

Osman Hamdi Bey's "The Arms Merchant": Representation, Cultural Capital and Symbolic Legitimacy in the Late Ottoman Artistic Field

Osman Hamdi Bey'in "Silah Taciri" Adlı Eseri: Geç Dönem Osmanlı Sanat Alanında Temsil, Kültürel Sermaye ve Sembolik Meşruiyet

Arash GOLZARİ HOSSEİNİ 

Painter and Independent Art Researcher / Ressam ve Bağımsız Sanat Araştırmacısı, İstanbul, Türkiye.



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Corresponding Author/Sorumlu Yazar:
Arash GOLZARİ HOSSEİNİ
E-mail: arashgolzari2022@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses "The Arms Merchant" (1908) by Osman Hamdi Bey within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of art. The central question of the study is how Osman Hamdi, relying on his cultural capital and bicultural habitus, simultaneously accepts the rules of the Orientalist field and questions them from within. The painting is examined as a strategic position-taking at the intersection of two fields the late Ottoman artistic field, then in the process of institutionalisation, and the international field of Orientalism each of which imposed its own system of expectations on the artist. The research is qualitative and descriptive-analytical; the data were gathered through documentary analysis and a visual reading of the work. The conceptual toolkit rests on the Bourdieusian triad of field, capital and habitus, so that every visual element of the canvas space, object, gesture and composition is read not as a purely aesthetic datum but as a move within a network of positions and struggles. The findings show that the elements of the painting the han, the Byzantine capital, the two historical helmets, the sword and the rifle operate as symbolic capitals, not by virtue of their age but because their recognition as heritage was secured in both fields at once, while the arrangement of the bodies (the seated merchant and the standing buyer) reproduces the hierarchy of power and the mechanism by which legitimacy is transmitted from one generation to the next. The juxtaposition of sword and rifle represents the transformation of the instruments of legitimacy in the passage from tradition to modernity, and what is decisive in the transaction depicted proves to be not the age of the object but the social relation through which it changes hands. The conclusion is that "The Arms Merchant" is not a passive reproduction of the Orientalist cliché but a strategic act within the artistic field, one that converts the image of a passive East into a narrative of civilisational continuity and authority.

Keywords: Osman Hamdi Bey, the arms merchant, Pierre Bourdieu, artistic field, cultural capital, orientalism

ÖZ

Bu makale, Osman Hamdi Bey'in "Silah Taciri" (1908) adlı tablosunu Pierre Bourdieu'nün sanat sosyolojisi çerçevesinde çözümlemektedir. Araştırmanın temel sorusu, Osman Hamdi'nin kültürel sermayesine ve iki kültürlü habitusuna dayanarak oryantalizm alanının kurallarını aynı anda nasıl hem kabul ettiği hem de içeriden sorguladığıdır. Tablo, kurumsallaşma sürecindeki geç dönem Osmanlı sanat alanı ile uluslararası oryantalizm alanının kesişiminde stratejik bir konum alışı olarak incelenmektedir; bu alanların her biri sanatçıya kendi beklenti sistemini dayatmaktaydı. Araştırma nitel olup betimsel-çözümleyici bir yaklaşımla yürütülmüş; veriler belge analizi ve eserin görsel okuması yoluyla toplanmıştır. Çözümlemenin kavramsal çerçevesi alan, sermaye ve habitus üçlüsüne dayanmakta; tuvaldeki her görsel öğe mekân, nesne, jest ve kompozisyon salt estetik bir veri olarak değil, konumlar ve mücadeleler ağı içinde bir hamle olarak okunmaktadır. Bulgular, tablodaki öğelerin han, Bizans sütun başlığı, iki tarihî miğfer, kılıç ve tüfek sembolik sermayeler olarak işlediğini; bedenlerin düzenlenişinin (oturan tacir ve ayakta duran alıcı) iktidar hiyerarşisini ve meşruiyetin eski kuşaktan yeni kuşağa aktarılma mekanizmasını yeniden ürettiğini göstermektedir. Kılıç ile tüfeğin yan yana getirilmesi de gelenekten moderniteye geçişte meşruiyet araçlarının dönüşümünü temsil etmektedir. Mekân ve nesneler düzeyinde eser, çöküş merkezli oryantalist anlatıya karşı Osmanlı medeniyet sürekliliğini yeniden kurmakta; bedenler düzeyinde bilgi hiyerarşisini ve kutsanmanın aktarımını resmetmekte; araçlar düzeyinde ise yirminci yüzyılın eşiğinde Osmanlı iktidar alanının yapısal dönüşümünü belgelemektedir. Ayrıca tuvalde bir araya getirilen nesnelerin altıncı yüzyıldan on sekizinci yüzyıla uzanan tarihsel aralığı, bu konum alışın yoruma değil sayılabilir verilere dayandırılmasına imkân vermektedir. Sonuç olarak "Silah Taciri", oryantalist klişenin edilgen bir yeniden üretimi değil, edilgen Doğu imgesini medeniyet sürekliliği ve otorite anlatısına dönüştüren, sanat alanı içinde stratejik bir eylemdir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osman Hamdi Bey, silah taciri, Pierre Bourdieu, sanat alanı, kültürel sermaye, oryantalizm

Introduction

"The Arms Merchant", a painting by the prominent Ottoman artist Osman Hamdi Bey, is an example of a creative representation shaped within the discourse of Orientalism and through the artist's cultural capital and habitus. The work is not merely a reflection of Orientalist clichés; it also reveals Osman Hamdi's conscious effort to consolidate his position in the Ottoman artistic field and to criticise the dominant Orientalist discourse in a subtle and symbolic manner.

In the field of Orientalism, the East was represented according to the expectations of Western audiences, with particular emphasis on elements such as Eastern costumes, architecture and exotic objects. Aware of these rules, Osman Hamdi Bey drew on his cultural capital a blend of Orientalist knowledge and Western art to create a work that, while aligned with the Orientalist discourse, also engages in its critique. Through the careful selection of subjects and artistic composition, the work seeks to strike a balance between the cultural values of the East and the expectations of Western audiences, while at the same time presenting an authentic and dignified image of Eastern civilisation.

An analysis of this work based on Pierre Bourdieu's theories in particular the concepts of the field of power, cultural capital and habitus shows how Osman Hamdi used art as an instrument for reproducing cultural power, criticising the Orientalist discourse and consolidating his position within the artistic field.

The scholarship on which such an analysis must build is uneven, and it is worth setting out plainly where it stands. Four bodies of work bear directly on the present study. Demirsar (1987) established the documentary basis: her thesis on the relation between Osman Hamdi Bey's paintings and their real-world referents identifies and dates the objects depicted in "The Arms Merchant", locates the Byzantine capital in the Çoban Mustafa Pasha complex at Gebze, and records both a photograph of the artist at work on the canvas and a version of the composition published under the title *Seyf-i Katî*. Her account is descriptive and iconographic; it does not ask what the assembly of these objects accomplishes. Gümüş (2018) offers the only study devoted to this painting, reading it as a political, socio-cultural and aesthetic response to Western Orientalism. His analysis is formal and thematic, and as noted below does not resolve the tension between its own two accounts of Osman Hamdi Bey's position.

Eldem's work poses the sharpest challenge to any reading of the kind attempted here. Across a long series of studies he has argued that Turkish art history has treated Osman Hamdi Bey selectively and uncritically, building interpretations on titles invented by later art historians and on meanings inferred from those titles without documentary support (Eldem, 2010). He characterises the painter's signature ability as the creation of wholly fabricated scenes that give the foreign viewer the impression of an undeniable reality, and describes the late work as resting on increasingly Orientalist constructions destined for exhibition in the West. On Eldem's account Osman Hamdi Bey held himself apart from his own society, understood himself as Western, and was not a nationalist; his art strategy was flexible, pragmatic and, in its operation, Orientalist. The present study does not dispute these findings. It disputes the inference commonly drawn from them that establishing the artist's dispositions settles the meaning of his paintings which is precisely the deduction Bourdieu rules out (Bourdieu, 1995, pp. 265–266). Eldem's evidence is here treated as describing a position, not as determining a position-taking.

Posocco (2021) is the nearest precedent in method. Applying

Bourdieu's field theory to the birth of the Ottoman museum, he analyses the museum as a field embedded within the field of power, traces Osman Hamdi Bey's capitals across it, and concludes that the painter carried two habitus, Western and Middle-Eastern, which coexisted in him and were projected into the institution he built. The use of Bourdieu to study Osman Hamdi Bey is therefore not new, and the present article does not claim it as such. Two differences none the less separate the two studies. Posocco's object is an institution: he analyses the museum, its architecture and its display, and at no point undertakes the reading of a canvas. And his central formulation two coexisting habitus is the one this article declines, for the reasons given in the theoretical framework below: a doubled habitus redescribes the duality it is introduced to explain, whereas a single habitus with a double field-reference explains why the same dispositions issue in different position-takings.

Between these four studies a gap remains. The objects in "The Arms Merchant" have been identified but not interpreted; the painting has been interpreted but not through a sociology of the field; the artist has been analysed sociologically but only as an institution-builder; and the methodological objection to biographical inference has been raised without an alternative procedure being supplied. The present article addresses that gap and advances three claims. First, that the dichotomy Orientalist / anti-Orientalist which has organised the debate from Cezar and Thalasso through Gümüş, and against which Eldem has argued is the wrong instrument for this case, and that the question should be reformulated as one of position-taking at the intersection of an institutionalising Ottoman field and a dominant European one. Second, that the datable objects assembled in this canvas constitute externally verifiable evidence for that reformulation, since their recognition was secured simultaneously in both fields and their chronological range is a countable rather than an interpreted property of the work. Third, that the transaction depicted an object passing from a holder to an acquirer permits the transmission of legitimacy to be analysed in its visible form, so that what field analysis usually reconstructs theoretically can here be read from the composition itself.

The third claim carries a methodological corollary that shapes the analysis below. If the transmission of legitimacy is what the painting shows, then the analytically decisive property of an object is not its age but the social relation through which it changes hands. Novelty is located in the relation, not in the thing. This principle is applied consistently in what follows, and it is what allows the sword an object of the later sixteenth or early seventeenth century to figure in the argument without being mistaken for a modern instrument.

On this basis, the present article seeks to answer three questions. First, how does Osman Hamdi Bey use the rules and expectations of the Orientalist field to consolidate his own position while simultaneously calling them into question? Second, how do the visual elements of the work space, architecture and historical objects operate as symbolic capital and represent the mechanism of the transmission of legitimacy? And third, what role do the gestures and bodies of the two main figures play in reproducing power relations in the Ottoman cultural field? To answer these questions, after outlining the method and the theoretical framework, the article first maps Osman Hamdi's position in the late Ottoman artistic field and then analyses "The Arms Merchant" along five axes: the work's relation to the Orientalist discourse; realism and technique; space and objects; bodily gestures; and the transformation of the instruments of power.

Method

The present study is qualitative and follows a descriptive–analytical design. Its unit of analysis is a single work, the canvas of 1908 known today as “The Arms Merchant”, examined as a single-case study in which a close visual reading of the painting is combined with documentary analysis of Turkish, English and Persian sources. The conceptual framework is the triad of field, capital and habitus in Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology: every visual element of the work space, object, gesture, composition is read not as a purely aesthetic datum but as a position-taking within a structure of positions and struggles. The aim is accordingly not to establish what the painting means in general, but to reconstruct what it does within a determinate configuration of the artistic field.

The case was selected on three grounds. First, among Osman Hamdi Bey’s late works this is the one whose manifest subject is the exchange of instruments of power: the painting depicts a transaction in which historical objects pass from one holder to another, so that the transfer of legitimacy which field analysis reconstructs theoretically is here also the visible content of the image. Second, the objects assembled in the composition have been individually identified and dated in the documentary literature, which allows the visual reading to be anchored in externally verifiable data rather than in iconographic intuition. Third, the work has attracted very little scholarly attention: apart from the catalogue entry in Demirsar (1987) and the art-critical study of Gümüş (2018) it has not been the subject of a dedicated analysis, and it has not previously been read through a sociological framework.

The documentary corpus comprises four bodies of material. Primary descriptive data on the setting, the objects and their dating derive from Demirsar’s (1987) unpublished master’s thesis, which remains the only systematic study of the relation between Osman Hamdi Bey’s paintings and their real-world referents. Catalogue information title history, dimensions, dating and present location is taken from Eldem’s (2010) *Osman Hamdi Bey Sözlüğü*. Interpretive and art-critical material is drawn from Gümüş (2018) and from the wider Turkish-language literature on Osman Hamdi Bey and Orientalism. Prior Bourdieusian treatment of Osman Hamdi Bey is represented by Posocco (2021), which is used in two distinct ways: as a source for the institutional history of the Imperial Museum and Osman Hamdi Bey’s position within it, and as the methodological precedent against which the present study defines its own conceptual claim. Bourdieu’s concepts are used from his own texts rather than from secondary summaries, and are cited from the editions listed in the references.

The visual analysis proceeds at three declared levels, applied in the following order. At the first level, space and objects: the setting and each identifiable object are described, dated where the literature permits, and examined for what their assembly within a single frame accomplishes. At the second level, bodies: posture, gesture, gaze and relative position are read as socially formed dispositions rather than as expressions of individual psychology. At the third level, instruments: the objects that change hands are examined specifically as material carriers of authority, and the direction of their transfer is traced. Each level is treated first descriptively and only then interpretively, so that the sociological reading remains separable from, and answerable to, the description on which it rests. The three levels correspond to the three sections of the analysis below and to the three-part statement of findings in the conclusion.

This protocol stands in a definite relation to the iconographic method. The first, descriptive stage corresponds to what Panofsky termed pre-iconographic description, and the identification of

the capital, the helmets and the weapons corresponds to iconographic analysis in the strict sense; for both stages the present study depends on the existing documentary literature rather than claiming new attributions. The specifically Bourdieusian layer enters at the point where iconology would ask what worldview the assembled motifs express. Field analysis asks a different question: not what the motifs mean, but what their assembly does what position it stakes out, against which competitors, and with what resources. The two approaches are therefore complementary rather than rival, and iconographic identification of the objects is treated here as a precondition of the sociological reading rather than as an alternative to it.

Four limitations should be stated. First, the analysis is based on high-resolution reproductions rather than on direct examination of the canvas, so judgements of facture and surface are deliberately avoided. Second, no archival research was undertaken; the exhibition and ownership history of the work is reconstructed from the published literature and remains incomplete. Third, the identification and dating of the objects rests substantially on a single source, Demirsar (1987); although the comparanda she cites are located in named museum collections, these have not been independently re-examined here. Fourth, a single-case design cannot establish that the strategies identified are typical of Osman Hamdi Bey’s practice as a whole. The findings are offered as an account of one position-taking, and their generalisation would require the comparative work indicated in the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Field, Capital and Habitus

Bourdieu regards the social world not as a unified whole but as a set of relatively autonomous fields, each with its own rules of the game, legitimate capitals and specific hierarchies. Within this framework, social space takes shape as a hierarchical structure in which distinct yet interrelated positions are defined. More precisely, social space is a space in which individuals and social groups occupy determinate positions according to the volume of their economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1994/2001, p. 33; the Persian translation is cited here for its rendering of this passage, and its pagination differs from that of the English edition of the same work cited elsewhere in this article as Bourdieu, 1998).

The artistic field is one such field: a space of positions in which artists, critics and institutions compete over the definition of legitimate art, and in which the position of each agent derives its meaning from his difference from others. Every social agent in the social field possesses a distinct position and a unique set of properties; indeed, the very formation of social space rests on the differences between individuals and social groups, differences that manifest themselves in various dimensions such as culture, the economy and social position (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 31). Indeed, to exist within a social space is precisely to differ, to be different; and to be seen and recognised in a society, an agent must possess distinctive properties (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 9).

What is produced and exchanged in this competition is capital, a concept that Bourdieu extends beyond the sphere of economics: a person’s social position can be defined by the place he occupies in the various fields of power. The fields of power are diverse arenas in which different species of capital compete with one another; these capitals include economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (such as fame, credit and respect), symbolic capital being in fact the other capitals once they have acquired legitimacy and recognition (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 230).

From this perspective, the value of a work of art is not intrinsic but the product of a struggle over the signs of distinction within the field: cultural value is not inherent; it is the product of a struggle in

which agents, by competing over the appropriation of the signs of distinction, simultaneously come to believe in the cultural game and profit from it (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 250).

The mediating link between the structure of the field and individual action is the habitus: a system of internalised dispositions that orients the agent's perception, judgement and practice. Individual inclinations are rooted in the mental dispositions of agents; they are formed over the course of a life and shape their behaviour and decisions (Brown & Szeman, 2000, p. 83).

These concepts converge in the notion of position-taking (*prise de position*), which Bourdieu develops under the heading of the dialectic of positions and dispositions. The interaction between the two, he argues, is reciprocal: a habitus, as a system of dispositions, is effectively realised only in relation to a determinate structure of socially marked positions, while conversely it is through dispositions, more or less adjusted to those positions, that one or another potentiality inscribed in the positions is realised (Bourdieu, 1995, pp. 264–265). A position-taking is therefore neither the free choice of an individual nor the mechanical expression of a structural location, but the meeting of the two. For the analysis of a painting this has a precise consequence. Each visual decision which object is placed where, which body is seated and which stands, which historical reference is admitted and which excluded is treated here as a move whose meaning is given by the structure of alternatives available at that moment in the field, rather than by the artist's biography or by the intrinsic properties of the objects depicted.

Bourdieu is explicit that the relation cannot be collapsed in either direction. Position-takings cannot be deduced from dispositions, nor can they be related directly back to positions; and the freedom left to dispositions itself varies according to the state of the field, its degree of autonomy, and the degree of institutionalisation of the post occupied (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 266). He illustrates the point by rejecting attempts to connect realism in literature or painting directly to the social characteristics of the groups from which its inventors came, insisting that such dispositions are determined only inside a determinate state of the artistic field and in relation to other positions within it (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 265). This methodological constraint governs the present study in both directions. It rules out inferring the meaning of the painting from what is known of Osman Hamdi Bey's upbringing, language or self-understanding; and it equally rules out deducing his pictorial choices from his institutional standing as museum director. The object of analysis is the relation between the two, not either term taken alone.

Three further concepts are used below and should be defined here. Relative autonomy names the degree to which a field imposes its own principles of hierarchisation rather than those of the economy or of politics; Bourdieu describes the artistic field as having constituted itself in the nineteenth century by taking the reverse of the economic law as its own fundamental law (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 84). Symbolic domination names the condition in which the categories through which a dominated group perceives itself are supplied by the dominant, so that the relation reproduces itself without overt coercion. Consecration names the act by which an institution converts a mere position in social space into a socially recognised reality an official nomination, a prize, an acquisition, an exhibition (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 135). Each is required by the argument that follows: the late Ottoman artistic field is analysed as possessing only relative autonomy; the terms in which Ottoman painting had to render itself intelligible are analysed as an effect of symbolic domination; and the passage of Osman Hamdi Bey's canvases into European collections is analysed as consecration in the strict sense.

In the analysis of "The Arms Merchant" these concepts are deployed in combination, and the manner of their combination requires two preliminary clarifications, since both bear on what the analysis is obliged to demonstrate.

The first concerns the two fields. This article speaks throughout of the late Ottoman artistic field and the international field of Orientalism, but this should not be read as the claim that Osman Hamdi Bey moved between two mutually independent universes, each with its own self-sufficient rules. The Ottoman artistic field of the 1900s was still in the process of institutionalisation an academy founded in 1882, a museum still building its collections, no autonomous market and no established body of criticism and it was constituted in a relation of symbolic domination to the European field. The categories by which a canvas could be recognised as art, the venues in which it could be consecrated, and the criteria of value themselves were established elsewhere. What is described here as a dual field is therefore an asymmetrical relation between a field in formation and a field that supplied the terms of its recognition, not a symmetry between equals. The evidential basis of this characterisation should be stated plainly, since it is not derived from the painting. It rests on the institutional record the dates of the academy and the museum, the training of Ottoman painters in Parisian ateliers, the absence of a domestic market or critical apparatus and on the existing scholarship: Posocco's (2021) account of the Ottoman museum as a field of limited autonomy, dominated politically and economically; and Eldem's observation that Osman Hamdi Bey's late canvases were destined for exhibition in the West. The painting is not offered here as evidence for the structure of that relation. It is analysed as a case operating within it, and the claims made below concern what the canvas does under those conditions, not what the conditions themselves were.

This clarification changes what the argument must establish. Bourdieu observes that the same dispositions may issue in aesthetic or political position-takings that are very different according to the state of the field in relation to which they have to be determined (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 265). The claim advanced below is accordingly not that Osman Hamdi Bey possessed two habitus, one Ottoman and one European, but that a single habitus, formed at the intersection of the two milieux, generated different position-takings according to which state of the field a given work addressed. What has been termed his bicultural habitus is on this account a single structure with a double reference, not a double structure. The formulation matters, because a doubled habitus would explain nothing: it would simply redescribe the contradiction it was introduced to resolve.

The second clarification concerns capital. The historical objects assembled in the painting the Byzantine capital, the two helmets, the sword, the flintlock rifles are not symbolic capital by virtue of being old. In Bourdieu's account a capital becomes symbolic when it is known and recognised, that is when it is perceived through categories of perception that grant it legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 111). Age alone confers nothing; recognition does. What makes these objects analysable as symbolic capital here is that at the moment of the painting they were recognised as heritage by two publics at once: by an Ottoman public for whom they indexed dynastic and civilisational continuity, and by a European public for whom the same objects functioned as authentic Orientalia and were collected, catalogued and exhibited as such. The objects are therefore treated below not as intrinsically valuable things but as items whose recognition was doubly secured and it is precisely this double recognition that makes them serviceable in a position-taking addressed to both fields at once.

Osman Hamdi Bey and the Late Ottoman Artistic Field

To understand Osman Hamdi's position-taking in "The Arms Merchant", one must first map his position in the late Ottoman artistic field a field on the threshold of institutionalisation, of whose institutions Osman Hamdi himself was one of the principal architects. In nineteenth-century Istanbul many painters had established studios in which art lovers enrolled to study; grasping this need, Osman Hamdi Bey took a decisive step towards fine-arts education in Turkey by founding the School of Fine Arts (Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi) (Armağan, 2023, p. 73). In 1881, after the death of Déthier, he was appointed the first director of the Imperial Museum (Müze-i Hümayûn); through his persistent efforts he then succeeded in founding the first Ottoman school of fine arts, known today as Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University (Armağan, 2023, p. 23).

This institutional position placed rare social and symbolic capital at his disposal capital rooted in his family origins. One of the key factors in Osman Hamdi's cultural and artistic achievements was his social position and family connections. His father, İbrahim Edhem Pasha, was a high-ranking Ottoman statesman, and these connections gave Osman Hamdi access to financial and political resources; he was thus able to transform a museum in poor condition into one of the most reputable museums in the world (Cezar, 1971, p. 165).

His artistic habitus, in turn, was formed in Paris in the atelier of Jean-Léon Gérôme; yet, unlike that of his Western peers, this habitus was placed in the service of a different project. Osman Hamdi's works were directly influenced by the Orientalist style of his master Gérôme an influence clearly visible in the general style of his œuvre, for which reason he too is classified among the Orientalist painters. He cannot, however, simply be equated with other Western Orientalist painters. Western Orientalists, often in order to justify their colonial domination and intervention in the East, presented clichéd and exaggerated images of backwardness, ruin and gendered notions of the East. Osman Hamdi, by contrast, despite drawing on the elements of the Orientalist style, sought to display the beauty and authenticity of Turkish art and culture. His deep attachment to Ottoman culture led him to create works that depicted the documentary and realistic aspects of Turkish art (Demirsar, 1987, pp. 32–33).

Unlike the clichéd, Western-centred approach of Orientalism, Hamdi returns in his works to the cultural and social roots of his own society (Özçelik, 2020, p. 457). This shows that Hamdi sought, by distancing himself from the dominant field of Orientalism, to construct a new artistic field in which native and national identity would be more prominent. "The Arms Merchant" must be read in the context of precisely this dual position: a work that answers simultaneously to two fields and two systems of expectations. Recent scholarship on the identity question in Turkish art reads this very duality as a founding moment: Osman Hamdi's rendering of local themes with Orientalist techniques carries the first traces of the identity fracture that the Turkish artist confronted in the process of modernisation, while his capacity to blend Western technique with Eastern content produced highly effective results (Arik & Karoğlu, 2026, p. 14).

Analysis of "The Arms Merchant"

Description of the Work

This painting is a work by Osman Hamdi Bey executed in 1908 in oil on canvas, measuring 185 × 140 cm (Eldem, 2010, p. 296). It counts as a classic restatement of the Orientalist tradition: distinctive Eastern costumes, objects, stonework and lines of East-

ern architecture are all visible in it (Image 1) (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5676). The work is held in the Ankara Painting and Sculpture Museum. Two points of source criticism should be registered at the outset. First, the dimensions are reported inconsistently across the literature: Eldem (2010, p. 296) gives 185 × 140 cm, Demirsar (1987, p. 89) 178 × 134 cm and Gümüş (2018, p. 5676) 175 × 130 cm. The present study follows Eldem, whose catalogue entry is the most recent and the most fully documented. Second, the title by which the painting is known today is not its earliest recorded name. Eldem registers *Seyf-i Katı Keskin Kılıç*, the sharp sword as the first name used in Turkish for this canvas, notes that it is generally known today as *Silah Taciri* (Eldem, 2010, p. 461), and reproduces the work under the title *Keskin Kılıç* (Eldem, 2010, p. 296). Demirsar (1987, p. 90) independently records that a version of the composition was published in the gazette of the Ottoman Painters' Society under the title *Seyf-i Katı*, with a caption stating that the work was then in London. The present article retains the current conventional title for the sake of bibliographic traceability, but two consequences should be noted. The designation "The Arms Merchant" is a later attribution rather than the painter's own, and the earlier title foregrounds the object rather than the transaction a difference that bears directly on the reading advanced below. This caution is not incidental: Eldem has argued that a substantial part of the interpretive literature on Osman Hamdi Bey rests on titles invented by later art historians and on meanings inferred from those titles without documentary support.

Image 1.

Osman Hamdi Bey, *The Arms Merchant* (*Silah Taciri*; earlier recorded title *Seyf-i Katı / Keskin Kılıç*), oil on canvas, 185 × 140 cm, Ankara Painting and Sculpture Museum, 1908



In a stone space with arched columns, two men occupy the foreground and two others the background. The seated man holds a fluted Turkish helmet of a fifteenth-century type, while a second helmet Turkish work of the seventeenth century, encircled by bands of stylised rumi and palmette ornament and by inscription bands rests on the column capital beside him (Demirsar, 1987, p. 90). He plays the role of a cultural intermediary: standing between historical authority and the new generation, he assumes the task of managing, presenting and interpreting this symbolic capital.

From the Reproduction of Orientalist Clichés to a Critique of the Dominant Discourse

The general characterisation given in the introduction can now be made specific. What was there stated as a claim that the work is not a passive reproduction of Orientalist cliché but a strategy executed with cultural capital and habitus is examined here against the pictorial evidence.

The rules of the Orientalist field, set out above, prescribed a repertoire of costumes, architecture and specifically Eastern objects. What requires demonstration is not that Osman Hamdi Bey knew these rules his training under Boulanger and Gérôme makes that certain but that he used them selectively. Through the choice of subjects, settings and objects he acted so as to balance the cultural values of the East against the expectations of Western audiences. The social field is an arena in which social agents endowed with different assets (economic, cultural and social capital) compete to acquire positions and to preserve their current position; at the objective level, groups and individuals strive, through symbols and collective action, to consolidate their position and to achieve dominance over the field of power (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 134).

The concept of the field of power shows that competition and domination in social fields including the field of Orientalism take shape through the mobilisation of different capitals. Using his cultural capital comprising Orientalist knowledge and Western art Osman Hamdi Bey was able to consolidate his position in this field. Through the deliberate choice of Eastern costumes, architecture and objects he both satisfied the expectations of Western audiences and challenged Orientalist clichés. These choices demonstrate his ability to use cultural capital to attain symbolic power and to criticise the dominant Orientalist discourse.

a) The Artist's Intervention in the Representation of the East: From Orientalism to the Re-Creation of Cultural Capital

This representation reveals Osman Hamdi's deep knowledge of the expectations of Western audiences, who viewed the East from a romantic and exotic angle. At the same time, he used the cultural elements of the East in such a way as to present a dignified image of Eastern culture and art instead of reproducing destructive clichés. This conscious choice reflects Osman Hamdi Bey's habitus, formed on the basis of his social and cultural background. Artistic inclinations and art-related behaviours take shape in interaction with social experience above all through the family and education and this process can be analysed through concepts such as habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 13). Drawing on this cultural capital, Osman Hamdi was able to create a work that would both be accepted by Western audiences and engage in a critique of the Orientalist discourse.

b) The Politics of Representation in the Orientalist Field: The Symbolic Use of Costume and Space

The choice of Eastern costumes in this work is one of Osman Hamdi Bey's key strategies for consolidating his position in the

Orientalist field. The work depicts the arms merchant and a young buyer who stands as his customer. As the source notes, the man's clothing suggests that he is an emir or a prince; in his paintings Osman Hamdi Bey preferred to use long, cloak-like garments, attractive to the Western viewer, in settings such as mosques, mosque forecourts, tombs and old mansions (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5678). This choice, while underscoring cultural authenticity, allows the Western viewer to entertain a romantic image of the East.

In terms of the concept of symbolic capital, the artist's symbolic capital is defined as a form of immaterial value grounded in recognition and credit within the artistic field; resting on the perception and belief of the agents and audiences of art, it plays a decisive role in the artist's position and influence (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 111). By using traditional Eastern costume as a sign of authenticity, Osman Hamdi reinforced the legitimacy of his works in the Orientalist field. This legitimacy not only consolidated his artistic standing in that field but also enabled him to answer the dominant Orientalist discourse through art.

c) Symbolic Resistance to the Orientalist Discourse: Re-Creating Eastern Civilisation Through Cultural Capital

Aware of Orientalist clichés, Osman Hamdi Bey sought to present a different image of the East. He believed that the best way to answer the West's Orientalist attitude was to draw on the authentic art and culture of the East and present it to the West; relying on these values, one could confront the Western outlook in a reasoned and effective manner (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5680). Instead of representing the East as a ruined and primitive space, he depicted it as a glorious and rich civilisation. This reading requires a qualification that the existing literature has not drawn out. Gümüş advances it only in his conclusion; in the body of the same article he follows Eldem in arguing that Osman Hamdi Bey held himself apart from his own society, understood himself as Western, and was demonstrably not a Turkish nationalist (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5676). The present study does not treat this tension as an inconsistency to be resolved in favour of one side or the other. It treats it as evidence that the opposition Orientalist / anti-Orientalist is the wrong instrument for the case, and that what is required instead is an account of the position from which such apparently contradictory dispositions can be held simultaneously.

This attitude reveals Osman Hamdi's resistance to the symbolic domination of the Orientalist discourse. Dispositions can undergo change over time and thereby become a reflection of the social and cultural conditions in which the artist lives (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 99). This view shows that dispositions, contrary to common assumption, are not static; they change under the influence of social and cultural structures, and artists can harness this dynamism to redefine dominant discourses. Aware of this capacity, Osman Hamdi Bey, rather than passively accepting Orientalist clichés, strove through his art to offer a different representation of the East one that, against the prevailing Orientalist narratives, insists on the cultural and civilisational values of the East. From this perspective his works were not only a critical response to the Orientalist discourse; they also showed how an artist can use his cultural capital to transform existing symbolic perceptions.

Realist Representation and Symbolic Consolidation: Realism, Squaring and Self-Representation

Realism in the art of Osman Hamdi Bey, besides reflecting the social and cultural transformations of the late nineteenth century, is also a product of his position in the Ottoman artistic field and of his interactions with other artists. Artistic realism depends not only on the social background of artists but also on their position

within the artistic field and their interactions with other artists; in other words, an artist's style and outlook are shaped, beyond social factors, by his position in the artistic space and his relations with fellow artists (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 265). Within this framework, the realism of Osman Hamdi's works not only registers the social and cultural influences of the Ottoman artistic field but also testifies to his complex interactions with contemporary artists and his effort to consolidate his position in the international field of Orientalism.

"The Arms Merchant" is a striking example of this realism. In this work, created with a realist approach, two figures appear in the background, one excitedly explaining something and the other listening attentively; the realism of the work is such that one can almost hear their conversation (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5677). This precise representation of an everyday scene displays Osman Hamdi's ability to use realism to create a bond between the subjects of his works and the viewer. In this way he not only reflects everyday life in the Ottoman world but also strengthens his position in the field by producing works conforming to the values of the artistic field of his time; for what makes a property valuable in a social field is not the property itself but the laws obtaining in that particular field (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 113). In this sense, the realism of Osman Hamdi's works reflects the laws and values of an Ottoman artistic field shaped by European academic traditions; by accepting those laws he was able to consolidate his position effectively both in the Ottoman artistic field and in international Orientalism.

a) The Squaring Technique as New Cultural Capital and Its Role in the Realism of the Works

One of the methods Osman Hamdi Bey employed in creating his works was the squaring technique: he would often take an actual photograph, square and enlarge it, and then paint from it on the canvas (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5677). The evidential status of this claim for the present work should be stated precisely. No source photograph for this particular canvas has been identified; Gümüş infers the use of the method here by dividing the finished painting into equal squares and observing that the placement of the figures follows the compositional logic of photography (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5677). What is documented for this work is of a different order: Demirsar (1987, p. 90) records a photograph of Osman Hamdi Bey at work on this very canvas. Besides demonstrating his mastery of precision and detail, this technique testifies to his engagement with new forms of cultural capital such as photography, then recognised as a modern instrument.

The position of individuals in social space depends on two key factors: the total volume of capital and the structure of capital (Bourdieu, 1994/2001, p. 34). The use of the squaring technique, as a form of cultural capital, allowed Osman Hamdi both to conform to the values of the artistic field and to create works that would stand out among his contemporaries. The method not only helped him raise precision of detail and realism to an unrivalled level; it also operated as an instrument for consolidating his position in the Orientalist field.

b) Self-Representation as a Strategy for Consolidating Position in the Cultural Field

Osman Hamdi's recurrent presence in his own works is one of the distinctive features of his style, functioning not merely as an artistic choice but as a strategy for consolidating his position in the artistic field. In many of Osman Hamdi Bey's works he himself appears in various roles and functions; in some paintings two or even three Osman Hamdis can be seen within a single space, as if he had been multiplied (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5677). This self-represen-

tation reveals Osman Hamdi's conscious effort to consolidate his cultural capital in the Ottoman artistic field and in international Orientalism.

The social position of individuals is determined not only by their various capitals (economic, cultural and social); it is also recognisable symbolically, through the signs of distinction. Individuals continually strive, by means of these signs, to preserve and reinforce their social position (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 11). Osman Hamdi's repeated presence in his works reflects precisely this approach: in doing so he not only consolidated his artistic identity but also contributed to reproducing the values of the Ottoman artistic field. Visual representation, moreover, does more than record a presence: it transforms the represented subject into an image resistant to time (Kızıllırmak Çekinmez, 2026, p. 39); each self-depiction thus also inscribed the artist durably into the visual memory of the field.

Realism in the works of Osman Hamdi Bey, as one of the most prominent features of his style, thus reflected the complex interaction between his individual habitus and the laws of the artistic field. Through techniques such as squaring and self-representation he was able to create works conforming both to the values of the Ottoman artistic field and to the expectations of international Orientalism. The valuation of artistic and cultural works is not confined to their intrinsic properties; their position in social fields and struggles also plays a decisive role (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 228). From this perspective, Osman Hamdi Bey's success can be seen as the outcome of a complex interaction between his habitus, his artistic techniques and the laws of the artistic field an interaction that enabled him not only to forge a unique artistic style but also to secure a lasting place, as one of the leading figures of Ottoman art, in the history of Orientalist art.

Space and Historical Objects: Art as Cultural Resistance

Osman Hamdi Bey turned painting into an instrument for representing the cultural and historical identity of the Islamic world. Unlike the Orientalist gaze common in the works of his Western contemporaries, this representation insists not on destruction and ruin but on the reconstruction of symbolic and cultural capital. Among his works, "The Arms Merchant" is an outstanding example of this approach: the architectural space, the objects employed and the composition of the figures all serve to reproduce Ottoman historical and cultural legitimacy. From a sociological standpoint, these choices not only express Osman Hamdi Bey's habitus as an intellectual artist in a field fraught with tension between East and West; they also constitute a form of resistance to the symbolic domination of the Orientalist discourse. Such a reading accords with the perspective of object semantics, which examines the material elements of a painting beyond their physical presence in their cultural, symbolic, historical and ideological layers of meaning and shows that depicted objects can operate as signs of status, cultural capital and global interaction (Kalyoncu, 2026, pp. 1-2).

a) The Representation of Space and Objects: A Critique of the Orientalist Discourse

The space represented in "The Arms Merchant", unlike that of many Orientalist works, is neither a ruin nor a derelict site. By emphasising architectural refinement, Osman Hamdi Bey distanced himself from the common Orientalist clichés that presented a static, decaying image of the Islamic world. Unlike many contemporary works, the space of this painting does not reflect decay and cultural decline; it is depicted as part of a living, dynamic tradition (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5680). This choice reveals a conscious effort

to alter the dominant narrative, especially since in the late nineteenth century many Western artists portrayed the Middle East as a static place trapped in the past.

The composition of the painting, too, stands in contrast to the Orientalist tradition. Instead of concentrating on unrealistic, fantastical elements, Osman Hamdi Bey created a coherent space grounded in precise architectural and historical detail. Such a choice reflects his position in the Ottoman cultural field, where, as an artist conscious of the dominant discourses, he sought to obtain artistic legitimacy not by repeating common clichés but by reconstructing cultural identity.

b) The Han as a Commercial Setting: Exchange and Historical Continuity

One of the most prominent spatial elements of the painting is its setting: the interior of a han, the urban commercial inn of the Ottoman city. Demirsar describes the space as the interior of a han whose staircase to the upper storey rises in the corner of the structure, and notes that because the interiors of hans have altered so greatly it has not proved possible to establish which han is depicted (Demirsar, 1987, p. 89). The terminological distinction carries analytical weight. The han is not the caravanserai of the long-distance trade routes but the working commercial building of the city, and in choosing it Osman Hamdi Bey situates the exchange of these objects within an urban commercial environment rather than in the vanished world of the caravan routes. The setting is thus closer to a claim about contemporary Ottoman commercial life than to a nostalgic reference to its history, though the point should not be pressed further than the image supports.

This choice is sociologically significant, since the Ottoman cultural field of the period needed to rebuild its legitimacy in the face of the waves of modernisation and Western cultural penetration. By placing his subjects in such a space, Osman Hamdi Bey implicitly insists on Ottoman historical continuity and civilisational role. In the Ottoman artistic field, such images not only contributed to cultural identity-building; they also served as a form of symbolic capital legitimising the official narrative of history.

c) The Byzantine Capitals: Representing Multilayered Civilisational Bonds

Another important detail in “The Arms Merchant” is the presence of historical column capitals in the background. This basket-patterned Byzantine capital underscores the cultural bonds between the Ottomans and earlier civilisations. In Osman Hamdi Bey’s painting a capital of basket-shaped design with mask-like ornament can be seen, belonging to the Byzantine period and the sixth century CE (Demirsar, 1987, p. 89) (Image 2). This capital is not an invented prop. Demirsar identifies it as a specific object that stood within the Çoban Mustafa Pasha complex at Gebze, argues that Osman Hamdi Bey must have seen it there, and observes that he transferred it to the canvas with certain small alterations; the present whereabouts of the object are unknown, so that the painting has itself become the record of it (Demirsar, 1987, p. 89). Two consequences follow for the argument. First, the painter is working from an identified monument in a locality he knew well, so the capital enters the composition as documented material rather than as generic Orientalist furniture. Second, the alterations are themselves position-takings: the artist does not merely record the object but adjusts it to the requirements of the composition, and it is precisely such adjustments that a field analysis is equipped to read.

Image 2.

Silah Taciri, detail: brass helmet, ivory-stocked flintlock rifles and carved capital fragments



Beyond its aesthetic value, this choice is significant from the standpoint of the cultural field. By displaying these elements Osman Hamdi Bey shows that Ottoman identity draws not only on the Islamic tradition but on the multilayered history of the region. His painting can thus be seen as part of a cultural project in which Ottoman history is represented not as a rupture with the past but as a continuation of earlier civilisational traditions. Such a representation stands against the prevailing Orientalist narrative that described the Ottoman world as an isolated, static entity. Indeed, the trans-civilisational circulation of forms is a deep-rooted pattern in Anatolian visual culture: studies of the double-headed eagle motif show how symbols of power and sovereignty travelled from Mesopotamia and Byzantium to the Seljuks and the Ottomans, being recharged with new meanings at every stage (Çelik et al., 2026, pp. 60–61).

d) Military Objects as Symbolic Capital: Power and Legitimacy in Ottoman Art

As an artist active in the Ottoman artistic field, Osman Hamdi Bey not only increased his cultural capital through artistic knowledge and skill; he also strove to consolidate his symbolic capital through acceptance in artistic and intellectual circles. The complex relation between the field of art and the field of power reveals a continuous, dynamic interaction between the two domains: the field of art, even as it is influenced by the field of power, acts upon it in turn, and artists, as the principal players of the artistic field, can challenge power structures and bring about social change through the production of works of art and the creation of cultural discourses (Posocco, 2021, p. 34).

Furthermore, the display of these objects in a commercial space of this kind recalls the historical role of hans and caravanserais alike in the arms trade and in military movements. This combination of space and objects not only underlines the economic and cultural complexities of the Ottoman world; it also operates as an instrument for representing the power and historical continuity of the empire. These artefacts of traditional craftsmanship are, in this sense, more than commercial props: as research on Anato-

lian craft traditions emphasises, such objects embody production practices that carry a society's aesthetic perception, its cultural symbols and its collective memory (Sönmez, 2026, p. 57).

e) Reproducing Cultural Identity Through Art

"The Arms Merchant" can be regarded as an outstanding example of Osman Hamdi Bey's effort to reproduce Ottoman cultural identity. By choosing the han, the Byzantine capital and the military objects, he offers a historical narrative that insists not on ruin and decline but on civilisational continuity and splendour.

This approach reflects the artist's habitus and his position in the Ottoman cultural field. On the one hand, as an intellectual artist, he criticises Orientalist clichés; on the other, in a field shaped by modernisation and cultural rivalries, he strives to consolidate Ottoman historical and cultural legitimacy. His works can therefore be seen as part of a broader project in which artistic representation becomes an instrument of cultural resistance and of the reconstruction of symbolic capital.

The Study of Bodily Gestures and the Consolidation of Power: Visual Arrangements and Hierarchies of Power

In "The Arms Merchant" the merchant's seated posture is designed to convey calm, stability and authority. He sits on a Byzantine capital itself a symbol of history, power and civilisation (Image 3). This gesture and bodily placement reflect his position in the cultural field and the power relations that field defines. Such a mode of sitting, and its association with social standing and hierarchies of power, is rooted in cultural and historical traditions: throughout history, sitting on chairs, thrones or particular objects has been read as a sign of authority and superiority, and the thrones and chairs of kings have historically been designed with exaggerated forms and special ornament to display their power and their superiority over ordinary people (Demirarslan, 2018, p. 73). In this painting the merchant's body, as a socialised body, has internalised the structures of the Orientalist cultural field and reproduces his authority through its gestures. This body is not only a bearer of cultural capital; it operates as a cultural text that narrates Ottoman history through gesture and through the object in his hand. Symbols such as the helmet here carry not only historical meaning; they also play a mediating role in cultural reproduction and the transmission of authority.

Image 3.

Silah Taciri, detail: the seated merchant with the fifteenth-century helmet and the standing buyer examining the sword



The merchant's body is, in effect, an instrument for representing the history and authority of the East in the face of Western cultural domination. Here too the choice of the seated gesture reflects the person's standing and authority within a particular cultural structure. The choice of the Byzantine capital as a seat, beyond referring to the merchant's position as a man of knowledge and authority, expresses a further layer of meaning: the use of a historical and cultural element (the Byzantine capital) as part of the scene displays the bond between power, history and cultural capital. By commanding this capital, the merchant consolidates his position not merely as a man of authority but as the bearer of a historical and cultural heritage.

The posture of the middle figure also carries important implications. He is placed so that he both has access to the historical helmet and can pass it on to the next generation a position that makes him the custodian and guardian of tradition. Such a figure occupies what this analysis treats as an intermediary position within the cultural field: he neither originates the authority the objects carry nor finally receives it, but controls the terms on which it is transmitted, interpreting and passing on symbolic capital in accordance with the frameworks already in place. In this process the standing man gradually not only consolidates his own position in the field of power; as one who has accepted and internalised this order, he will himself in future become an agent of its reproduction. In this sense, what at first sight appears to be a transmission of knowledge leads, at a deeper level, to the consolidation of the symbolic order of power.

The standing man, placed opposite the seated man and holding a sword, symbolises the future of authority. What distinguishes him from the merchant is not the age of the object he holds but his relation to it. The seated man commands historical objects that are already his; the buyer is in the act of acquisition, raising and testing the blade before it passes into his possession. The sword itself belongs, as the analysis of the weapons below establishes, to the older register of the composition rather than to a new one. What is new is the moment of transfer: authority here is being handed over rather than merely displayed, and it is this transfer, not the object, that registers the redefinition of power in a changing context.

In the visual arrangement of the painting one may note the combination of straight and curved lines, which creates a contrast of forms: the horizontal board in the background and the vertical column in the outer section display a palpable opposition, reinforced by the placement of the figures. The vertical form of the standing man and the forty-five-degree angle of the sword in his hand create a kind of harmony and balance; likewise, the round helmet in the seated man's hand and the helmet hanging from his waist by a red cord display a form of visual concord (Gümü, 2018, p. 5676).

The viewer's eye moves naturally from the helmet on the capital to the helmet in the seated man's hand and then to the standing man. This movement constructs a series of symbolic distinctions that function as a visual syntax: it not only narrates the transmission of knowledge and authority but arranges the viewer's attention so that the resulting hierarchy appears as an order to be recognised rather than as an arrangement to be questioned. The placement of objects and persons creates a hierarchy of power: first the helmet on the capital (the symbol of historical authority), then the seated man who presents and manages it (the cultural intermediary), and finally the standing man who is learning and acquiring cultural capital.

The reading of the bodies proposed here extends the account of habitus set out above. A body that has internalised the dis-

positions of a field is not merely a bearer of cultural and social capital; it is the site at which those dispositions become visible, and therefore the site at which hierarchies can be shown to be reproduced. In "The Arms Merchant", the gestures and bodily placement of the two main figures the seated merchant and the standing buyer can be analysed as instruments for displaying this symbolic struggle in the Ottoman and Orientalist cultural fields. The merchant, seated on a Byzantine capital, occupies the superior position and, through his control of the historical helmet, displays his command of cultural capital. Opposite him the young customer, probably an emir or prince, stands in a lower position with a curious, forward-leaning posture a bodily attitude marking him as one in the process of acquiring cultural capital who has not yet attained full command. From this perspective, the combination of symbols, objects and the figures' positions forms a hierarchical visual system in which historical authority is transmitted, through a cultural intermediary, to the new generation.

The distinction between the seated man and the standing man can be taken as a representation of the mechanisms by which power is reproduced. For a proper understanding of social phenomena, instead of searching for their fixed, intrinsic essence, one must analyse the mutual relations and interactions between individuals and social groups; in other words, individual behaviours and choices are shaped by people's positions in social space and cannot be attributed merely to their intrinsic characteristics (Bourdieu, 1994/2001, pp. 29–31). This idea can be observed in the position of the seated man, who, as cultural intermediary, manages and transmits knowledge and authority, while the standing man is engaged in acquiring legitimacy and consolidating his own position.

The distinction drawn earlier between capital and its recognition applies here in a further respect: what is transmitted in this scene is lodged both in an object, the helmet, and in a position, the merchant's command of it, and neither is intelligible without the other. The seated man, holding the helmet, represents one who has access to this cultural capital and can transmit it to later generations. The transmission of knowledge and authority thus proceeds not only through social interaction but through symbolic systems and meaning-bearing objects.

On the other side, the standing man who holds the sword appears in the painting as the representative of the new generation and the future of Ottoman authority. His standing posture signals dynamism and the pursuit of power. In the terms established above, this figure is in the process of acquiring cultural capital and entering the field of power. Although he has no access to the helmet as the symbol of past authority, his sword an active and more modern instrument shows that his authority takes shape not through direct possession of historical capital but through its reconstruction and adaptation to present conditions.

This transmission of knowledge and legitimacy is not a neutral process but a form of reproduction of power relations, effected through the supervision and regulation of knowledge by the seated man. To attain his position the standing man must not only learn this knowledge but internalise it and submit to the existing structures of power a fact that underscores the importance of adapting and reinterpreting traditions for the survival and legitimization of new authority.

The Transformation of the Instruments of Power and Legitimacy: From Sword to Rifle

Moreover, this transformation of the instruments of power and legitimacy in "The Arms Merchant" emphatically registers the changes then under way in the social field and in the structures of power. This follows from the account of capital given above,

in which legitimacy is reproduced not through economic capital alone but through cultural, social and symbolic capital as well (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 230); the instruments and signs of power are among the material forms through which that reproduction becomes visible. "The Arms Merchant" is an outstanding example of such representation, depicting the change in the instruments of power and legitimacy. Through its distinctive composition and its precise rendering of the instruments of power helmet, sword and rifle the work offers a multilayered narrative of power and legitimacy.

In the painting, the standing figure and the sword in his hand are placed at the intersection of the horizontal and vertical lines. This technique, also used in photography to direct the viewer's attention, marks the artist's emphasis on the standing figure as the principal symbol of power (Gümüş, 2018, p. 5677). The composition not only makes the standing figure the centre of the viewer's attention; it also foregrounds the sword as one of the instruments of historical and symbolic legitimacy.

The details of the weapons in the painting are likewise of great significance. The rifles on display are flintlocks with ivory stocks dating from the eighteenth century, of which comparable examples survive in Turkish museums (Demirsar, 1987, p. 90). These rifles register the change in the instruments of power over time: the rifle, as a more modern instrument, is set beside the sword, which belongs to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Demirsar, 1987, p. 90). The use of Byzantine columns alongside Ottoman weapons creates a historical contrast that probably carries an interpretation of the Ottoman Empire's cultural coexistence and rivalry with its Byzantine past; the combination may symbolically indicate the role of the past in the formation of Ottoman identity. This historical juxtaposition clearly depicts the passage from traditional to more modern instruments of power showing that Osman Hamdi painted not merely a scene but the evolution of a civilisation. Taken together, the datable objects assembled in the composition form a continuous chronological sequence: a Byzantine column capital of the sixth century, a fluted Turkish helmet of the fifteenth, a Turkish sword of the later sixteenth to early seventeenth, a Turkish helmet of the seventeenth, and flintlock rifles of the eighteenth (Demirsar, 1987, pp. 89–90). Twelve centuries are thus laid out within a single frame. The claim of civilisational continuity is not, in this painting, a rhetorical figure supplied by the interpreter; it is a countable property of the objects the painter chose to place in the room, and it is on this basis that the sociological reading offered here rests.

The change in the instruments of power can be interpreted as a change in the social field and in the reproduction of symbolic capital. The sword, as a traditional instrument, symbolises a legitimated power rooted in tradition and history; the rifle, by contrast, represents newer instruments that redefine legitimacy and authority through technology and modern means. Four levels must be held apart here, since conflating them is what produces the error the analysis has already had to correct. At the level of the objects' dates, the sword is the older and the rifle the more recent. At the level of symbolic position, the sword indexes tradition and inherited legitimacy, the rifle technology and modernisation. At the level of the figures' relation to the object, the merchant is the holder and the buyer the acquirer. And at the level of the transformation of power, the sword marks continuity and the rifle marks change. These levels do not run in parallel, and the argument of this article turns on their separation: the buyer's position is new although the object he raises is old, because what is new is the relation through which the object changes hands, not the object itself. This change registers not only a transformation of the physical instruments of power but also a shift in the structures of the field of power and legitimacy.

"The Arms Merchant" can therefore be regarded as a manifestation of the field of power and of symbolic capital, in which the instruments of power, as symbolic elements, are put to work in representing and consolidating the social order. Through artistic composition and precise historical detail Osman Hamdi Bey depicted this transformation subtly and thought-provokingly. The work shows how the instruments of power and legitimacy are represented and reproduced not only in historical contexts but in artistic and cultural ones as well. Power and legitimacy, in consequence, are perpetually in transformation and redefinition, and symbolic instruments play a key role in this process.

Body, Habitus and the Reproduction of the Field

As the visual arrangement and the instruments of power have shown, power relations are reproduced not only through objects but through bodies and habitus. In this respect the habitus performs the function that other philosophies ascribe to transcen-

dental consciousness: the habitus is a socialised body, a structured body that has absorbed the immanent structures of a world, or of a particular sector of that world a field and these structures shape both perception of and action in that world (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81).

The reading of the two figures has already been given in detail above and is not repeated here; what matters at this point is its theoretical consequence. The merchant's seated command of the helmet places him in the position of the knower of the field. Opposite him the customer stands, raising and examining the sword the position of one who is acquiring cultural capital but has not yet attained full command. The buyer's standing posture can be read as a metaphor of the East in reconstruction: against the image of a passive East in the works of Western Orientalists, Osman Hamdi deploys this standing, dynamic body as a symbol of youth and of the potential for re-creating Eastern identity in the face of Western cultural domination.

Table 1:

Pictorial technique in Osman Hamdi Bey and its operation in "The Arms Merchant"

Axis of analysis	Features and details	Operation in "The Arms Merchant"
Realism in the works of Osman Hamdi Bey	Precise representation of everyday life, natural gestures of the figures and details of the setting.	In this canvas realism serves an evidential function: because the objects are rendered with documentary precision, they can be identified and dated by later scholarship, and the claim of civilisational continuity therefore rests on verifiable material rather than on atmosphere.
The squaring technique	Use of an actual photograph transferred to the canvas with high precision.	No source photograph has been identified for this canvas; what is documented is a photograph of the artist at work on it (Demirsar, 1987, p. 90). Photographic method here functions less as a demonstrable procedure than as an index of the artist's command of a new technical capital.
Architectural detail	Precise representation of Eastern architecture such as hans, Byzantine capitals and Islamic spaces.	The setting is the interior of a han, not a caravanserai, and the Byzantine capital within it is an identified object from the Çoban Mustafa Paşa complex at Gebze, transferred to the canvas with small alterations (Demirsar, 1987, p. 89). Architecture here is documented material subjected to authorial adjustment.
Display of historical objects	Precise depiction of military instruments such as the helmet, the sword and the rifle, together with decorative elements such as historical capitals.	The datable objects span the sixth to the eighteenth centuries. They function as symbolic capital not because they are old but because their status as heritage was recognised simultaneously by an Ottoman and a European public, which is what makes them usable in a position-taking addressed to both fields.
Self-representation of the artist	The recurrent presence of Osman Hamdi Bey in his own works in various roles.	Whether either figure in this canvas is a self-portrait is not established by the documentary literature; the technique is therefore invoked here as a general feature of the practice and is not made to bear analytical weight in the reading of this work.
Lighting and colour	Use of soft lighting and warm colours to emphasise figures and objects.	Light falls on the raised blade and on the standing figure, so that the object in transit and its acquirer, rather than the seated holder, occupy the illuminated centre of the composition.
Arrangement and composition	Combination of straight and curved lines, opposition between standing and seated figures, and the guidance of the viewer's eye towards key elements.	The eye is led from the helmet on the capital, to the helmet in the merchant's hand, to the standing buyer. The sequence stages the three analytical levels of this study objects, bodies, instruments in the order in which the composition itself presents them.
Engagement with European academic traditions	Influence of realism and of Western artistic techniques.	The academic idiom is what made the canvas legible as painting in the European field at all. Its use is therefore evidence of the asymmetry described in the theoretical framework: the terms of recognition were supplied by the dominant field, and had to be accepted in order to be contested.
Analysis of the artistic field	Attention to the expectations of Western audiences and adaptation of the works to the rules of the Orientalist field.	In this canvas the strategy is legible as a single position-taking: the conventions of the genre are observed costume, weapons, an Eastern interior while their content is inverted, since the scene shows not a decaying East but the orderly transmission of authority between generations.

In consequence, the bodies in this painting are not merely representations of characters; they are the medium through which the field reproduces itself. This completes the second of the three analytical levels declared in the method: what the objects establish as a structure of recognition, the bodies enact as a structure of transmission. The third level, the instruments and the direction of their transfer, has been treated in the preceding section, and the conclusion draws the three together.

Analytical Summary: Elements of Realism and Technique in “The Arms Merchant”

Table 1 sets out the pictorial techniques identified above and, for each, its specific operation within “The Arms Merchant”. Its function in a single-case design is to make explicit how a general feature of Osman Hamdi Bey’s practice is realised in this particular canvas, so that the claims of the analysis can be checked against the work rather than against the œuvre as a whole.

Taken together, these techniques are not a list of stylistic virtues but the practical means by which the position-taking analysed here was executed. Realism supplied the evidential precision that makes the objects identifiable; the academic idiom secured legibility in the dominant field; and the compositional hierarchy directed the viewer through the transmission the painting depicts.

Conclusion

A Bourdieusian analysis of “The Arms Merchant” shows that the work cannot simply be placed within the dichotomy Orientalism / anti-Orientalism; it must be understood as a strategic act at the intersection of two fields. Osman Hamdi, as an agent endowed with a bicultural habitus and a rare volume of cultural, social and symbolic capital, accepts the rules of the Orientalist field the Eastern subject, costume, architecture and exotic objects in order to be seen in that field; but he inverts the content of those rules: instead of a ruin, a living tradition; instead of a passive East, a standing, learning body; and instead of rupture, a civilisational continuity from Byzantium to the Ottomans.

The findings of the analysis can be formulated at three levels. First, at the level of space and objects: the han, the Byzantine capital and the historical weapons are symbolic capitals assembled in the composition to reconstruct Ottoman historical and civilisational legitimacy against the decline-centred Orientalist narrative. Second, at the level of bodies: the opposition of seated and standing gestures depicts the hierarchy of knowledge and the process of the transmission of legitimacy; the bodies in this work are not mere representations of characters but the very mechanism by which the field is reproduced. Third, at the level of instruments: the juxtaposition of sword and rifle shows the redefinition of legitimacy in the passage from tradition to modernity, turning the work into a document of the structural transformation of the Ottoman field of power on the eve of the twentieth century.

In sum, “The Arms Merchant” is a visual document of the moment at which the Ottoman artistic field sought to define its relative autonomy vis-à-vis the international field of Orientalism; and with this very work Osman Hamdi shows that symbolic resistance becomes possible not by leaving the game but by mastering its rules. Future research could extend this analysis through a comparative study of “The Arms Merchant” and “The Tortoise Trainer”, and of the Orientalist works of Jean-Léon Gérôme, and could examine, from the standpoint of the sociology of reception, how the work was read in European exhibitions of the early twentieth century. A further promising line of comparison lies in contemporary art: studies of Kehinde Wiley’s strategic reworking of the classical European portrait tradition show that appropriating the codes of a dominant visual field in order to re-inscribe a marginalised iden-

tity within it functions not as a mere formal choice but as a critical strategy against historical exclusion (Aydın & Karoğlu, 2025, p. 36) a strategy whose logic “The Arms Merchant” had anticipated a century earlier.

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Image Sources

Image 1.

Osman Hamdi Bey, The Arms Merchant (Silah Taciri), 1908, oil on canvas, Ankara Painting and Sculpture Museum. Wikimedia Commons (public domain). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ankara_Silah_Taciri_by_Osman_Hamdi_Bey_0556.jpg (accessed 16 July 2026)

Image 2.

Detail of the work reproduced in Image 1 (helmet, flintlock rifles and carved capital fragments). Same source as Image 1

Image 3.

Detail of the work reproduced in Image 1 (the two principal figures). Same source as Image 1