

*It was
in the
1950s that
the works
of Aliye Berger*

were known in Istanbul, although older artists regarded her as pet rather than rival. Even after she abandoned her early romanticism for something profound in a very different manner, their lack of understanding continued. This false paternalism, or patronage, of older men of established reputation (at least in their own country) did not disturb her but it brought out a subtle, childish innocence that masked a singularly mature attitude to life in the last days of the Ottoman empire.

Daughter and granddaughter of pashas and vezirs, she had the strength of the traditions of a ruling family behind her. These were designed to cope with astonishing fluctuations of fortune from which the Shakir Pasha children were to suffer in early adulthood along with the rest of the old order. The grandeur of her family konak on Prinkipo, as she always spoke of Büyükada, gradually faded; it was recently demolished and the remarkable garden built on.

It was there that as the youngest child of a formidable family she learnt how to wheedle and play the innocent with everyone except her elder sister, later to be the Princess Fahr-ül-Nissa Zeyd. For this formidable artist, whose works were altogether grander than those of Aliye, had an enduring affection and belief

in her sister with a judgement which had matured in the art world of Paris and a studio in the Rue de Grenelle. One may concur with her faith in her younger sister-and also bitterly regret losing sight of her blue portrait of Aliye many times life size which does indeed reflect her true character as she stares into the mirrors that were Fahr-ül-Nissa's eyes.

Here was no kitten conveniently maturing her own lemon vodka alongside the cucumber on her balcony fronting the Istiklal Caddesi (once La Grande Rue Pera) in what a 150 years before had been the imperial Russian embassy. Instead, the portrait expressed someone only too aware that as an artist she was likely to have to face disappointment once again and yet her magnificent eyes continued questioningly with the echo of a Byzantine icon of the Theotokos: at which comparison she would have been astonished, hilarious but also questioning, had it been made when she was still alive.

The kitten was there, of course; and because the image protected her, she enjoyed playing the part which was always to be an aspect or herself. Those other artists who were drawn to her studio because of the quality and quantity of her vodka were taken in because they were too deeply blindfolded by their own self-importance. There was a comic example of this when she suddenly felt the need to break away from her engravings, masterly as they were, to paint in oil. It all began with an emptied bottle of vodka 48 hours before the opening of a grand competition. There were to be three judges, two of whom were western critics of international repute. Aliye said that she would like to paint and submit a canvas and her temporary uncles were so amused that they returned that evening with tubes of unwanted oil paints, including various greens, brushes tempered by time and a conventional canvas. She immediately set to work and by morning she had created an astonishing seascape playing on the strange relationships between light and waves.

Appropriately still wet, she carried the picture to the exhibition just in time for it to be hung in the farthest corner. The great men awaited their honours but the foreigners astounded the art world of Istanbul by awarding the prize to Aliye. This untoward event did not help her reputation until many weeks of vodka quenched the hostility of the affronted grandees.

One knew at once that she would be the mistress of the medium when one entered her studio to encounter paintings of all shapes and sizes covered with strips of newspaper as if emerging from a casualty ward. It was analytical self-criticism: she was her own surgeon. However, she was to abandon oil painting and turn to printing rather than engraving.

It is revealing to return to the beginning of her life. The house on Büyükada was very large with a salon so grand that the end wall had been transformed into a flourishing grotto sprouting ferns to the lofty ceiling. There were 40 chairs round the dining table and the cast iron machinery in the kitchen and scullery gave the impression of an engine room of an early Atlantic liner. On family days, the children sat quietly supervised by their governesses: French, German and English who did their work well, for the children grew up to be remarkable linguists in the Ottoman tradition.

Discipline was strict but mostly kindly. One day Aliye was let out of the local infants school early by mistake and made for her much-loved swings in the square. Since there was nobody to supervise her, being Aliye, she swung too high and crashed, appearing to escape with a graze or two. She limped home where the angry German governess changed her clothes and scrubbed her hands and knees while she relentlessly admonished the unruly child. They were just in time for lunch, which began with soup. Aliye opened her mouth and the soup turned red: she had not dared to confess that the pencil had pierced her palette. Her father was furious, not with her but the governess who was dismissed in disgrace. The part of the kitten was to be well rehearsed after this unexpected twist of fortune.

It was in this house some 40 years later that I lodged in the old nursery on the top floor. It was stripped of toys but had a bed large enough for three and a chair. Climbing roses had broken in through the window to explore the ceiling and to hang in full bloom over the bed. I was scarcely a beauty and there was no beast, but to live that night could only be as a character in a folk tale. It was from a window on the spacious landing that Aliye at twelve conducted her first love affair. The villa garden of the Papal nuncio reached within a foot of the house and there an adolescent acolyte followed the future pope, when he strolled

among his flowers, playing on a fiddle. She threw the youth rosebuds every day to the extreme embarrassment of the handsome boy whom she adored. His unexpected quavers must have surprised the nuncio.

There were to be other love affairs and eventually her passionate marriage to the Hungarian musician Charles Berger-Boronai. At one time he was the conductor of the royal orchestra made up of women from the royal family. Since they performed in private, one must accept his judgement that they were good enough to please and were not restricted to Saen-Saens. His sudden death changed Aliye's life from that of untrammelled vitality to creativity. She would have gone mad without some aim with which to tame her grief and feed her dynamic personality-complete with its rare bursts of anger which she attributed to the splash of Albanian blood inherited through her Cretan mother.

On Charles' death she fled to her sister and the Emir Zeyd who was the Iraqi ambassador in London. She was unlike anybody else and it was this that attracted Krishna Menon, platonically, to a personality the opposite of his own. It is only superficially surprising that she and the austere statesman should enjoy each other's dynamism.

It was, of course, Fahr-ül-Nissa who knew her needs and made her study with Hugh Blair Stanton. He was a disciplinarian who kept her working at engraving-a medium that is boring and erratic without discipline. Her earliest works were small aspects of a spring garden. This was emotional art into which she drove her unhappiness until eventually the hint of a figure stood in the shadows, strengthened into the form of a ghost and one day Charles himself stood there. She was convalescent and could return to their studio in Beyoğlu, its romantic drawing of him playing his violin, his silent piano. Much later she was to collapse, still holding her glass upright, then suddenly sit up and declare that life was but a pied-à-terre and collapse again to recover in the morning.

Now that she was back in her great city, she worked with that integrity and commitment to the finest detail which Blair Stanton had taught her. Istanbul was still the city of wooden houses, vulnerable to fire from stove pipes poking out of windows to spray sparks over the frosts of winter. All this was a

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Kitten with claws

romantic period except for the quality of an eye which multiplied detail into statements. Her other engravings of this period returned to black and white and were notably larger and deceptively simpler.

Meanwhile, a new medium inspired her. A discerning gift of acrylic paints resulted in a series of masterpieces lit by brilliant colours. The gypsy wedding with the dancer before the fire is an outstanding example. The movement of the symbolic dancer, the swaying of the other guests and the energy of the flames creates a red scene which goes beyond romanticism because this work is intense with other moods than happiness. The first impression of lack of form contracts, when the scene is scanned perceptively, into a work of defined and harnessed actions that discipline the complex composition of a crowd. A much softer, because daylight, view of Bursa Market from above exchanges sunlight for firelight and the compact design of *The Wedding* gives way to an expressive and relaxed vision, vivid though the colourscape is. All this made a grand finale.

I have referred to the fairy-tale element in her life which was indeed to become a legend. Alas, the great legends of Asia and Europe are not about fairies but demons. Her life was creative because she defied the djinns. Her beauty was never masked by tragedy although her life was tempered by the bitter marrow in its spine. Her work cannot die and some day she will achieve honour even in her own country.

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