

This article is lovingly dedicated to Tayyibah Taylor, a formidable and compassionate woman of deep faith who continues to be a role model for innumerable Muslim women. May Allah bless her soul.



FATMA ŞEYMA BOYDAK

TEZHİP

WOMEN TEZHİP ARTISTS FROM THE CITY OF RUMI

by Valerie Anna Bebiery

We have all become familiar with the phrase: “The Qur’an was revealed in Mecca, recited in Egypt and written in Istanbul.” We can also add that the Qur’an was “illuminated in Konya.” Also known as the city of Rumi, Konya, Turkey is well known for the quality of its traditional art and artists. The practice of tezhip and other traditional Islamic art is still thriving throughout Turkey,

a country where Atatürk’s vision of modernism relegated these art forms to the cultural past. During the Republican period (1923-46), however, the intellectual elite safeguarded their rich artistic culture, preserving these art forms until today. Recent revivals of these art forms are also due to society’s continuing interest in Ottoman culture; the Turkish people are dedicated to preserving traditional arts. To this

day, vocational courses offer to teach anything from calligraphy, woodworking, weaving, bookbinding and embroidery, to metalwork and ceramics.

Arriving in Konya, I soon discovered that many women who study theology and art history at the university practice *tezhip*. Beautiful, intricate and complex, this art is profoundly spiritual. It is intertwined with the texts of the Qur'an, and the hadiths and practices of Prophet Muhammad, peace be on him. Throughout the Ottoman empire, and the rest of the Muslim lands, women actively practiced calligraphy and textile arts. They may have also practiced *tezhip* (illumination), however, no known work painted by a woman has survived. Currently, however, women make up a sizable percentage of the students in Turkish traditional arts courses, upholding the tradition and reclaiming it from its exclusively male past. I had the honor of meeting emerging *müzebbibes*, women masters of *tezhip*, Lutfiye Depeler, Ayşe Zehra Sayın and Fatma Şeyma Boydak. Their stories reveal the importance of art in their lives as they paint the landscape of manuscript illumination in contemporary Konya.



Lutfiye Depeler

WHAT IS TEZHIP?

Tezhip refers to the geometric floral painted decorations adorning religious and secular manuscripts, imperial decrees or *fermans*, and single pages of calligraphy known as *levhalar*. As intimated by the term's Arabic origins, *tezhip* (to gild) is also characterized by its intricate use of gold. The art, often described as the dress or adornment of calligraphy, has a long history in the Muslim world. Copies of the Qur'an began to show decorative features as early as the 8th century, although these were initially functional, indicating the beginning of *surahs*, the *juz* number and the places of prostration. By the early 11th century, however, Qur'ans started to display more profuse and purely aesthetic decoration such as illuminated frontispieces. From then on, illumination artists continued to develop more learned, lavish and innovative compositions and designs. Illuminated manuscripts themselves became beautiful, as well as sacred, art objects, reaching various peaks of perfection, particularly in the Timurid, Safavid, and Ottoman periods.

Turkish *tezhip* artists generally see themselves as inheritors of classical 16th century Ottoman culture,



LUTFIYE DEPELER

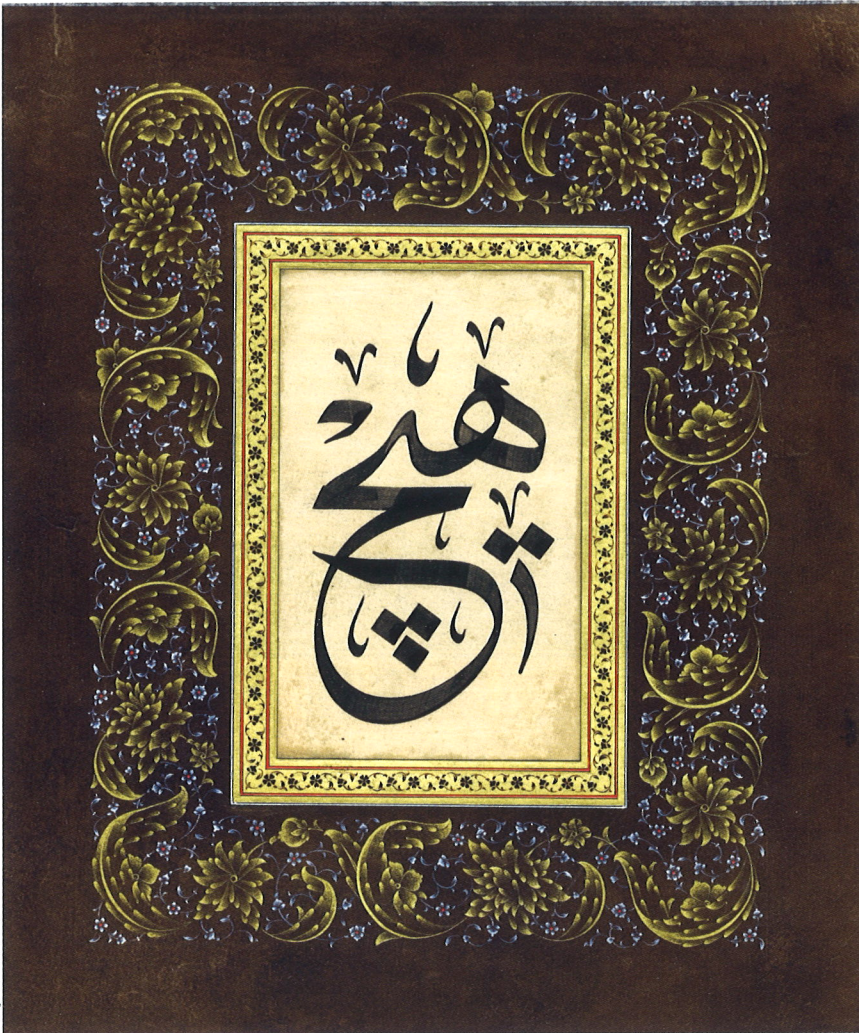
although they admire and study works from other periods as well. As Sayın told me, "Some Turkish *müzebbibes* (practitioners of *tezhip*) look mostly at Ottoman illumination, but to become a good *tezhip* artist one has to look at work from all periods and dynasties."

LEARNING TEZHIP: AN EDUCATION OF THE HEART

Tezhip is an art that not only requires patience but also elicits patience. Whether one studies with a private master or in one of the many traditional art departments in Turkish universities, it takes years to master the craft. For example, it can take almost

eight to nine years to earn an *icajet* (*ijazah* in Arabic) or diploma from a master allowing one to take on students of one's own. Students spend countless hours learning a particularly difficult motif and artists can spend months finishing a commissioned piece.

Whether one studies in a university or private art school, the teaching method is the same. Students first learn how to draw the principle individual motifs called *yaprak*, *penç*, *goncağül*, *batayi*, *rumi*, *bulut*, *yaprak* and *münbani*. Stylized flowers like roses, hyacinths and tulips are also commonly taught at the beginners level. This is a year long process in private school where lessons



Ayşe Zehra Sayin

are taught once a week; in university, where students practice every day, sometimes all day, it takes about four months. Aspiring illuminators also learn how to use brush and ink, and apply paint and gold to their work. Most importantly, though, they learn to design successful compositions.

The real apprenticeship of this unique art resides beyond the gold flowers and delicate interlacing patterns, and within the human heart. The finished works of *tezhîp* mirror the alchemy of the soul. To underline this key intangible dimension of the art, Boydak quotes the best-known contemporary Turkish *müzevhibe* Fatma Çiçek Derman born in 1945, "The most important thing is to adorn our hearts." For Depeler, Sayin, and Boydak, *tezhîp* is a meditative, spiritual practice, a kind of visual *dhikr*, the aim

of which is to cleanse and beautify the heart and gain proximity to Allah.

THE THREE ARTISTS: LUTFIYE DEPELER, AYŞE ZEHRA SAYIN AND FATMA ŞEYMA BOYDAK

Lutfiye Depeler, Ayşe Zehra Sayin and Fatma Şeyma Boydak were born and raised in Konya. All three showed interest in the visual arts at an early age and were encouraged by parents or teachers to explore the art of illumination. These ladies are at different stages of their careers. Because they are university students, they must divide their time between art and their studies. Depeler is working on her Bachelor's in Islamic studies, while Sayin and Boydak are finishing their Master's in Islamic art history.

Depeler is a very bright student in her early twenties. Upon hearing her

impeccable British accent, I assumed she was an expat. However, Depeler impressively learned the language on her own by listening to newscasts and watching YouTube videos. Depeler's paternal grandfather, Abdullah Riza, was a master calligrapher who lived in Medina. Having gained much respect in the blessed city for his calligraphy, Riza was commissioned to adorn the interior and exterior of windows of the Holy Prophet's mosque. Depeler's brothers, Seyit Ahmet Depeler and Abdurrahman Depeler, are master calligraphers who live and work in Konya. Lutfiye, therefore, comes from an artistic family. Depeler's father, although a businessman, encouraged his three children to learn how to earn a living with their hands and it was he who, seeing Depeler's love of drawing, encouraged her to study illumination.

In 2006, when she was just 14, Depeler attended a year-long tezhîp course. Since then, she has been studying at Destegül located in the heart of Konya just next to Rumi's tomb. Destegül is the only private establishment teaching illumination, calligraphy, miniature painting and ceramics, courses for which this school is considered better than others. Depeler's teacher is a woman, master illuminator, Halime Güler. Depeler will soon begin studying both in person and through distance education with Istanbul-based artist Fatima Özçay from whom she hopes to receive her icajet. The study of tezhîp usually begins after an initial meeting between student and teacher, which can be conducted by mailing completed works and corrections back and forth.

Although not yet considered a full-fledged master—a diploma from a master is needed for this—Depeler is already working, often doing the illumination for her brothers' calligraphic works. Hoping to make a career of her art, Depeler acknowledges that the practice of tezhîp is much more than just work. The young artist admits to being somewhat anxiety prone. Concentrating on the miniature world of flowers, geometric designs and colors, and adorning pious texts, grounds her in a reality much larger than her own. This helps her with the nervousness that sometimes characterizes her artistic temperament. Lutfiye considers illumination a spiritual art form that cultivates patience, the capacity to see one's errors, and a growing consciousness of the perfection of Allah.

I first met Sayin the day after my own mother passed away. She came to my apartment along with a few other students from the university to help me through the sorrow. Unphased by my red face, puffy from tears and lack of sleep, she sat on the couch exuding

grace, compassion and tranquility. Her presence was healing and I was grateful that she had come. I did not know at the time that she was a müzehhibe, but the experience confirmed for me the truth of Sayin's words when she later told me that tezhîp had changed her life. "I became calm, tranquil and patient. The problems of life no longer

The real apprenticeship of this unique art resides beyond the gold flowers and delicate interlacing patterns, and within the human heart. The finished works of tezhîp mirror the alchemy of the soul.

"The most important thing is to adorn our hearts." Turkish müzehhibe, Fatma Çiçek Derman.



AYŞE ZEHRA SAYIN

seemed insurmountable." Ultimately, illumination is a visual prayer weaving beauty out of our many imperfections.

Sayin is the only one of these three artists to have obtained her icajet. She has, therefore, earned the title of master and has begun teaching at Destegül. Tezhîp was not originally in the artist's plans for her future. Sayin first sought to study modern art at the university. She spent one year preparing for the entrance exam. Just one month before starting her first year, she suddenly asked herself "Why am I studying Non-Muslim art when I am Muslim?" An entrance examination for the Turkish Traditional Arts Program was being given a month later and Sayin decided to give it a try. To her amazement, she passed and became a student at Seljuk University. It was there that she met Ersan Perçem, whom Sayin, Depeler and Boydak recognize as one of the the top master tezhîp artist in Konya. Perçem became Sayin's supervisor and suggested she study illumination and miniature painting. Sayin later received her tezhîp certificate from Perçem as well. Sayin expresses her admiration for the Ottoman müzehhibs especially Shah Kulu and Ali Üsküdari.

As a new teacher, Sayin feels so much gratitude that her work revolves around beautifying *ayabs*, *hadiths* and other Islamic texts. When asked about the benefits of tezhîp in her life, Sayin tells me about the large-scale *hilye* she completed as her university graduation project. The *hilye*, especially esteemed in Turkey, is a textual portrait of the Prophet Muhammad usually bearing Ali Ibn Abu Talib's poetic description of Muhammad's persona and uniqueness. When discussing making the piece, Sayin becomes very emotional. Barely holding back her tears, she explains that through the long hours of preparation she felt particularly close to the Holy Prophet, peace be upon him, feeling something of his light and blessing. For Sayin, the forms and compositions intrinsic

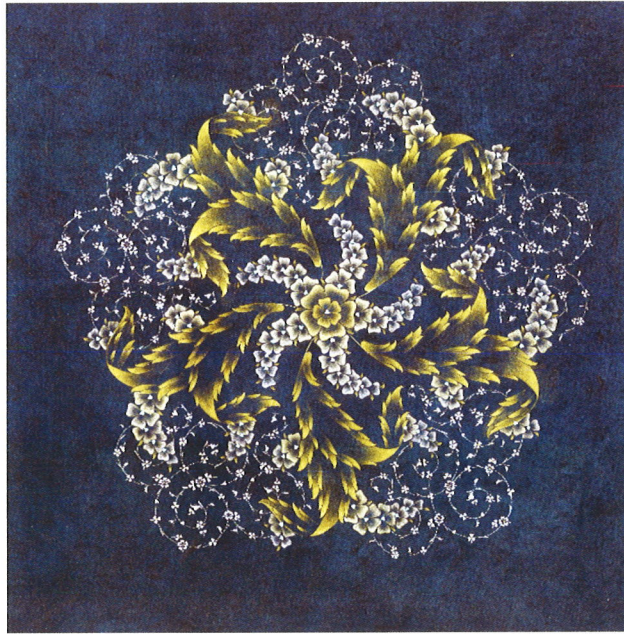
to tezhîp all relate and attempt to communicate infinity. It can be said that illumination is a practice that enables closeness to Allah and a greater awareness of the beauty of His Prophet and His creation.

Sayin plans to begin practicing tezhîp every day once her master's thesis is complete. She stresses the importance of daily practice. "In Ottoman times, tezhîp artists and calligraphers did not practice on Fridays but made sure to get back to work on Saturdays, lest their hands forget." When I asked if she had any advice for us North American Muslim artists, she unhesitatingly answered "Muslim women should practice one of the traditional Islamic arts because they teach us so many things. You might be talented, but even if you're not you shouldn't give up because the practice is more important than the gift."



Fatma Şeyma Boydak

Like her colleagues, Boydak loved drawing and painting as a child. She discovered tezhîp in high school simply by noticing and admiring the illumination decorating the Qur'ans in school, the mosque, and at home. Like



LUTFIYE DEPELER

Sayin, she intended to study fine arts but, as she explains, destiny or *nasib* brought her to the Islamic Studies Faculty instead. It was during her undergraduate program that Boydak took a course in *ebru* or paper marbling with Dr. Ahmet Saim Arıtan who has since become a very important mentor to her. A specialist in Islamic bookbinding (among other Islamic arts), Arıtan suggested she try her hand at tezhîp. Boydak began classes in 2009, also studying under Ersan Perçem from whom she hopes to receive her diploma in three years.

Boydak looks forward to being able to practice tezhîp every day. For now, much of her time is taken up by her courses, as well as her position as a research assistant at the university. An excellent student, Boydak will subsequently pursue a doctoral degree continuing her research on the history of tezhîp and Islamic manuscripts.

For Boydak, studying the history of illumination is just as important as its practice, she believes the past teaches us about the present. In order to drive home her point, Boydak mentions a book she's presently reading by art historian Selçuk Mülayım, who renames the past "traces of mind" in order to highlight the guiding role

art and heritage can play in contemporary Muslim self-identity. Sayin echoes this idea, stating that "the traditional arts are our culture, we should preserve their character." In Turkey, this idea is especially strong as the Turkish people trace the illumination, stylization, and abstraction characteristic of Islamic art back to their pre-Islamic Central Asian roots. Boydak experiences tezhîp as a spiritual practice that has taught her both patience and discipline. She also tells me she "has learned to see better, to look at things more

carefully," and that she likes the fact that art is communicative; through the beauty of tezhîp, she feels she can speak to others.

Our artistic heritage is an important part of our identity. Whether we become students of the traditional Islamic arts, or we are inspired by them to create works considered contemporary art, the images we surround ourselves with shape who we are and reveal who we want to become. The beautiful and delicate floral and geometric patterns of tezhîp are largely meant to enhance the holy words of Islam. Like visual lace, they illuminate our homes and lives.

Tezhîp classes while available throughout Turkey are difficult to find in North America. For those unconstrained by family obligations, health and finances, illumination is a good reason to prepare your bags for the city of Konya. However, if this is not the case, the good news for aspiring western Muslim illuminators is that courses can be done through correspondence. Sayin is already a teacher and Depeler and Boydak will soon follow, all three committed to the endless learning and teaching of beauty, one delicate petal at a time. 🌸