

The Art of Ahmet Ertug - a Vision of European Culture

Today there are exceptionally few photographers who have the depth of knowledge of their subjects to make definite statements about them through their work. Some of them follow a calling from history or nature; while others dedicate themselves to exhaustively document their surroundings through a unique contemporary viewpoint. One thing is common to most serious approaches to photographic art that renders lasting impressions: roots, connecting to them or searching for them. Knowing this is one thing; accomplishing it quite another. Only a few photographers create convincing visual stories that seem predestined to become a part of history. One of these is the Istanbul based photographic artist and publisher Ahmet Ertug, who is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Europe and Asia. As editor in chief of Ertug & Kocabiyik he has published 25 books with his partner Ahmet Kocabiyik in limited editions. The publications are supported by travelling and stationary exhibitions of ultra large photographs.

Their thematic spectrum spans from the advent of European and Eurasian cultures to historical libraries and opera houses. Architecture is their primary theme, but the works also include landscape references as well as defining artefacts and sculptures. These oversized volumes are bound in the finest cloths, silks or leather and presented in a substantial slipcase or presentation box that radiate luxury. They are artworks in themselves comprising Ertug's full format photographs and complimented by reproductions of rare documents along with enlightening texts by recognised international experts. The works engulf the mind of the viewer in historical topics with references connecting to contemporary culture. Ahmet Ertug's work is available to all through his elaborate exhibitions and many through the range of opulent books by Ertug & Kocabiyik, a small autarkic empire in the glut of throw-away photo books today.

A question of control

Ansel Adams is another example of a visual artist that will be remembered. He was firmly grounded in the landscapes of the West he loved and photographed so extensively. Adams developed a meticulous technical approach to black and white photography to honestly capture the beauty he saw in nature. Another protagonist from the United States but from a different field was Julius Shulman, one of the most celebrated photographers of modern architecture. His subjects were the works of California architects Neutra, Wright, Koenig or Eames. He proudly presented them to the world and saw it as his mission to build a reputation for the elite of Western architecture. His photographic career was motivated by the wish to convey the genius of the architects he had worked with - there is no notable book about the subject today without at least one picture of Shulman's.

A distinctive feature of these two outstanding photographers' work and personality is their complete commitment to their subject's aura - fresh and carefree as it was in the days of California's exuberant new architectural forms or deep and rich as it is in the unaltered Western landscapes and historical places.

What they both lacked was the will to control the prints, reproductions and distribution of their work. Shulman sought wide popularity; while the work of Ansel Adams shares the posthumous fate of many other visual artists of his calibre. It is everywhere - calendars and cheap reprints shout it out, his signature is used to promote photo workshops. Who today remembers the centuries of landscape painting proceeding and underpinning Ansel Adams' mastery? The aura of his original photographic artworks, in that long tradition, has evaporated in recent decades as the availability of his images proliferated.

Aura and Photography

"One might generalise by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition." These words are from Walter Benjamin, who coined the philosophic term aura as it relates to art and media. The aura, attached to or radiated by an original artwork, is lost in its reduction to wide distribution, according to Benjamin. A perfect example of an intact aura is the subjective impact of a Byzantine icon on the observer that is viewing it in its spiritual context. The question arises: Is it possible for an artist using photography and print today - with its unlimited potential for reproduction - to

maintain the aura of his artwork and reach a wider audience without diluting it? How can the aura be preserved, or at least not sold-out, while conveying artistic statements through photography?

We can turn to the East for an answer. In this case, East means Istanbul. Ahmet Ertug is based there, where Europe and Asia meet. Originally an architect on several highly acclaimed projects, the photographer Ahmet Ertug controls every intricacy of his publications. His sumptuous exhibitions are also solely under his control. The original pictures are only presented in these two outlets. The exposures are made with superior-quality large format cameras capturing the subtlest details of historical edifices and artefacts.

In addition to maintaining a tight rein on his art, he chooses enduring subjects - very likely none of them will wither away in the next centuries. His work will maintain their importance as a visual legacy as their subjects will continue to be available to coming generations.

A place in history

Ahmet Ertug's works will not only stand the test of time in the bookcase of collectors, but also in libraries dedicated to art and history due to their twofold approach: They treat selected chapters of history, outstanding buildings or their creator's complete oeuvre with academic rigour.

Ahmet Ertug's book on the Hagia Sophia was the initial work in his series of historical-cultural explorations. The Hagia Sophia - "Holy Wisdom" in Greek - was a central landmark in medieval history. Its conversion from a Byzantine cathedral to an Ottoman mosque in 1453 marked the end of the Eastern Roman Empire. The subtitle of Ertug's book, *A Vision for Empires*, alludes to its landmark character.

In his subsequent title, *Sinan, An Architectural Genius*, Ertug takes a detailed look at the builder of the signature mosques of Istanbul's skyline and the majestic Selimiye mosque in Edirne which gave form to the limitless power of the Ottoman Empire. Here Ahmet Ertug's experience as an architect expresses its relevance to his photography. He strongly identifies with the master-builder of the sultans and expertly elucidates Sinan's architectural language. From this peak of architecture expression, Ertug's next books venture back in time to *The Sacred Art of Cappadocia* and to the eloquent ruins of Ephesus. *A delightful Spiritual Journey* looks at the collection of far Eastern art in the Paris Musée Guimet. This book, focusing on Asia art, compliments Ertug's impressive list of European cultural achievements. Recently, he broadened his perspective and included Europe's historic libraries and opera houses in his portfolio of publications, achieving a peak in photographic technique and expressive insight of his subjects.

Architecture as defined by Ahmet Ertug's photography

His prints have already found their way into permanent museum collections and - as homage to their creator - into the upper north gallery of the Hagia Sophia herself, as an extensive permanent exhibition. Thereby Ertug's prints have returned to the place of their birth and flourish in the aura of their inspiration - a captivating juxtaposition of artistic auras that might have even intrigued Walter Benjamin.

"And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced." Obedient to Benjamin's quote, Ahmet Ertug's books and ultra large print exhibitions do reach a wide audience, but harbour a certain danger to the original. They place the beholder in an all-encompassing artistic vision of its own. In particular the books seduce the senses and lure the thoughts into a realm of aesthetic bliss. Ahmet Ertug's compelling depictions of architectural space are guaranteed to absorb the mind of any beholder, offering him a voyage through history and an intimate connection to select parts of the aura of its subject, cocooning its most magnificent features and artefacts.

Jeff Wall, considered the most scholarly contemporary photographic artist, concluded: "The fundamental shock caused by photography could be related to its ability to provide an image that is received more like visible reality itself, which never was possible before. A photograph therefore shows its subject by means mostly used to show what constitutes firsthand experience." Concisely put, why travel to far off places when one has these books at hand or stands in front of Ahmet Ertug's overwhelming photographs in ex-

hibition? In the Hagia Sophia you get Ertug's reproductions and the original at the same time. The exhibitions are well worth the effort to see, but some of the historical documents unearthed by Ahmet Ertug and incorporated in his books are impossible to view otherwise.

A contemporary classic

Over the last three decades, photographs with an objective approach are strongest when they avoid replacing subjectivity with personal style. The results can be found among the greatest exponents of the "Germanic" aesthetic, derived from Ernst and Hilla Becher's work and teachings. The body of work that consistently incorporates a humble mind and an encyclopaedic knowledge when dealing with a subject will be best remembered.

Ahmet Ertug can be called one of the independent stalwarts of this form of "documentarism" of architecture and related arts, having put together a body of photographic work with an encyclopaedic character on the subject over several decades. The reward for this daunting task is the feeling of completeness, which he conveys to the beholder of his projects in books and on the walls of the galleries or museums that exhibit them.

Another overriding characteristic of his pictures is the certainty they radiate: "I always try to put myself in the position of the architect," he says, "I even know where to put my camera instinctively - it is the spot where the architect stood, evaluating his work." Waiting for the perfect light in the right place, plumbing the aura of his subject in full measure is Ertug's secret for perfection. A form of perfection that is far from sterile, it is rather born from empathy, particularly palpable in the photographs of the masterworks of Sinan.

Ahmet Ertug's body of work bares similarities to the works of other outstanding contemporary visual artists. Ertug shares the intuitive certainty of determining the perfect vantage point for his exposures with Candida Höfer. From a fundamentally different approach, they both reveal classical citations in architectural spaces, as in Ertug's project of important libraries.

With Thomas Struth, Ertug shares a certain overlap of his photographic heritage and technique, although their cultural backgrounds and artistic strategies differ substantially. Both evoke a painting-like presence with their ultra large prints, in the lineage of the objectivity and demeanour of pioneers like Eugène Atget. In Struth's pictures of crowded historical churches or museums, the subjects visually push to the front, evoking questions of collective behaviour. Whereas in Ertug's exposures, the few human figures are engulfed in expanses of architecture or bathed in ethereal light as in his interiors of the great Ottoman mosques.

But when human figures are central to the composition of his pictures they are stars. As a prime example, one can meet a group of Ottoman princes on one of the first pages of Ertug's book (p. 16) on Sinan's architecture. Their tombstones fronting a side wing of the Sehzade mosque are adorned with traditional Turkish head wear hewn in stone, turning them into abstract figures of different heights and sizes, ranked by their importance or closeness to the emperor. These turban-wearing gravestones are brought to vibrant life by a streak of evening light delineating their strong silhouettes against the chiaroscuro of elegant towering domes and weathered stone walls - this is masterly storytelling purely employing photographic means.

Travelling Europe - libraries and opera houses

Ahmet Ertug more recently applied his skills to subjects that are a logical continuation of his creative journey. He focussed on over twenty significant European libraries from Prague to Salamanca and splendid opera houses from Paris to Naples. Again the architect in Ertug came out. The resulting photographs elucidate their builders' concepts, in many cases resulting in symmetrical views of perfectly preserved spaces created to house historic and renowned collections of human knowledge and artistic skill.

The elegance of Paris is palpable in the photographs Ertug took in the Opéra Garnier. Looking at a de-

tailed view of the grand staircase evokes the sense of a fin-de siècle romancier, peering from behind a column in the gallery as the upper classes walk below to their loges. Echoing sounds of cheerful voices and rustling dresses add to the anticipation of the event. The romancier strolls out the photographer's lens through a wide open door carrying the title amphitheatre. Looking around the theatre interior, his thoughts race to realms of classical Greek theatre, views of Italian pastorals and French courtly masquerades evolving into opera as the lights dim and the curtains part.

Opera has deep roots in European culture. Its oeuvres are embellished when framed by the most enthralling buildings of Europe as Ertug depicts them.

Layers of culture

In this point Ahmet Ertug's roots come to the fore. He grew up in Istanbul, absorbing the historicity of that transcontinental modern metropolis built on the foundations of the Eastern Roman Empire and reshaped by the vibrant Ottomans who ruled the East Mediterranean from there until 1923. Since then Turkey has been a modern state built on those historical layers deeper rooted in the ancient Hellenistic civilisation. When selecting subjects for his photographic or publishing endeavours, Ahmet Ertug employs these roots: "After years of study and artistic practice I realised that the foundation of creativity is the profound knowledge of one's heritage."

The classical threads infusing modern European culture and connecting it to its Mediterranean past are the same that imbue Ertug's work. A few examples: Ottoman art is in general a blend of Greek and Turkmen traditions. Their first mosques facades, predating Sinan, mirrored the pageantry and structure of late Roman palaces and theatres. Taking these indoors, they metamorph into the stage of the Renaissance Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, Italy. This oldest roofed theatre is still in use and included in Ertug's book about the opera houses of Europe. Andrea Palladio, its architect, was often compared to Sinan, sharing his manneristic approach to finding architectural forms.

The history of architectural domes reaches back to ancient Iran and Turkey, among others. The Romans perfected its construction with the Pantheon temple in Rome, becoming the archetype for so many spiritual and governmental buildings, including the Capitol in Washington DC. This form is also fundamental to the architecture of Hagia Sophia. Sinan refined it in more than 100 mosques he created. Simultaneously Michelangelo was employing it in his design of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Two geniuses who never met - one defining the architecture of the Ottoman Empire, the other the Renaissance man himself. Both built tombs, one for the Medici in Florence; the other for the most important Ottoman sultans in Istanbul. East and West came close during the High Renaissance; there was an exchange of ideas and concepts. In those days the Sultans even breached the Islamic rule avoiding portraying human figures. The life at court in the Topkapi palace, designed by Sinan, is well documented and presented in several books of Ahmet Ertug.

Ertug's photographs are strikingly analogous to paintings of the late medieval period, infused with tones of the budding Renaissance. There was a brief timeframe of remarkable clarity in art especially in portraiture framed by revealing interiors and veduta backgrounds. One can look deeply into the souls of the bourgeois or clerics depicted by Dürer, Holbein the Younger, Van Eyck or Bellini (who portrayed sultan Mehmet II) and Botticelli south of the Alps. These artists were absolutely intrigued by the possibilities of realism. Those portrayed seem so familiar to us today, as the artists resisted adding any interpretation of beauty or psychology to the paintings, as became vogue only a few years later. The same soulful clarity can be found in Ahmet Ertug's portraits of buildings. This elevates his body of work above that of most contemporary photographers who attempt to capture the spirit of historical architecture today.

A vision of European culture well rooted in the past

Ahmet Ertug's works and his more than convincing presentations are perfect compensation for any loss of aura as a result of technical procedures that might be perceived by any modern day Walter Benjamin. The inherited values of classical culture, especially architecture, and echoes of civilisations past shine through the surface of these modern photographs. Time is layered in these works opening deep insights into history.

Returning to the Hagia Sophia - in Istanbul and in Ahmet Ertug's book and exhibition - Ertug's achievement offers atonement for the damage shallow photographs do everyday to an artistic medium and its sincere champions. Photography is and will remain a medium for artists who are keenly intent on experiencing the objective world and how it changes through time. The ability to convey the depth of an artist's experience is mastered only by its most accomplished exponents.

Aura is the Greek word for breeze - describing perfectly the inspiring fresh air of humanity and beauty found in historic spiritual and cultural buildings of Europe and Asia - conjoined traditions brought to new life through the art of Ahmet Ertug.

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