

*Özgün Makale*

# An Introductory Inquiry on Museums' Educational Role in the Late Ottoman Empire (1839-1915)<sup>1</sup>

Geç Osmanlı Döneminde Müzelerin Eğitimsel Rolü Üzerine Giriş Niteliğinde Bir İnceleme (1839-1915)

**Mertkan KARACA\***

## Abstract

The Ottoman elite functionalized museums beyond being a signifier of the modern empire over time, and museums' role gradually ascended and diversified towards the late 19th century. The vein comprised of scholars such as Wendy Shaw and Zeynep Çelik, argues that Müze-i Hümayun (the Ottoman Imperial Museum) had directly taken part in the image and identity politics of the Empire. To extend the borders of this argument, I would like to point out the educative and intellectual role of museums in Istanbul from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries. In the light of archival documents, I suggest an examination of the aims of local visitors, and the circulation of objects. This examination will indicate that, when the focus shifts from the museum as an institution to adventures of the objects displayed, museums draw a more dynamic panorama as active participants in the education process and intellectual activities.

**Keywords:** Ottoman Museums, Public Education, Modernization, Late Ottoman.

## Öz

Osmanlı eliti içinde bulunduğu yüzyıl boyunca müzelere modern imparatorluğun göstergesi olmanın ötesinde bir işlevsellik kazandırmış; böylece müzelerin rolleri 19. yüzyılın sonlarına doğru giderek artmış ve çeşitlenmiştir. Wendy Shaw ve Zeynep Çelik gibi akademisyenlerin oluşturduğu damar, Müze-i Hümayun'un Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun doğrudan imaj ve kimlik siyasetinde yer aldığını ileri sürer. Bu argümanın sınırlarını genişletmek için 19. yüzyılın sonlarından 20. yüzyılın başlarına kadar İstanbul'daki müzelerin eğitsel ve entelektüel rolüne dikkat çekmek istiyorum. Arşiv belgelerinin ışığında, yerel ziyaretçilerin amaçlarını ve nesnelerin dolaşımını incelemeyi önerdiğim bu çalışma, araştırma odağının kurumsal olarak müzenin kendisinden, sergilenen nesnelerin sergüzeştine kaydırıldığında, müzelerin eğitim süreci ve entelektüel faaliyetlerin aktif parçaları olarak daha dinamik bir panorama çizdiğini gösterecektir.

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\* Res. Assist., Department of Art History, Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, mertkan.karaca@msgsu.edu.tr., ORCID: 0000-0002-7008-3679.



**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Osmanlı Müzeleri, Halk Eğitimi, Modernleşme, Geç Osmanlı.

## Introduction

The museum in the Ottoman context flourished hand in hand with educational concerns. In the educational area, reforms aimed to establish modern institutions and educate ordinary people, but especially cultivating skillful military staff, engineers, and bureaucrats. This growing generation was schooled to explore global and scientific knowledge; as a result of this policy, a versatile intellectual group emanated after the 1840s. The concept of museum developed in this understanding and museums were transformed into active members of the education policy, especially after the 1880s. In other words, Ottoman museums emerged as outstanding agents of the local intellectual network in Istanbul.

Nevertheless, domestic links between museums and ordinary people, especially students and instructors, were mostly neglected by the dominant literature. For instance, Wendy Shaw focuses on the Ottoman Imperial Museum as an institutional representative of the Ottoman modernization, and an apparatus of the identity politics during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II:

...(Ahmet Fethi Paşa's) purpose was to impress the museum audience with the fact of Ottoman ownership rather than to participate in the positivist ordering of knowledge in vogue in Europe. The superficial emulation of the museum institution allowed it to produce a spatial discourse that contextually transcribed the Greco-Roman past already incorporated into the European heritage... In the Ottoman context, Islamic collections provided a counterpoint to the growing association between Arabs and Islam. In effect, the neutralization of difference promoted by a category of art designated as "Islamic" supported the Ottoman cause as effectively as it did that of colonial European powers. (Shaw, 2003, pp. 173-175).

Shaw delimits the Imperial Museum's frame by taking a share of the Ancient Greek heritage and establishing links between concurrent policy and collection management. Her arguments revolve around the connection between modern Ottoman identity, legitimization of the presence, and the Imperial Museum in terms of the visualization of history. Shaw mentions the educational role of the Imperial Museum in this part of her study but attributes to the museum a relatively passive role. The same approach is followed by Zeynep Çelik, in her significant contribution to the politics of archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, *About Antiquities*. Çelik gives a more detailed account of local visitors by focusing on the balance between local and foreign visitors. She points out that there was a crowd of students in the Imperial Museum:

...from Kızanlık (Bulgaria) and from the girls' high school in İhsaniye (Üsküdar) in 1907; from a Greek religious school in Bulgaria in 1910; and from the Teachers' College in Bursa in 1914. In effect, by 1914 the museum administration could not easily handle student crowds. Complaints were voiced that sometimes several schools overlapped in their visits, with the disastrous consequence of failure from the educational point of view, in addition to creating enormous difficulties for keeping discipline and order. To resolve the problem, principals were asked to apply with an official letter a week before the visit so that they could be given a specific time slot (Çelik, 2016, pp. 87-88).

However, rather than focusing on the motivation of this crowd, Çelik elaborates on the maintenance of order in the museum. In this part of the book, the educational role of the museum is discussed from a different point of view, a role that dictates etiquette for visitors (Çelik, 2016, p. 89). It is not far-fetched to state that Zeynep Çelik tries to enlighten the role of the Imperial Museum in modern Ottoman society.



Although these two approaches occupy significant positions to comprehend the function of the museum, they are not adequate to figure it out. Due to the scope of their studies, the research centers around the Imperial Museum in its context and doesn't give place to other museums in Istanbul. This deletes the multi-layered local network of museums in the city from the studies, as well as the function beyond identity and etiquette. What I would like to do in this paper is trying to fulfill this gap. By concentrating on local visitors, their aims to visit, and collections, I examine the role of museums in educational and intellectual life.

## Public Education and the Concept of Museum

The Ottoman elite functionalized the museum beyond being a signifier over time. An active apparatus in the hands of the intelligentsia to cultivate generations equipped with global and objective knowledge in an Ottomanized manner. The forerunner of this approach was the *Galatasaray Numunehanesi* (The Herbarium at the Galatasaray School of Medicine) (1839-1850). The collection was the embodiment of a new understanding of the Ottoman bureaucratic/intellectual elite's mindset. This novelty was to seek global and scientific knowledge, which was one of the pillars of modern civilization. Embodying this approach by inaugurating a natural history museum in the Ottoman lands also figures out the Ottoman elite's endeavor to be integrated into the European



**Fig. 1:** One of F. W. Nöe's samples for the Herbarium at Galatasaray School of Medicine. (Çelik, 2019, 37).

intellectual network. The natural history museum's local and international connections give many clues about the functionalization of a museum in the Ottoman Empire. As a purely educational institution affiliated with the School of Medicine, the museum extended students' horizons towards both collaborated European national history museums and Anatolia (Çelik, 2019, pp. 36-37). The school organized expeditions of discovery to Anatolia to collect botanical samples for the museum collection, and students at the school were always members of these cohorts (Çelik, 2019, p. 37) (fig. 1). The concurrent bureaucrats' consideration of the museum as an active part of the educational policy, I think, transformed into tacit knowledge for the Ottoman elite. Throughout the century, museums were dynamic spaces for storing, conserving, and transferring knowledge in the Empire.

For instance, an archival document dated July 22, 1914, puts a request from *Bursa Mekteb-i Sultanisi* (High School) to visit the Ottoman Imperial Museum into words (BOA, MF. İBT. 509/60). A group of scouts asks for permission to see collections in the museum and the group got approval from the directorate. Unfortunately, the document doesn't give details of the visit, and the research requires to be extended to grasp the aim. The school is comprised of two stages as *rüşdiye* (middle school) and *sultani* (high school). According to the curriculum of the school, students had *tarih-i umumi* (global history) for three years in middle school. As it is known from the other examples at the same period, history courses were separated into three as *tarih-i kadim* (ancient history), *tarih-i kurun-ı vusta* (history of Middle Ages), and *tarih-i kurun-ı ahire* (history of modern ages) (Mehmed Esad, 1894, pp. 167-168). Particularly, since ancient history class covered Mesopotamian history, Ancient Greece, and Hellenistic periods, the Imperial Museum constituted a great space to visualize knowledge taken from the class. Also, they had history classes for five years in the high school stage, which was most probably separated very closely from the middle school curriculum. (Hüdavendigâr, 1911). As known from the publication on global history, Ottoman historians tended to write global histories to integrate the Ottoman Empire to the "objective" and worldwide history.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, even if it was no in-depth knowledge of civilizations throughout history, Ottoman middle and high schools educated their students to stimulate their curiosity about the global scope of history. Visiting the Imperial Museum to observe wonders of Ancient civilizations, especially Greeks, fits well into the concurrent trends in the Ottoman educational policy -and the intellectual milieu<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, this scout group was not unfamiliar with the museum because the first branch of the Imperial Museum in Constantinople was inaugurated in the garden of Bursa Mekteb-i Sultanisi in 1904. This independently demonstrates the functionalization of the museum in education. Ottoman authorities associated museums with schools, even, as a part of the school. After visiting the branch of the Imperial Museum, they most probably wanted to see more in the main building and complete their knowledge. This globally concerned history education reflected not only on the formal students of the Empire but also on the civil elite.

An archival document from the same year, 1914, refers to a group of women asking for permission to visit the Topkapı Palace's Harem section. However, at the beginning of the document, there is a sentence identifying the women as students pursuing open-public courses for women at the *Darü'l-Fünûn* (the House of Sciences / University) and taking lectures on ancient history for two months. As put into words in the document, İhsan Bey, the instructor of history at the House of Sciences, was taking this group to the Imperial Museum as part of his class (BOA, MF. MKT. 1198/21). While taking the class, to stimulate their curiosity, and to consummate their knowledge by observing the collections of Ancient Greece and the Hellenistic Period, İhsan Bey conducted his lectures at the Imperial Museum.

Not only the Imperial Museum but also the *Eslihâ-yı Askeriyye Müzesi* (The Museum of Military Weapons), later known as *Müze-i Askerî-i Osmâni* (the Ottoman Military Museum), was a place to visit within the context of classes. An article published in *Tedrisat-ı İbtidaiyye Mecmuası* (The Journal of Primary Education) in 1910 documents a lecture in this museum. The article was fictionalized as a conversation between the instructor and a student. The instructor asks questions about the objects and takes their opinion about them. However, the last part of the conversation is riveting to understand the role of the museum.

<sup>2</sup> For a great panorama of the 19th century Ottoman historiography concerning global narrative: (Yıldız, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Ancient Greek interest in the 19th century Ottoman literature, please see: (Yüksel, 2012).



The instructor and the student are on a dual conversation about the chain used to close the Golden Horn at the siege of Constantinople in 1453 (fig. 2). After talking about Mehmet the Conqueror's urge to transfer his navy from the strait to the Golden Horn and his decision to move the ships over the land, the instructor asks:

- "O halde Fatih nasıl bir padişahmış? (Then, what was the personality of the sultan Mehmed the Conqueror?)

- Akıllı bir padişahmış. (He was an intelligent sultan.)

- Daha? (What else?)

- Sebatlı bir padişahmış. (He was a patient sultan.)

- Sebatlı olmak iyi mi? (Is being patient a good characteristic?)

- İyi, efendim. (Yes, sir.)

- Değil mi ya! Eğer insan yapacağı şeyi güç gelir diye yarıda bırakırsa eline bir şey geçmez değil mi? (Yes, if someone gives up working because of the work's inconvenience, he cannot gain anything, can he?)

- Hayır, efendim. (No, sir)

.....

- Evet oğlum. Mesela, okumak, yazmak ibtida ademe güç gelir değil mi? Peki şimdi okumak yazmak güç geliyor diye onu yarıda mı bırakmalı? (Yes, my son, for example, reading-and-writing is difficult at the beginning. Should we leave it undone thinking that it is difficult?)

- Hayır efendim. (No, sir.)

- Ya ne yapmalı? (Then what should we do?)

- Çalışmalı. (Work hard.)

- Evet sebat etmeli, çalışmalı. Sebat edilir, çalışılırsa ibtida güç gelen okuma, yazma... (Yes, we should keep being patient and working. If we do this, reading-and-writing, which is difficult at the beginning...)

- Sonra kolay gelmeye başlar, nihayet okuma yazmayı öğrenir. (Then it becomes easier and we learn it.)" (İhsan, 1919, p. 102).

The end of this dialogue is a good example of observing how interpretations of objects can be stretched. The path, from the chain used by the Byzantine army to the global merits such as working and patience, shows that museums were embedded into the Ottoman education system beyond the identity politics and the construction of a modern image.

The role of the Imperial Museum was not stuck into the ancient history classes and visiting the museum within the context of the classes. Among the archival documents, there are examples of objects sent to *Darü'l-fünun* (House of Sciences – the Ottoman University) for *talebinin bihakken istifadelerini temin edecek surette cereyanı* (to ensure conducting classes properly for the complete benefit of students) (BOA, MF. MKT. 1222/ 8 /2). A document from January 5, 1917, puts Hamdullah Subhi Bey's request from the Imperial Museum into words. He was the instructor of Turkish – Islamic Fine Arts at the House of Sciences that year. To visualize the written information in sources, Hamdullah Subhi indented for twenty tiles samples dated to the Ottoman period from the directorate of the Imperial Museum (BOA, MF. MKT. 1222/ 8 /2). Nine days later, the museum directorate approved his request and informed Hamdullah Subhi about the quality of representation of the tiles (BOA, MF. MKT. 1222/8/4). According to this document, twenty tiles from the Ottoman period were ready to be sent to the House of Sciences within the context of Turkish – Islamic Arts class. Wendy Shaw's argument is based on seeing objects to transmit religious/national knowledge to glorify the Empire:





**Fig. 2:** The chain in the Ottoman Military Museum, (TBMM Milli Saraylar, 11/260, 17).

It was no surprise to Osman Hamdi that the new collections promoted a radical shift in Ottoman modes of education. Whereas once Ottomans learned about religion by reading the Qur'an, in the museum they would learn about the nation through the objects that once helped to transmit religious knowledge. (Shaw, 2003, p. 178)

However, as it is apparent in the document, the museum was functionalized more dynamically. Objects were not immobile behind the museum's glass barriers and in the storage, they moved among several institutions such as the House of Sciences (as seen in Hamdullah Subhi's request), and *Mekteb-i Sanayi-i Nefise* (the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts). In another document from March 19, 1895, the arrival of an album exhibited in the 1893 Chicago Universal Exposition at *Ticaret ve Nafia Nezareti* (the Ministry of Commerce and Public Works) was issued (BOA, MF. MKT. 256/25). Osman Hamdi Bey, the concurrent director of the museum, wrote to *Maarif Nezareti* (the Ministry of Education) for storing this album in the Library of the Imperial Museum to send to the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. Osman Hamdi Bey wished the album to be benefited as a model by painting class students at the academy. In comparison to the archival documents in this study, Osman Hamdi's request from the Ministry of Education is relatively earlier. This demonstrates that this active participation of the imperial museum was not peculiar to the post-19th century period. Osman Hamdi endeavored to function as a dynamic agent in education policy. Moreover, these implementations enrich/extend the scope of the Imperial Museum's activity and figure out that the activity of the museum overreaches taking a share from the Ancient Greek heritage and injecting the Islamic identity.

After this relatively early example, to see closely how the museum's educational function was regarded over time, a French grammar book published in 1912 and written by Ahmed Cevad could constitute a proper example. This bilingual book named *Méthode Rationnelle pour Apprendre le Français / Lisan-ı Fransevi Tahsili için Mantiki Usul* (Rational Method for Learning French Language) is separated into several parts such as personal belongings, furniture, and parts of human body. In the section devoted to the parts of the human body, the author of the book visualizes the human body in an anatomy museum (fig. 3). Encountering a museum even in a grammar book proves that the concept of the museum in the Ottoman Empire was directly associated with education, and these attempts try to emphasize this closeness between these two concepts.

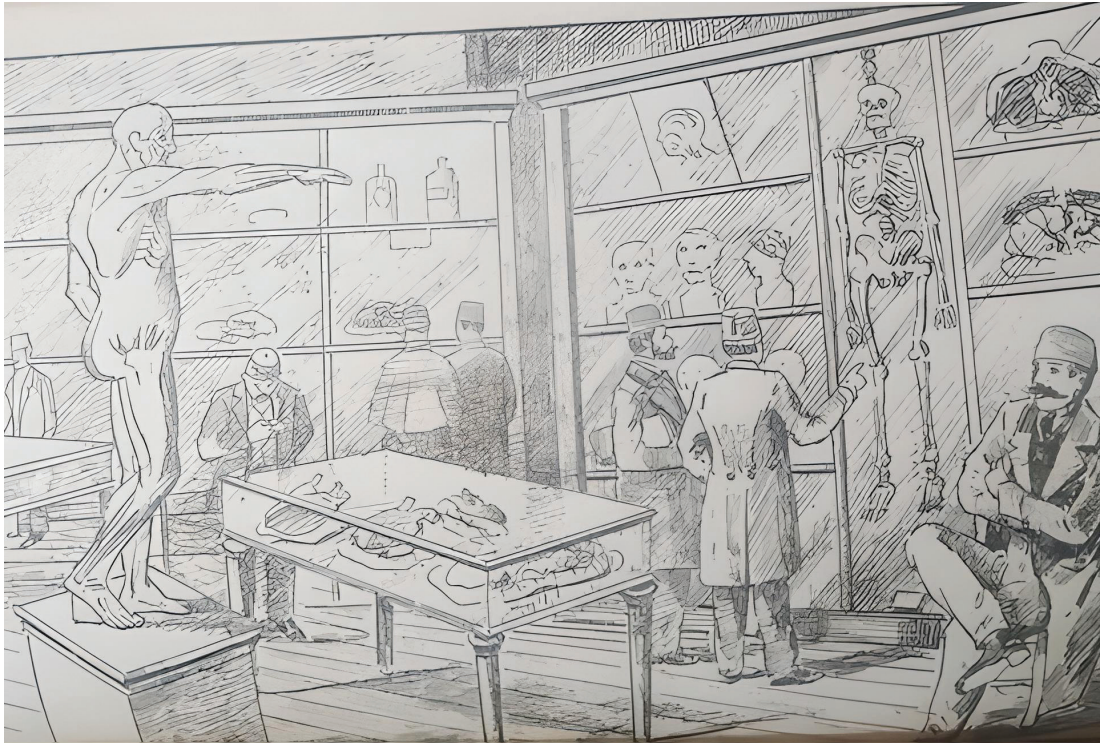


Fig. 3: The anatomy museum in Ahmed Cevad's book. (Ahmed Cevad, 1912, p. 49).

Apart from being a government policy, the Ottoman intellectual conceptualized museum as an educative space in the press. For example, Kemal published an article entitled *Müzelerden İstifade* (Benefiting from Museums) in 1895. In this article, Kemal's focal point was the role of a museum in the development of public education. He emphasized this focus by referencing European and American museums that attract people's attention through several entertainment activities. To support his argument, the author, a certain Kemal, capitalized on the "important opinions Mister (Gud), the director of a Washington Museum," had expressed. According to Çelik, Kemal's position offered a fresh detour from the more traditional references to European ideas in the Ottoman press and an implicit criticism of Osman Hamdi (Çelik, 2016, pp. 86-87). This digression offered "visitor friendly", conveniently grasped designs, not to bore people visiting museums. Moreover, Kemal advised that it is crucial to alter the design of the exhibited objects to

give visitors a chance to view the same objects from different perspectives. In the article, the most significant point is that he suggested some ways for museums to stimulate the curiosity of the people and redesign themselves by changing circumstances. Kemal also argued that museum directors have many essential points to learn from the directors of public entertainment establishments such as casinos and theatres, who constantly changed their repertoires (Kemal, 1895, pp. 55-58). This article figures out that Ottoman intellectuals were aware of the significance of museums in public education, and tried to disseminate this understanding through the printing press. They criticized the museum directorate for not being attractive.

These kinds of attempts continued in the coming years. In 1904, an article titled *Cümle-i Müessesat-ı İlmiye-i Cenab-ı Padişahiden Müze-i Hümayun* (the Imperial Museum as One of Our Imperial Scientific Institutions) in again *Servet-i Fünun* (Anonymous, 1904, pp. 338-342). The article devoted itself to introducing the Imperial Museum to the public. In this relatively long article, the author told the progress in the Hamidian era, then established a link between the progress and the inauguration of the Imperial Museum. In further paragraphs, the author elaborated on the history of the museum, gave details about the collections exhibited in each saloon, catalogs prepared by different people, and the significance of Osman Hamdi Bey. Considering that *Servet-i Fünun* was one of the most significant journals of its time, this long and detailed description of the Imperial Museum should stimulate the curiosity of local people. At least, intellectuals tried to draw people to the museum by underlining its role in progress and development.

Nevertheless, although they conducted a “project” of attracting people’s attention to museums, local visitors to the museum continued to be in a small number (Çelik, 2016, p. 88-89). In 1913, in his letter from Paris, Nazmi Ziya reflected the Imperial Museum as a small museum. He argued that as its contents were uniquely works of antiquity, its appeal was not to “us”; the collection appealed to foreigners. Even among the “enlightened” sector of Istanbul (Çelik, 2016, p. 89).

A controversy arises between museum’s policies and intellectuals’ demands in the printing press. While the museum directors activate museums by linking them to other educational institutions, intellectuals disseminate their opinions to awake ordinary people about the significance of museums. Vis a vis the government policy, intellectuals targeted a wider mass to draw the museum. For example, the publication policy during the 1890s and the early 1900s demonstrates the mission undertaken by the Imperial Museum. Under the directorate of Osman Hamdi Bey and his successor Halil Edhem Bey, the museum began to develop its policy towards fulfilling educational deficiencies. Especially after the 1880s, the Imperial Museum conducted an impressive publication policy in Turkish and documented its collections to extend its scope of visitors. However, as Zeynep Çelik figured out that appealing to locals emerges as a secondary concern, supported by the fact that the catalogs were not written for the Turkish-speaking audiences but were translated from the French originals (Çelik, 2016, p. 88). This situation shows the primary concern of the Imperial Museum again. These “academic” publications targeted the “expected intellectuals” of the Empire rather than ordinary people. These expected intellectuals were, of course, military and civil school students who planned to be equipped with global and scientific knowledge. These publications covered a huge group of numismatics collection from Umayyads, all through Abbasids, Fatimids, the Genghis Empire, the Ilkhanate Empire, Seljuks, Turkic principalities, to the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, the Imperial Museum published the catalogs of sarcophagi, sculptures, and handiworks from Ancient Greek, Egyptians, Palmerian, and Himyarite.





Even though the primary concern was not targeting ordinary people, the published collections seem to be attracting a wider scope of people living in the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire:

- *Takvim-i Meskukat-ı Osmaniye* by İsmail Galib Bey in 1890,
- *Takvim-i Meskukat-ı Selçukiyye* by İsmail Galib Bey in 1892,
- *Lühud ve Mekabir-i Atika Kataloğu* by Osman Hamdi in 1893,
- *Asar-ı Heykeltraşi Kataloğu* by Osman Hamdi in 1894,
- *Meskukat-ı Kadime-i İslamiyye Katalogu kısm-ı sani* by İsmail Galib in 1894,
- *Asar-ı Himyeriyye ve Tedmüriyye Katalogu* by Osman Hamdi in 1897,
- *Meskukat-ı İslamiye Katalogu kısm-ı evvel* by Halil Edhem in 1898,
- *Asar-ı Mısriyye Katalogu* by Osman Hamdi in 1899,
- *Meskukat-ı İslamiye Katalogları kısm-ı salis* by H. Edhem in 1900,
- *Meskukat-ı İslamiye Katalogu kısm-ı rabi* by İ. Galib in 1903,
- *Meskukat-ı İslamiye Katalogu kısm-ı hamis*
- *Kurşun Mühür Kataloğu* by Halil Edhem in 1903,
- *Meskukat-ı İslamiyye Katalogu kısm-ı sadis* by Halil Edhem in 1915.

## Conclusion

Museums were conceptualized as places for education, and very dynamic and active participants in the educational process. Along by being a door opening to the European intellectual network for the Ottoman intellectual, they also served local people as injectors of modern knowledge. In addition, while doing this, museums in the Ottoman lands employed some peculiar methods such as sending objects to demanding places rather than inviting them. In other words, when the focal point is shifted from the institution to objects, the panorama gets wider and becomes more dynamic. Further research on local and foreign visitors, their aims, peculiar requests, and publications of museums will demonstrate the intersections between local and global networks of museums in the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, the inauguration of new branches in Anatolia such as Bursa and Konya, as well as schools exhibiting different collections like Saint Josef High School, Darüşşafaka High School have a great potential to enlighten the local network between the museums.

Last but not least, comparative research should be conducted to grasp the impulses of multi-national empires such as the Russian Empire, and the Austria-Hungarian Empire. How did they functionalize museums? What was the role of museums in an age of turmoil for the 19th-century empires? How much did these empires model after each other? When these kinds of questions try to be answered in the context of global intellectual history and museum studies, it is possible to observe Ottoman museums from a wider perspective.

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