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## **BLOCK PRINTING: ONE OF LOST TREASURES OF MARDIN**

Mardin'in Kaybolan Değerlerinden Yazmacılık

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### **ABSTRACT**

The identity of cities is being reshaped in line with the changing and developing science, industry and communication technologies. These changes and developments being experienced over the recent years have caused a lot of treasures that have significant artistic or historical importance either to be forgotten entirely (by being transformed) or to lose their functionality and be left behind time. Mardin which is one of the oldest cities of the region it is located in is a city that welcomes a wide range of religious and ethnic components, where different groups of ethnicities live together and where culture and art intertwined together.

Assyrians living in Mardin have especially been successful at architecture and architectural ornaments and also at handicrafts such as jewellery. Another traditional form of art they have been good at on the other hand is block printing. The block printing is referred to as "hetmo" by the Assyrians. The phrase "block printing" is used to refer to printing made with an impress or figures drawn using a brush mostly on cotton fabrics. Abandoning the traditions rapidly and not attaching traditional arts the significance that they deserve play a great role in block printing which is a form of folk art from Anatolia losing its influence today. However, it is observed that the foundations of contemporary or modern arts rely and practice upon traditional arts. In this study, having discussed the art of block printing and introducing the last representative of Assyrian block printing; Miksiye Nasra Simmes Hindi, the significance of this culture in terms of traditional arts is pointed

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## Block Printing: One Of Lost Treasures Of Mardin

out. Field study, source person interviews and literature screening techniques are used within the scope of our methodology in this study. Assyrian art of block printing and its latest representative have been documented with the photographs of Miksiye Nasra Simmes Hindi who was the latest representative of the art of block printing which were taken back when she was alive and also with the photographs of her workshop taken after her death.

**Keywords:** Culture, Mardin, Assyrian, Traditional Arts, Block Printing

### **ÖZ**

Bir kentin kimliği, değişen ve gelişen bilim, sanayi ve iletişim teknolojileri doğrultusunda yeniden şekillenmektedir. Son yıllarda yaşanan bu değişim ve gelişimler kültürel, sanatsal değeri olan tarihi öneme sahip birçok geleneksel değeri ya ortadan kaldırmış (dönüşüme uğratmış) ya da işlevselliğinin yitirilmesinde ve çağın gerisinde kalmasına neden olmuştur. Bulunduğu bölgenin en eski şehirlerinden biri olan Mardin; dinsel ve etnik açıdan çeşitli unsurları bünyesinde barındıran, farklı etnik grupların bir arada yaşadığı, kültür ve sanatın iç içe geçtiği tarihi bir şehirdir.

Mardin’de yaşayan Süryaniler özellikle kuyumculuk gibi el sanatlarında, mimaride ve mimari süslemeciliğinde başarılı olmuşlardır Başarılı oldukları bir diğer geleneksel sanat ise yazmacılıktır. Süryanilerde yazmacılık “hetmo” kelimesi ile ifade edilmektedir. Çoğunlukla pamuklu kumaşlar üzerine fırça ile çizilen desenleri veya kalıp ile yapılan baskıları ifade etmek için “yazmacılık” kelimesi kullanılmaktadır. Anadolu halk sanatlarından yazmacılığın günümüze kadar eski gücü ile ulaşamamış olmasında, geleneklerin hızla terk edilmesinin ve geleneksel sanatlara yeterli değerin verilmemesinin rolü oldukça büyüktür. Oysaki gelişmiş toplumların çağdaş veya modern olarak adlandırılan sanatlarının temelinde geleneksel sanatlardan yararlandığı ve bu sanatlara göndermeler yapıldığı görülür. Bu çalışmada yazmacılık sanatından ve Mardin’deki Süryani yazmacılığının son temsilcisi olan Miksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi’den bahsedilerek bu kültürün geleneksel sanatlar açısından önemine dikkat çekilmiştir. Çalışmanın gerçekleşmesi için yöntem anlayışı açısından gerekli araçlar olan alan araştırması, kaynak kişi görüşmesi ve literatür taraması teknikleri kullanılmıştır. Yazmacılık kültürünün son temsilcisi olan Miksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi’nin hayattayken çekilmiş olan fotoğrafları ve vefatından sonra atölyesinde çekilen fotoğraflar ile Süryani yazmacılık sanatı ve son temsilcisi belgelenmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kültür, Mardin, Süryani, Geleneksel Sanatlar, Yazmacılık

### **Introduction**

The concepts of culture and identity are not independent from each other. There is a multidimensional relationship between identity and culture. Identity is the facts and feelings of an individual who defines him/herself in the society (Assmann, 2001: 130). Different societies own their culture and identity by this means. Every city creates its own culture and has a specific identity by means of its specific geography, language, ethnic and religious origins. Mardin has created a synthesis made of multiple identity specific to itself like many other cities in Anatolia. However, this multicultural historical city has also occasionally failed in protecting itself from the influence of today's modern world which are eroding traditions. The change and transformation of tradition in time is considered normal whereas once a thing belonging to traditional has lost its functional significance in daily life this results in its loss too. The latest status of block printing that is currently considered a traditional art in Mardin is discussed in this study.

Identity of a city is being reshaped in line with the changing and developing science, industry and communication technologies. These changes and developments being experienced in these fields over the recent years have caused disappearance of many traditional values having an artistic significance or historical importance either to be forgotten entirely (by being transformed) (Koyuncu Okca, 2016: 203) or to lose their functionality and be left behind time (Altıntaş, 2016: 161). Mardin which is one of the oldest cities of the region it is located in is a city that welcomes a wide range of religious and ethnic components, where different groups of ethnicities live together and where culture and art intertwined together. Being usually attracted attention to its multicultural structure, Mardin is currently considered as an outdoor museum or a museum city. The fact that several ethnic and religious groups like Assyrians, Armenians, Jews, Kurds, Arabs, Turks, Yezidis and Shams live together in Mardin does not only make Mardin a cosmopolitan city, but also these communities brought their traditions functionally to the forefront at the stage of protecting and maintaining their identity. In this study, particularly the influence and contribution of Assyrian block printing master from Mardin, namely Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi in this traditional art shall be discussed. Having many different opinions about their ethnic origin, Assyrians belong to Christian religion. It is argued that Assyrians who are the first tribe that had turned into Christianity collectively have a long history of 6765 years in the geography they live in (Uygur, 2015: 28). Assyrians have become successful particularly in handicrafts like jewelry, architecture and architectural ornamentation (Bilge, 2001: 111; Şimşek, 2003: 204-230). Having a significant position among the traditional arts they have become successful, block printing is expressed with Syrian "hetmo" word (Küçük, 2008: 41). The term "block printing" is usually used to express patterns usually drawn with a brush or printing made with a mould on cotton fabrics. Since the first examples of this art have been performed with a brush on stretched fabric, the word "block printing" (yazmacılık in Turkish) derived from "printing" (yazmak in Turkish) has been considered suitable for this art (Öz, 2016: 121). Block printing distinguishes as a bazaar and household activity in Anatolia (Pamir Akbil, 1970: 29). Majority of block printing kerchiefs produced for several purposes have been used as a

### Block Printing: One Of Lost Treasures Of Mardin

traditional headscarf. In addition to headscarf, prayer rugs, quilt covers, bundles, table sheets, toss pillows and pillow cases, couch covers, quilted turban covers, mourning handkerchiefs, oil handkerchiefs and shirts have also been abundantly produced with block printing technique. Most of such products which may easily wear off with daily use were not able to survive to the present day. Block printing examples which can just be seen in museums and special collections are mostly the products belonging to post 20th century.

It has become possible to produce greater quantity of products with spending shorter time and less effort once the serigraphy printing was started to be used in block printing in 1965 (Öz, 2017a: 34). This technical development which had been considered as a way out during these years has accelerated the closure process of traditional block printing workshops and the old patterns have been significantly left with concern of fashion in time (Öz, 2017b: 77). On the other hand, production is made in serigraphy and mostly in digital printing techniques with degenerated patterns under the name of block printing. However, there are a few workshops which make production in traditional methods only in a few cities where block printing was intensively performed in the past like Tokat, Kastamonu, Istanbul. The reason why block printing as one of the Anatolian folk arts failed in reaching to present time with its former strength includes the fact that traditions have been rapidly left, and traditional professions and traditional arts are not sufficiently valued. However, it is seen that traditional arts are benefited and these arts are referred to on the basis of arts which are named as contemporary or modern in developed societies. These concrete bonds established between the past and future by means of traditional arts enables the transfer of traditional and emphasis on social identity. Traditional handicrafts and patterns on them should be considered as the instruments of remembering. Being the cornerstone of culture and identity, traditional arts should be attempted to be sustained by their functional usage in the past and their new interpretations converted into a work of art today. When we look at the ornament elements in Anatolian block printing kerchiefs, it is easily seen that the relationship between base and pattern is highly balanced. There is a compliance with the base in terms of composition order, on the other hand transverse colors are used together skillfully which can reveal value of each other in colorization (Ertürk, 2012: 139-140). It is a reality that block printing kerchiefs having preserved their aliveness and brightness for centuries are establishing a connection between the past and future and being an inspiration for today's designers with their brave color orders and composition systems (Karoğlu, 2011: 253). In this study, block printing art that is one of the traditional arts is illustrated on Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi who devoted her life to this art and the patterns she transferred into block printing kerchiefs to reflect her ethic and religious identity. The greatest representative of block printing art is Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi in Mardin where Assyrians have an intensive population (See Photo 1). Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi who was born in 1916 has continued block printing works in Mardin lifelong by using the moulds and patterns inherited from her father and techniques he learned at small ages (Sipahioğlu and Kavcı Özdemir, 2012: 77). Having kept working in a home-workshop system (See Photo 2), Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi has devoted her life

### Block Printing: One Of Lost Treasures Of Mardin

to the works he had illustrated occasionally by drawing or mould printing on white cotton fabrics called madapolam. The technique of illustrating with a brush on fabric is expressed as “hand-carved block printing”. Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi’s works are usually just drawn and painted with a brush, they may be considered under this technique. She has also included mould printings in addition to brush illustrating in some other works. Such kinds of works may be considered as “mould-hand carved block printing” because these two techniques are used together.



Photo 1-2: Assyrian Block Printing Master Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi and her Home-Workshop

Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi’s works are considerably different from other Anatolian block printing works which may be called as classic in terms of patterns and composition. A pictorial expression on a fabric attracts the attention just like in Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu’s block printing works. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu has compared the painting art and block printing and expressed his opinions as follows: “Paintings are mostly made on fabric, so is block printing. Any fabric on which a painting will be made is turned into linoleum with long efforts, in spite of this no one can guarantee that it will not crack and is cast in the future and will not disturb paints applied on it. Whereas block printing fabric never breaks from its paint even though it used in some works which may never be endured by a painting. Block printing is not afraid of sun, rain, mud. Block printing paint does not only stand on the surface of fabric like painting dyes but it chills the fabric to the marrow, mixes and becomes one with this fabric” (Eyüboğlu, 1986: 361). In addition, he expresses the aspects of painting and block printing different from each other as follows:

“Block printing is a public commodity. Block printing is made with short and sweet values. Block printing mixes colors and shapes with life...Block printing is generous, does not become a handful, and is useful...Block printing gives human relief and joy...I hope to same to painting!” (Erol, 1984: 107).

Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu has argued that canvas wall paintings for museums are not sufficient to ensure complete reflection of the art into society. He has expressed this thinking with the verse “what would I do with a beautiful that is not useful” (Aslier, 1976: 12). Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi has performed pictorial block printing works just like Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu and used figurative patterns. He has used its works as an instrument of self expression. Someone can have

### Block Printing: One Of Lost Treasures Of Mardin

opinion about ethnic and religious identity from his block printing works and may reach stories and miracles of saints. The codes of her identity lie behind her simple and pure expression. The block printing works in which belief and expression become concrete have become the distinctive characteristic of Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi. Religious items are usually in the forefront in her works where scenes received from the bible are illustrated. She has illustrated some figures like the Jesus, Virgin Mary, apostle, saint, angel, Assyrian metropolitans\* and some illustrative scenes like crucifixion and last dinner of the Jesus in her block printing works with an interpretation specific to herself. She has used several flower patterns, Mardin's pigeons and Turkish flag as the patterns ornamenting the figurative motives. she has produced church curtains, wall decorations, table sheets, bed covers, pillow cases and bundles with all these patterns and motives. Simplicity in her patterns immediately attracts the attention. Her patterns in which plain forms of expression are used give the feeling that there is not much effort on these works. The figures she used are two dimensional and it is seen that she supports these figures with decorative elements. The works of Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi means something for everyone due to this simple and plain form of expression. Just for this reason, the curtains made with handwork and decorated with religious figurations (See Photo 3-4-5), are ornamenting the Assyrian churches located at several countries of the world in addition to Mardin.



Photo 3-4-5: Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi's Curtains Decorated with Religious Figurations

The words decimal or alms-giving are used in the Assyrian Orthodox Church instead of the term zakat (benevolence). Decimal means the donation or gift required to be given voluntarily in order to cover expenses of the church and ensure livelihood for spiritual persons who devote themselves for the service of the God and the community and other servants (Akdemir, 1972: 65). Another reason why block printing curtains of Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi are existing in churches in several places throughout the world is that they have been donated as a decimal gift

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\* Metropolitan: This is a Greek origin word that means the head of bishops and expresses the religious president of Assyrians in a certain region (Koluman, 2001: 75).

### Block Printing: One Of Lost Treasures Of Mardin

in these churches. A painting with natural paint print on felt and paintings of Fevzi Çakmak, İsmet İnönü and Atatürk on American fabric were given as a gift by Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi during the visits of Atatürk in Mardin and its neighborhood where Assyrians have lived (Koluman, 2001: 124). Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi has been figuring religious motives as well as basilisks and birds specific to herself and used some motives such as grapes and candles in her block printing works. These motives and patterns bear the stamps from the multicultural society and structure she lived in, namely Mardin. She has been producing dinner table covers, couch sheets, pillow cases by making prints with wooden moulds in her works (See Photo 6-7-8-9) (Uygur, Koyuncu Okca and Öz, 2017: 235).



Photo 6-7: Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi's Basilisk, Bird Figurations



Photo 8-9: Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi's Grape, Candle Motive and Wooden Block Printing Mould

Assyrian block printing that has been sustained by Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi in Mardin has become one of the lost arts upon death of Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi in 2016 when she was 100 years old. Her contributions in block printing art are too great to be ignorable not only because she has been a significant value belonging to her culture but also become the last representative of block printing tradition in Mardin.

### **Conclusion**

Traditional arts, traditional vocations and outstanding masters in many fields are under the danger of extinction throughout Turkey by the influence of globalization. Therefore, finding a master is becoming increasingly difficult in many branches of art and vocation (Oğuz, 2008: 10). Being one of the lost values of Mardin, block printing and the transfer of this art has interrupted after the death of Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi who was the last representative of block printing. Hindi family has block printing curtains decorated with handmade figurations in Assyrian churches located in several places throughout the world not only in Mardin (Uygur et al., 2017: 237). Among the block printing kerchiefs made by Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi each has a different story. She has imprinted religious motives and symbols with her specific interpretations on block printing fabrics and contributed in both culture and publicity of Mardin.

There are many craftsmen and masters who have been the last representative of their art but died without ensuring the transfer of this art in Anatolia just like the block printing master Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi from Mardin. Because the transfer of such values to next generations is not ensured, they disappear with their craftsmen and masters. Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi has struggled as a woman by herself in transferring, reviving, sustaining and marketing of block printing tradition. She has been included as subject matter of many scientific studies with this dimension and served for Mardin as long as her health allowed. Traditional arts and traditional vocations shall provide both economic and cultural, artistic contributions in their locality and play an effective role in publicity of their locality by coming to the fore again and turning into a status of sustaining their production and responding to requirements of the time. After Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi as a significant value of Mardin lost her life, her works and future works were left half finished. Therefore, it is necessary to document and produce identical of limited number of block printing works and moulds of Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi and let people who study in this field access to such works in order not to be a mere spectator in disappearance of block printing art that bears a significant cultural value for Mardin, and not to forger her and her works. The works and moulds of Mıksiye Nasra Şimmes Hindi must be definitely included under the topics of block printing which are studied as courses in relevant departments of Faculties of Fine Arts, Faculties of Art and Design and Vocational Schools of Higher Education of Universities. Moreover, placement of these works and moulds in museums is highly significant because they are an important value of Mardin. Local administrations should own and protect this art and the art should be included in life practically by means of several art activities in order to ensure accurate transfer of block printing art to next generations.

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