



## ORAL ART HISTORY OF ART THROUGH TRADITIONAL ARTISTS IN KONYA

### KONYA'DA GELENEKSEL SANATLARÇILAR İLE SÖZLÜ SANAT TARİHİ

**Doç. Dr. Melek GÖKAY**

Selcuk University, Education Faculty, Fine Art Department, Konya-Turkey

[melegokay@yahoo.com](mailto:melegokay@yahoo.com)

#### Öz

Bu çalışma içeriğinde Konya'da lise seviyesindeki öğrencilerin yerel iki zanaatkarla yaptıkları görüşme ele alınmıştır. Sanat eğitiminde sözlü sanat tarihini (görüşme tekniği) ele alan bu çalışmada öğrenciler sanatçıları çalıştıkları atölyelerde (işyerlerinde) ziyaret ederek zanaatkarların kendileri ve ortaya koydukları ürünleri hakkında sorular sormuşlardır. Geleneksel sanatçılar olarak seçilen Keçe ustası Mehmet Girgiç ve Kündekari ustası Mevlüt Çiller öğrencilere verdikleri cevaplarda samimi olmuşlar ve detaylı bilgiler vermişlerdir. Öğrencilerin atölyeleri kokusuyla, tozuyla hissetmeleri ve ürünlerin nasıl ortaya konulduğunu bu işi yapan sanatçıdan öğrenmeleri onların bu görüşmeyi unutmamalarını sağlayacaktır. Öğrencilerin yaşadıkları yörede bulunan kültür ürünlerini fark etmeleri ve sanatçıların onlarla konuşmaları geçmişlerinden bahsetmeleri, öğrenciler üzerinde etkili olmuştur. Bu görüşmeden birkaç hafta sonra görüşmeye katılan öğrenciler üzerinde yapılan anket çalışmasında öğrencilerin görüşmeyi ve gördükleri yerel sanat dalını hatırlamaya devam ettikleri gözlenmiştir. Böylece ezbersiz öğretim konusunda uygulanan yöntemlerden olan görüşme tekniğinin sanat eğitiminde kullanılabileceği görülmüştür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sanat Eğitimi, Görüşme Tekniği, Sanat Tarihi, Geleneksel Sanatlar.

#### Abstarct

In this project high school students in Konya facilitate oral history interview techniques to learn more about two local traditional artists lived in Konya. The work was oral art history study with students who visited the local artists at their studios. The students had asked about their arts and their life to learn more detail. Local artists visited were Mehmet Girgiç, one of the last traditional feltmaker in Konya and Mevlüt Çiller, famous kundekari, woodcarving, artist in Turkey. These two artists answered the students' questions comprehensively and sincerely. The students saw the artists personally and spoke with them; they smelled the artists' studio environments. They observed the artists' products and they touched the art works. This study provided the students that they never forget these experiences in their lifetime. The effects of the oral art history experiences on the students were prevailing, students seemed that they uncover a new dimension in their cultural background. A few weeks after the interview, a survey was conducted to ascertain if the students could remember the aims and details of the interviews. It was observed that, students remembered most of the questions they asked and they described what had happened during the interviews. This results presents us that oral history which is one of the effective educational methods in effective learning could be used in art education as well.

**Key Words:** Art Education, oral art history , Art History, Traditional Arts.

## INTRODUCTION

In this project high school students used oral history interview techniques to learn about two local traditional artists of Konya, Turkey. After organizing predated interviews, the students were taken to their studios. The students asked whatever they wondered to the artists during the interviews. So that they could learn more details about artists lives, their work places and especially their art works. Three weeks after from interviews and art studio visits, I conducted a survey to ascertain if they could remember the aims and details of project. Since, artistic and cultural worth of these traditional arts were reevaluated with the selected artists' life-stories during the interviews, I observed that students remembered most of the questions they asked and they described what had happened during the interviews. Students expressed their positive feelings about the interviews and they mentioned their attitude towards local art and artists were increased.

Konya is one of the populated cities of Turkey. It is located in the middle of central Anatolia, 170 miles south of the capital, Ankara. Due to its agricultural capacity, Konya is also the main grain production center of Turkey. The cultural history of Konya and its environment have influenced the central Anatolia since the Prehistoric Age. The earliest remains at Catalhoyuk-Konya dating back to the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Prehistoric village of Catalhoyuk, 50 miles south of the Konya, was one of the oldest known inhabited area in the world (Balter,1998). Konya was governed by Hittite, Phrygians, Lydians, Persians, Iskenderun and Bergama states. Then, Roman, Byzantine, Selcuk and Ottoman empires governed the city. Since 1923 Konya has been one of the fifth important cities of Turkey in cultural and economic means.

There are now 45 high schools in Konya city. I selected one of them for a project involving oral history interview techniques. The name of the high school was Fine-Art High School. After explaining the purpose of the project study to the school administration and students, they decided to take part. Initially, the students did not want to participate, because they thought it might involve many monotonous meetings and surveys. They became interested however when they learned that the project concerned local artists of Konya, and included interviews with them in their studios. Truesdell's (2002) introduction to oral history interview techniques and the description of the Pine Hill oral history project (2002) guided the project. As in Stokrocki's work (2001), students were informed that volunteering for the project would involve answering pre-visit survey questions about their general art knowledge and art views.

After explaining the project procedures, four students (two males and two females) volunteered for the interview with felt-maker and another four female students volunteered for the interview with woodcarver. The total number of students in this Grade 9 class, was 10, all 16 years old. The survey questions asked of the students were extracted from those suggested by Stokrocki (2001). They were as follows; What is art? Who is an artist? Where do we find art? Which art forms and types do you like most / dislike? Are you currently involved with any kind of art activities outside of school? Does anyone in your family participate in art activities? Who is your favorite artist? About what art form do you most want to learn? Do you know what feltmaking and woodcarving are, and do you know anyone involved with these practices?

The students' responses to the survey were then reviewed in terms of their beliefs about art and art works. Since the selected high school specialized in fine art, these students have more art context in their curriculum. They have opportunities to produce their own art work (drawings, oil and water color paintings etc.) in studio sessions. They are most interested in painting and drawing. Almost all of them have knowledge of famous world artists of the Classic and Modern eras, especially, painters. However, the survey indicated that they had limited information about felt-making and woodcarving. Moreover, They had almost no knowledge of local artists in Konya working in these realms.

### **RESEARCH PROCEDURE FOLLOWED**

To begin, I provided some preliminary information about woodcarving and felt-making with the including significance of these art forms in Turkish and World culture. Student told me that they viewed felt-making as an old fashioned art. In addition, they believed that felt-making and kundekari arts (traditional woodart in Anatolia) would disappear in the future. As will become evident, the students' ideas changed completely after they met and interviewed local artists, Mr. Girgic and Mr. Ciller. I provided basic information about how to conduct a library search on traditional woodcarvers and felt-makers. I also asked student use research strategies of art historians by analysing "How an art historian analyzes the traditional arts in a local area".

The following procedures were followed in completing during the oral history interviews: 1) I asked the students to do a short pre-interview search about felt-making, felt arts, woodcarving and kundekari arts. They were asked to prepare their own questions about these art forms and artists. They were free to ask any questions of interest. 2) I arranged appointments with Mr. Girgic and Mr. Ciller. Mr. Girgic has a working studio near the famous Mevlana Museum in the city center of Konya . Mr. Ciller has a workshop in an industrial/commercial area in Konya, located near furniture and carpenter shops. The interviews took place at the studios in order to reveal the artist' working environments to the students. 3) After gaining permission from the students' families and school administrators, the students were taken to the artists' studios. 4) After introducing the students to Mr. Ciller and Mr. Girgic, I allowed the students to ask their questions, exploring the artists' lives and art. I asked a few questions as points of clarification. 5) The interview sessions were tape recorded and transcribed. I then reviewed the transcriptions. Below I summarize the content of the artist' interviews.

### **FELT-MAKING AND MR. GIRGIC**

Archaeological remains found in central Asia indicate that felt has been used since pre-historic times. The remains consist of womens and babies' clothing ( especially swaddling clothes ), horse saddle covers and mats for tents. The artifacts suggest that felt was used on a daily basis between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. (Karpuz, 1999). In the past the people's needs were fulfilled by handmade objects often with artistic features. Certain cities on the Silk Road (trade route from China to Europe) were known for their high quality arts and crafts. Because, Konya was the capital city of the Anatolian Seljuk State between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, felt-making and woodcarving like other art forms soon became widespread. Today, textiles made of felt have largely disappeared from Turkish city life. However, there are still people in central Anatolia who choose to wear clothing made of felt for extremely cold weather. Shepherds in the countryside often prefer special felted clothing called "kepenek" (Photo c). Farmers and truck drivers also buy felted products such as cloths, sacks, pants, floor-mats. Young women in the world who live in the cities sometimes buy felted handbags and other ornaments (photo d), (Vickrey, 1997) for their decorative qualities.

Mr. Girgic was interviewed at his studio (Photo a) which was located in a garden (Photo b).. The first house nearest the garden entrance is used as a felt making studio and contains wool storage and felt processing rooms including a dyeing pool and wool processing machineries. There are also four traditional Turkish tents (yurts) in Mr. Girgic's garden. All of them contain a selection of Turkish carpets, kilims and felt-mats. Mr. Girgic said *"I prepared them (the tents) for my visitors from other cities or abroad. Sometimes they like to stay here a few days in the summer"*. Felted fabrics are not made with the same procedures as woven cloth. In felting, large pieces of dyed wet fleece are thickly layered, and then matted as they are heated and dried. In the interview Mr. Girgic said that; *"The main material of felting is sheep's wool, especially lamb's wool. Not all sheep's wool is good for felt making the wool collected from the mountain villagers is the best"*. Today as in the past, a few traditional Turkish felt makers dye the wool by using pigments obtained from local flowers and plants. They use dyed wool to shape symbolic motifs on their special felt works. Cirillo (1998) explained that felt as a material is suitable for abstract and symbolic art. Therefore, like the abstract motifs of carpets, the symbols on felt works can have many meanings (Durul,1973). Mr Girgic had similar ideas about his felt motifs. He said *"I am influenced by anything during motif selection. I use traditional symbols and motifs used for carpets. For the first 30 years of my practice I used only traditional motifs. Today, however, I think of felt-making as a more international art form, so I use more generic and universal symbols"*.

There are now less than ten professional felt-makers in and around Konya. However it was once reported that there were many felt-makers in Konya and felt textile trade was one of the reasons that people visited Konya in the past (Karpuz, 1999). Mr. Girgic told me that he has been in this family business since 1966. He learned felt-making from his grandfather. Mr. Girgic has produced many felt products. He explained to the students how felt is made and then summarized his latest projects as follows: *"I attended an exhibition in Germany and a research study in England (Oxford). It was Art-in-Action research. I stayed in Oxford two months and worked with many students. I trained them in felt making. I made 17 "kaytak-style" felts during that project. All our works were displayed at the end and sold immediately. The last exhibition I attended was three years ago. It was in 1998. I worked with one German researcher here in Konya. At the end of that workshop we presented our felt products at exhibitions held in Germany and Konya-Turkey"*. Mr Girgic said *"I am getting felt requests from all countries including England, Germany, Sweden,*

*Norway and Hungary*". He noted that people's interest on his art and products especially increased after his studio and products were part of a documentary on one of the German National TV channels.

During the interview, Mr Girgic also talked about himself and his art and he said that "*my friends sometimes ask me if I have tried everything in this art. I say to them there is no boundary in art. You can learn new things everyday. Nowadays, I am thinking more globally and trying to apply everything I see in nature*". At the end of the interview he concluded that "*felt making is like drawing a picture. Felt artists should not limit their capabilities with a few motifs. They should be open to learn more about local and world art*". He also told the students that, "*you are guided by your school's curriculum that gives you a good opportunity. Moreover, listen to your teachers and instructors carefully and be grateful to them. You should also feel nature, observe the harmony of form and color. Today, I am also trying to apply natural form (mountains, springs, trees) to my felt products. Nature is a wise teacher if you can understand*".

### **TRADITIONAL WOODCARVING AND MR. CILLER**

There are only a few (less than a dozen) living kundekari artists in Turkey and one of them is Mr. Ciller who lives in Konya. Therefore, I would like to introduce him to the high school students as a living artist in a prearranged interview in his studio. Mr. Ciller's studio has two parts. The office has a ceiling and walls covered by carved wood. The other part is arranged as a work area that includes a selection of wood stock, as well as wood cutting and polishing machines (Photo e). In Turkey woodcarving is a special craft work applied to domestic furniture and fixtures such as doors, window panels, mimbars (pulpit beside the mihrab reached by a long, straight flight of steps), ceiling and wall covers. Mr. Ciller showed his products (photo f,g,h) and said that; "*this kind of woodcarving art has been called "kundekari" in Turkey. It combines the work of the wood carver and carpenter. In the past, woodcarving was performed by local Konya craftsmen for special projects sponsored by local sultans and rich people*". He emphasized the difficulty of this work by noting that; "*kundekari artists need patience; they have to work hard to finish one single project*". Mr. Ciller also told us that "*in the past kundekari art was developed to eliminate warping of large wooden surfaces*". Craftsmen working in this art first prepare wooden frames, especially located just beneath the small wooden kundekari pieces, suited to the project. These pieces are organized

and located on the wooden frames side by side (jointed through the tenons) to form whole domestic fixtures (photo gj). Kundekari artists may use many geometric patterns representing different meanings in their designs (Photo h). In the process of designing the selected motifs on domestic fixture, kundekari artists determine the number of small carved wooden pieces needed for the required kundekari product. The forms to be carved on these small wooden pieces need special care and artistic considerations. Mr. Ciller answered a question about carved figures and their originality as; *“I have a comprehensive motif collection which contains designs by me and other woodcarvers and kundekari artists. I like Ottoman figures and I generally use them in my works. In Arabic kundekari works, the artists carve arabesque and flower motifs in general. Ottoman style looks nicer to me. Nevertheless, I realize that the style of motifs in our products often overlap with those of Arabic symbols. In fact, Kundekari artists can use any of the Ottoman, Arabic or Baroque woodcarving styles as long as the customers like it”*. Mr. Ciller mentioned that; *“the points of the designed figures (usually stars) are very important in this work, and can have meanings. In the past 8, 10 or 13 pointed star motifs/patterns were often used. For example, a company contracted me to prepare a wooden entrance door. I designed a 16 pointed star shape at the center of the door. The door was placed at the main entrance of the company building to commemorate company’s 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary years of foundation”*. These explanations address the students many questions. Mr. Ciller discussed the issue originality in kundekari designs, reflecting on past experiences; *“I prepared one project with a star motif at the center. I thought that it was a new and original design. However, there was a PhD student from England visiting me and she had worked on kundekari art. She and her university invited me to England. When I was there, I went to a Museum and I saw similar star figure on one of the Arabic kundekari projects exhibited. I had not known about this work while I prepared my design. The carved motifs on this kundekari product are different, but the star division is almost same. So I think that one comonly evaluate the originality of any new kundekari design after fully documenting all kundekari art works”*.

Mr. Ciller also explained that kundekari artists needed to use special kinds of woods in their work. If the selection is wrong, the end product will crack in time. Mr. Ciller acknowledged that this was a problem since; *“finding wood for our work is getting difficult. I generally work in oak and cedar for strong frames. I used to buy them from the National Forest Enterprise easily. Today they have stopped supplying oak. Therefore, I now get them at wood-markets like the other woods such*



*as walnut, apple, pear, cedar, rosewood. These special woods and especially Walnut wood are very difficult to find. Very long lasting wooden fixtures and kundekari products can be made from walnut wood". He concluded the interview by saying that, "In art there is no end, you can not say "this is the best". There is always an opportunity to make a new piece of art work that is nicer than the others. In kundekari art, one can use any additional ornament materials the client requests. Kundekari artists can use silver, gold, pearl, ebony and other valuable metals to form any artistic symbol on the surface of the kundekari work pieces; there are endless possibilities for art making if there is no financial constraint".*

### **DISCUSSION ON THE RESULTS OBTAINED**

Turkey has a rich cultural history, but it has been suggested by this project that its and place in the world's art heritage has not been presented and taught properly. In the art education curriculum for high schools in Turkey, lectures do cover information about art in general, classical art, world's art heritage and traditional Turkish arts. However, information given in these high school lectures has been limited. Most of art teachers do not discuss local art production nor do they provide the background knowledge necessary to stimulate student's artistic appreciation of such work. Art education in high schools is based primarily on the art production of famous world and Turkish artists, with too little information about the local artists and art forms. As a result, I decided to see if oral history interview techniques effective in helping high school students gain information about local artists and artistic practices and cultures. The students involved in this study were asked to behave like art historians, sociologists and researchers to evaluate local art production. I think, they have learned a way to learn through the local artists. They have also had an opportunity to make connections between culture and artistic meaning and values. They were active participants in this art education study. The interviews covered activities influencing all of the students' senses . They heard and saw the artists in person; they smelled the studio environments; they also viewed the studios and the artists' products. They touched the art works, feel their softness, strength and texture. I believe that they will never forget these experiences.

Mr. Girgic's and Mr. Ciller's life stories and discussions of their art works and artistic ideas influenced the students deeply. Students told me that they had not expected a local artist in Konya to have exhibited abroad. When they learned about the activities of Mr. Girgic and Mr. Ciller, they



were surprised and became very interested in felt and carved wood products. They realized that these art forms are traditional in Konya. However, they also learned that versions of these arts could be observed around the world. It was also interesting for students to discover that, in their early training, Mr Girgic and Mr. Ciller worked only for economic reasons. Later however, when they earned contracts from local museums for small scale restorations, they begin to approach their work with greater artistic consideration. It was enlightening for the students to realize that the artists had expended time doing research and exploring ideas about their art. As a result, students learned that in order to excel at one art form, it was necessary to consider artistic approaches around the world.

### **CONCLUSION**

Transmitting information about the lives and works of famous artists alone tends to limit students views of what art is and who makes art. As a result, they lack information about local artists and art production in Konya. The students, however, became interested in interviewing local artists in their neighborhoods and were deeply affected by local art production. Enriched their vocabulary and knowledge of local art traditions and gained new insights about where art can be found. They also gained new understandings of the interconnection between art and culture grew. They determined to see art everywhere around them in the future. They learned that every artist and art work has a story to tell. In his paper La Porte (2000, p40) writes that, “life experiences and ways of thinking and valuing may differ in many ways between generations, but when shared, can foster insights into the historical and cultural contexts of art and artifacts that enrich the study of art”. This statement is reflective of the outcome of this project. The oral histories of Mr. Girgic and Mr. Ciller contained valuable historic and cultural information about both technical processes and symbolic traditions. Because information in these interviews was obtained from the artists themselves, it was both clear and authentic.

**Photographs:**



**a)** Students interviewing with Mr. Girgic, in his traditional tent (yurt) office.



**b)** Traditional tents in Mr. Girgic's office garden, with sun drying felts, kilims and carpets.



**c)** Felt sample (Kepenek).



**d)** Felt sample (wall covers).



**e)** Mr. Ciller and his studio-workshop.



**f)** Kundekari (close view).



g) Kundekari door (star shaped).



h) Kundekari sample.

## REFERENCES

Balter, M. (1998) Why settle down? The mystery of communities. *Science*, V282, N5393.1442, Nov.1998, pp1442-1445.

Cirillo, S. (1998) Felting, as expressive art form, *Art and Activities*, December 1998, pp20-21.

Durul, Y. (1973) Seljuks' carpets, since at the beginning up to the middle of the 16. Century. (Selcuklu halıları, başlangıcından 16.yuzyıl ortalarına kadar Turk halı sanatı), (in Turkish), Istanbul, Turkey.

Karpuz, H. (1999) *Living artists in Konya and their art products (Yasayan Konya'lı sanatçılar ve eserleri)*, (in Turkish), Konya-Selcuklu Municipality, Cultural Print Series, Series No: 10, (Ed. Abdülkadir Gök), pp78-80. İzmir, Turkey.

La Porte, A.M. (2000) Oral history as intergenerational dialogue in art education, *Art Education*, July 2000, pp39-44.

Pine-Hill Project (2002) Center for oral history and cultural heritage, Pine-Hill Programs-What are folklife and folklore, University of Southern Mississippi, <http://www.dept.usm.edu/~ocach/>.

Stockrocki, M. (2001) Learning the Arts Visual Arts, <http://artwork.asu.edu/AAERC/index.html>  
<http://herbergercollege.asu.edu/>.

Truesdell, B. (2002) Oral history techniques-How to organize and conduct oral history interviews, Indiana University Oral History esearch Center, <http://www.indiana.edu/~ahrc/>.

Vickrey, A.E. (1997) *The art of felting*. Watson-Guption Publications, p144, Newyork, US.