Figen Aydıntaşbaş Resim Sergisi 1977; Aldoğan, 2003, p. 107).



Figure 5. Figen Aydıntaşbaş While Creating a Mural at Antalya (1976)
Photo: Salt Research Archive. Public Domain.



Figure 6. The Mural Created by Figen Aydıntaşbaş (1976)
Photo: Salt Research Archive. Public Domain.

One of the artists who produced a mural during the festival in Antalya was Seniye Fenmen. Born in 1918, Fenmen graduated from the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts. Known primarily for her ceramic works, Fenmen also made significant contributions to mural art. Her ceramic panels, particularly those located at the Anafartalar Bazaar in Ankara, are among her most notable Works (Can, 2018, p. 94-101). While Fenmen predominantly focused on creating ceramic panels for public spaces, she also ventured into mural painting, with her first mural being the one executed in Antalya. This work, applied to the transformer on Güllük Street, was unfortunately subjected to a vandalistic attack shortly after its completion.

Another artist whose mural was subjected to vandalism during the same festival is Nevhiz Tanyeli. Born in Edirne in 1941, Tanyeli graduated from the State Academy of Fine Arts in 1965. She has participated in numerous national and international exhibitions and received instruction from influential figures in Turkish painting, including Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Neşet Günel, and Cemal Tollu (Aldoğan, 2003, p. 53; Ergüven, 2017, p. 352; Dastarlı, 2018, p. 102-103).

Through archival research, it has been established that the artist executed a mural on the Anıtbirlik Transformer in Antalya, as evidenced by a photograph. The inscription on the reverse of the photograph indicates that the title of the work is “Yürüyüş” (“March”) and that it was subjected to an act of vandalism. In this mural, Tanyeli employed a figurative style of representation (Fig. 7).⁴



Figure 7. *The Mural Created by Nevhiz Tanyeli (1976)*

Photo: Salt Research Archive. Public Domain.

⁴ “Nevhiz Tanyeli, Yürüyüş,” Salt Research, erişim 29.10.2024, <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/206916>

Another prominent female artist who created a mural during the 1976 festival in Antalya is Zehra Aral. Born in Ordu in 1945, Aral graduated from the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts in 1968. Throughout her career, she conducted research and produced artworks in various countries, and her mural in Antalya is of considerable significance. The mural was executed on the Pazar Pazarı Transformer and, although untitled, it depicts fishermen, emphasizing Antalya's identity as a coastal city. In this regard, the mural exemplifies the relationship between the artwork and the urban context. Similar to many other works at the festival, Aral's mural was subjected to an act of vandalism (Fig. 8) (Aldoğan 2003, p. 53-54).⁵



Figure 8. Zehra Aral While Creating a Mural at Antalya (1976)

Photo: Salt Research Archive. Public Domain.

One of the festivals in Türkiye aimed at mural production, which was also directly influenced by the political events of the period, was the 1980 Kuşadası Culture and Art Festival. This event, in which the Association of Visual Artists participated, sought to produce a variety of artistic works. Within this framework, one of the artists designated to create a mural was Dilek Ulusoy. Based on an archival sketch, it can be inferred that the artist intended to create a mural featuring interconnected children (Fig. 9).⁶

The year 1980 marked one of the most turbulent periods in Turkish political history. Political strife and the subsequent military coup profoundly impacted the country. This political climate undoubtedly had an adverse effect on the creative output of artists. Within the context of the Kuşadası Culture and Art Festival, the mural project, including the one Dilek Ulusoy had begun to

⁵ "Zehra Aral," Zehra Aral, erişim 29.10.2024, <https://zehraaral.com/biyografi/>

⁶ "Dilek Ulusoy İsimsiz," Salt Research, erişim 29.10.2024, <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/206828>

prepare, was banned by the governing authorities. This prohibition was met with protest by the festival's participating artists, who displayed a banner on the unfinished mural that read, "*They fear murals. No to the reactionary laws banning murals,*" as an act of defiance against the ban (Fig. 10).



Figure 9. Dilek Ulusoy While Creating a Mural at Kuşadası (1980)
Photo: Salt Research Archive. Public Domain.



Figure 10. While the Banner Was Being Hung on the Mural (1980)
Photo: Salt Research Archive. Public Domain.

EVALUATION – CONCLUSION

This article examines female artists who contributed to the development of mural painting in Türkiye between 1940 and 1980. The eight artists included in the study were identified through comprehensive archival research and

field investigations. As previously noted, there is a significant gap in scholarship specifically addressing the mural practices of female artists. This absence is primarily due to the male-dominated nature of mural painting in Türkiye, compounded by the patriarchal framework that characterizes art historical discourse. In reviewing examples, it is evident that many prominent male artists, such as Ayetullah Sumer, Naci Kalmukoğlu, Cemal Tollu, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, and Turgut Zaim, are frequently discussed alongside their respective works. The prevalence of these artists' commissions from institutional bodies, along with the prominence of their works in contemporary press and art historical writings, has contributed to the consolidation of mural painting as a predominantly male-dominated artistic domain in Türkiye. Conversely, the mural works produced by female artists during this period were largely realized either in collaboration with their husbands or through collective efforts. The artists examined in this study corroborate this narrative.

Based on our research, Semiha Sumer emerges as the earliest identified female artist engaged in mural production. As previously noted, Sumer's foray into mural art commenced following her marriage to Ayetullah Sumer. Ayetullah Sumer, a highly regarded figure within both state and private institutions, known for his extensive commission-based work, featured Semiha Sumer prominently in his mural productions. Initially assisting her husband, Semiha Sumer gradually became directly involved in the creation of mural works, as evidenced by both extant examples and archival records. Despite the availability of such documentation, Semiha Sumer's omission from the canon of art history, alongside the greater visibility afforded to her husband Ayetullah Sumer, underscores the patriarchal underpinnings of the Turkish art scene and its historiographic traditions.

Collective initiatives have provided a significant opportunity for female artists to engage in mural art production. Particularly noteworthy are the various cultural and artistic festivals held in Türkiye, which have played a pivotal role in fostering these artistic endeavors. As previously mentioned, during the 13th Antalya International Film and Art Festival in 1976, artists such as Gülsün Karamustafa, Figen Aydıntaşbaş, Seniye Fenmen, Nevhiz Tanyeli, and Zehra Aral produced mural works. Similarly, in the 1980 Kuşadası Culture and Art Festival, Dilek Ulusoy also participated in mural production. These events reflect the integral role of such festivals in providing a space for women artists to contribute to the field of muralism, despite the broader challenges they faced within the male-dominated art scene.

Festivals and cultural events, while serving as crucial platforms for artistic production, are also subject to the direct influence of the political context

in which they occur. The political climate of the 1970s and 1980s in Türkiye, marked by increasing tensions and instability, significantly impacted the artistic endeavors within these festivals. Notably, in 1976, the mural works of Seniye Fenmen, Nevhiz Tanyeli, and Zehra Aral were subjected to vandalism, as evidenced by photographs showing the artworks being defaced with paint. In response to these incidents, the Visual Artists' Association organized a collective exhibition that documented both the production process of the murals and the subsequent attacks they faced (Sanata Saldırı Kınanıyor, 1976, p.6). Similarly, during the 1980 Kuşadası Culture and Art Festival, Dilek Ulusoy's mural project was obstructed by local authorities before its completion, reflecting the political suppression that characterized this period.

The production of mural works by female artists, along with their chronological development, serves as a lens through which the internal dynamics and socio-cultural context of the period can be examined. In the early years of the Republic, the majority of artists operated within their private studios, with limited engagement in public art projects. This can largely be attributed to the patriarchal structure of the art world and the artist-patron relationship. A pivotal factor in enabling Semiha Sumer to create murals and secure commissions from state and private institutions from the 1940s onward was her collaboration with her husband, Ayetullah Sumer. This familial approach to artistic production provided Semiha Sumer with a supportive framework that allowed her to navigate and operate within the predominantly male-dominated art world of the time.⁷

It can be posited that the comfort or sense of security provided by a supportive environment directly influenced the creative output of female artists. For instance, despite Gencay Kasapçı having received mural training in Italy in the late 1950s and creating murals there, no such works have been identified in Türkiye to date. However, her ceramic panels and sculptures are present in various cities across the country. Similarly, numerous other female artists, including Füreyâ Koral, Eren Eyüboğlu, Seniye Fenmen, Jale Yılmabaşar, and others, have contributed to public spaces with their ceramic and mosaic works. This situation presents a paradox: although the works of female artists have found a place in public or architectural spaces, they are generally produced in the privacy of the artists' studios. One possible explanation for the greater prevalence of women's ceramic and mosaic works, as opposed to murals, in public spaces may lie in this discrepancy in the production context (Yılmabaşar, 1982; Sönmez, 1997, p. 6-7; Can, 2018, p. 38-39, 45, 47-48; Smith, 2022, p. 126-127).

⁷ In the interview with Nazan Sumer Akpınar, it was learned that the artist occasionally assisted her parents, the couple Semiha and Ayetullah Sumer, in their wall paintings and worked during the production process of the murals.

Female artists who contributed to mural art in festivals and cultural events in Türkiye have done so within a collective framework, characterized by a shared artistic consciousness. The works of artists such as Gülsün Karamustafa, Figen Aydıntaşbaş, Seniye Fenmen, Nevhiz Tanyeli, Zehra Aral, and Dilek Ulusoy, as previously mentioned, not only serve as important examples of collective artistic movements in Türkiye but also stand out for their significant interventions in public spaces through muralism.

In conclusion, the mural art scene in Türkiye presents a significant issue regarding the representation of female artists. While there are numerous women artists active in this field today, the historical background reveals a complex and challenging process. The patriarchal nature of both the art environment and art historical writing has had a direct impact on the recognition and production of female artists. This study has examined the works of eight artists; however, it is evident that many more female painters and their contributions to mural art remain underrepresented in the historical record. Further scholarly inquiry into this subject is essential for advancing both feminist studies and the field of art history.

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FIGURES REFERENCES

Fig. 1. Semiha Sumer While Creating a Mural at Hacettepe University (1954).

Photo: Sumer Family Archive. Courtesy of Sumer Family.

Fig. 2. Semiha Sumer While Creating a Mural at General Direction Building of the Turkish Sugar Factories in Ankara (1957)

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Fig. 3. Gülsün Karamustafa While Creating a Mural at Antalya (1976)

Photo: Salt Research Archive. Public Domain.

Fig. 4. The Mural Created by Gülsün Karamustafa (1976)

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Fig. 5. Figen Aydıntaşbaş While Creating a Mural at Antalya (1976)

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Fig. 6. The Mural Created by Figen Aydıntaşbaş (1976)

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Fig. 7. The Mural Created by Nevhiz Tanyeli (1976)

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