UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

# Disorienting encounters : re-reading seventeenth and eighteenth century Ottoman miniature paintings = Desoriënterende ontmoetingen : een herlezing van zeventiende- en achttiende-eeuwse Ottomaanse miniaturen

Firat, B.O.

**Publication date**
2008

Link to publication

**Citation for published version (APA):**
Firat, B. O. (2008). *Disorienting encounters : re-reading seventeenth and eighteenth century Ottoman miniature paintings = Desoriënterende ontmoetingen : een herlezing van zeventiende- en achttiende-eeuwse Ottomaanse miniaturen*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

**General rights**
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)*
Download date:13 Nov 2026

**SUMMARY**

This study focuses on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ottoman illustrated manuscripts. It aims to develop a novel concept-based methodology for analyzing miniature paintings and argues that they possess agency in contemporary culture as "theoretical objects" that teach us how to think, speak, and write about art today.

The first chapter explores the narrative function of the pictorial detail in the process of reading images. It not only makes inquiry into the ways in which words and images interact but also sketches out a methodological stance that will guide this study. To address the issues pertaining to reading, I examine a seventeenth-century miniature painting that visualizes a story that is universally known (at least in the West, and further afield as well): the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise. I show how certain iconographically dysfunctional details that do not easily fit in the pre-textual framing of the miniature open up a process of narrative reading, which privileges the detail as a site of meaning on its own. By so doing, the first chapter demonstrates that images are not merely prefigured by official texts but also, and above all, *post*-performed by the viewer, a premise developed in the following chapters.

In the following chapter, I advance my take on the process of reading in greater detail by engaging with the notions of rereading and palimpsestic looking. I deal with conventional modes of viewing and visual discourses invoked by images and imposed on them by their viewers. I look at an eighteenth-century single-page nude miniature entitled *Woman bathing in the Hamam* by the court artist Abdullah Buharî. This miniature, a unique occurrence in the scarcely existing genre of the nude, appropriates the style and content of so-called bazaar miniatures (by local miniaturists working outside of the imperial atelier) that drew on Orientalist images from costume albums produced by European artists. Through its negotiation with the Orientalist gaze—handed down to it from these albums as well as local bazaar miniatures—the miniature encourages us to ponder the conventional ways of addressing a nude that have been formulated in binary oppositions such as gazing and glancing, or returning/subverting the gaze.

I argue that the *Woman bathing in the Hamam* miniature challenges the distanced, voyeuristic, and almost rapist reading enabled and indeed encouraged by the Orientalist imagery. It offers an alternative mode of looking, playing out what I

call an “intimate encounter.” The miniature fosters a spatial, embodied, haptic, and erotic intimacy that plays on the boundary between knowing and not-knowing the other’s body. As such, the miniature, while proposing an intimate look as a mode of engagement, simultaneously prompts us to reconsider the concept of intimacy. Ultimately, based on the two diverse understandings of the intimate as have been advanced by Gérard Wajcman and Hamid Dabashi, I argue that the miniature promotes an instance of intersubjective intimacy in which the image looks back at and touches the viewer.

Chapter 3 zooms out from the detail to a wider realm of inquiry, namely the representation of time and movement in painting. I look at a set of miniatures from the *Sûrname-i Vehbi*, which gives a day-to-day visual and verbal account of the circumcision festival of Sultan Ahmed III’s sons. The miniature series under consideration depicts the Sultan’s procession in three sets of double-paged miniatures spread over six pages. I propose that the arrangement of the miniatures has an anachronistic cinematic “touch” to it because the technique underlines a problem of representing an *event*—a problem that extends into the treatment of time and space within motion. My comparison between the two incompatible media relies on a “critical loop” between media—a concept inspired by the writings of the Soviet cinematographer Sergei Eisenstein—through which the problematic tradition of representation that has been handed down to the figurative arts over time can be compared and contrasted. This interpretative method allows me to address issues concerning representation in the series by engaging a chain of cinematic concepts such as the still and the out-of-field as well as the notions of montage and the interval. This montage of concepts articulates the ways in which the procession miniatures produce an idea of event-ness in both effect and affect so as to help construct an imperial visuality.

In the following chapter, I trace the production of the imperial visuality further by focusing on one of the most established genres in Ottoman painting, namely, portraiture. The miniature portrait of Sultan Ahmed III by Levnî is an exceptional miniature in sultanic portraiture since its ornamentation, taken to the level of *horror vacui*, nearly overwhelms the main subject—the figure of the sultan. In this sense, the miniature problematizes not so much the core issues of referentiality and likeness but the very function of imperial portraiture. To delineate what this portrait does to its viewer, I first assert that the ornamental is a site of

meaning, a constructive supplement, or a *parergon* that creates a resolutely flat and opaque pictorial space. Additionally, the ornamentation provides the miniature with an "auratic" shield (a notion advanced by Walter Benjamin), distancing the viewer from the image and simultaneously screening her gaze from access to the sultan's inner qualities, and thus prohibiting the achievement of what has usually been considered one of the defining traits of a "successful" portrait.

Subsequently I address the ways in which the miniature portrays the sitter as *the sultan*. I propose that it does not represent an individual—Ahmed III—but presents the sultan, conceptually, as an image. The viewer is not provided with *a* sultan, but is shown the meaning of sultan-ness. This view concords with Gülru Necipoğlu's argument that the Ottoman sultan differs from his contemporaries by an irreconcilable invisibility that is epitomized by the architectural structure of the Topkapi Palace (2000). In this sense, the miniature portrait reinforces the sultan's power to not be seen, or to be seen only as a silhouette that cannot be imbued with individuality.

In the fifth chapter, I dwell on material aspects of miniatures by engaging with physical and conceptual features of their primary medium, the book. A miniature from the *Rawdat al-Safa* depicting the campaign of King Timur (a.k.a. Tamerlane) against Sultan Husayn directs me to focus on the scale, dimension, and physical orientation of miniatures as conditioned by their placement in books so as to disentangle their implications for the process of reading. The directionality of looking proposed by the Timur miniature, which is analogous to that of reading a book, brings about a problem concerning the orientation of the viewing process. The mode of reading encouraged by the miniature is significantly different from the viewing trajectory promoted by the tableau and wall painting, which follow the vertical orientation of the human body. Following critiques of verticality offered by Walter Benjamin, Leo Steinberg, and Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, as well as their arguments concerning the horizontal image in modernism, I argue that the miniature suggests a total horizontalization of the viewing process that affects the viewer's body as much as her intellect.

Additionally, the image combines the experience of horizontalization with a process of miniaturization that has a subversive potential, affecting the viewer's physical and intellectual encounter with objects. In the Timur miniature, at the juncture of miniaturization and horizontalization, an invisible "object," a detail in the

center, takes over the image. This invisible detail offers a narrative reading by operating as a device for what has been conceptualized as a "pregnant moment"—a moment that opens up to a future-to-come that cannot be incorporated within the miniature. Moreover, it functions as a symptom, as Georges Didi-Huberman called it, indicating a passage to "another state of painting."

In the final chapter, I scrutinize the state of painting advanced in miniature painting by introducing the novel concept of the threshold, which I propose to be an alternative to one of the "founding" metaphors of visual theory, namely the window. The miniature entitled "The Theological School of Gazanfer Ağa," executed by Ahmed Nakşî in the *Divan-i Nadiri*, incorporates representational techniques—such as the illusion of depth—that have been considered foreign to the idiom of traditional miniature painting. Scholars have proposed that this miniature negotiates with the notion of painting as a window.

Accordingly, I trace the logic of the tableau-window and suggest that it is an "epistemological metaphor" that produces the knowledge of its object and the conditions under which it becomes knowable. The trope achieves these ends by juxtaposing the discourses of the frame and of transparency, both of which are burdened with the baggage of the window-object. The Gazanfer Ağa miniature enters into a complex negotiation with both discourses. The miniature frame, instead of offering up the painting as an immediately readable object (as suggested by the discourses of the frame and of transparency), encourages a liminal experience of looking that is caught between different modes of representation: looking, reading, and sensing. Moreover, the viewer's acts of looking are "thresholded" by means of the horizontal layering of the pictorial plane, tainting the encounter with opacity rather than imbuing it with transparency. In this sense, the miniature as a threshold prompts a process of looking that constantly questions the status of the frame as well as the instantaneous visibility and readability of the image being seen. By so doing, it provides an alternative visual epistemology by encouraging the analyst to dwell in a way of knowing that is transitional, relational, opaque, and precarious, rather than being in the state of certainty, transparency, and unconditioned visibility that is epitomized by the window metaphor.

I conclude this book by tracing the "afterlife" of miniature painting in the realm of artistic practice so as to underscore reverberations of my study in a wider realm. Contrary to the common conviction that Ottoman miniature painting ceased to

exist by the end of the eighteenth century (as it had lost its original function and context), I suggest that its aesthetic concerns survived and can be found in the "cracks" of modernity. Inspired by Mieke Bal's notion of "preposterous history," I discuss the ways in which two contemporary works, namely Orhan Pamuk's novel *Benim Adim Kirmizi* (*My Name is Red*) and Derviş Zaim's film *Cenneti Beklerken* (*Waiting for Heaven*), engage with the tradition of Ottoman miniature painting and develop a novel literary and cinematographic language conditioned by their encounter with miniatures. These works, I suggest, not only reverberate with the concerns of my study in the field of artistic practice but also open up a further realm of theoretical inquiry.