

## An Overview of the Furniture Design Education and the Furniture Industry in Turkey

### Türkiye’de Mobilya Tasarım Eğitimi ve Mobilya Sanayine Genel Bakış

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#### *Abstract*

Obviously, the relationship between furniture design education and the furniture industry is very important in terms of improving the industry itself in Turkey. Therefore, the Turkish government has established a number of furniture design departments in vocational - technical high schools and faculties to educate students for the furniture industry.

This paper aims to underline the history of furniture and furniture design education from the very early beginning, its relationship to the furniture industry and to the government’s priorities in Turkey. It is assumed that they may play such an important role as to pioneer the industry and to follow up changing technology and information.

*Key words:* Furniture, furniture design education, furniture industry and government.

#### *Öz*

Türkiye’de mevcut sanayinin gelişiminde mobilya sanayi ve mobilya tasarım eğitimi arasındaki ilişkilerin, önemli bir yeri vardır. Bu doğrultuda Türk hükümeti mevcut mobilya sanayine kalifiye eleman yetiştirmek için sanayi meslek ve teknik liseleriyle birlikte, birden çok fakültede mobilya tasarım ve üretim bölümleri açarak bu sektörde rol oynamıştır.

Bu bakış açısından hareketle, bu makale mobilya ve mobilya eğitiminin (tasarım ve üretim) doğasını çok erken zamanlardan ele alarak sanayi ile olan ilişkisini ve bu alanda hükümet etkinliğinin altını çizmeyi amaç edinmektedir. Mobilya eğitimi ve devletin, sanayinin gelişmesine katkıda buldukları, değişen bilgi ve teknolojinin takip edilmesinde sanayiye öncülük ettikleri farz edilerek mevcut durum incelenmektedir.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Mobilya, mobilya eğitimi, mobilya sanayi ve devlet.

#### Introduction

Furniture has been an important part of the life of Turkish people, reflecting developing requirements and expectations as a decoration as well as an item of use, with a cultural and aesthetic value bearing the respective lines and forms of each era. It can be said that the manner of living, culture, mentality and accommodation of Turks has influenced the use of furniture and furniture education on different occasions.

The formation of the Turkish people’s philosophy of life from ancient times until the time of settlement was

completely formed according to nature. It can be claimed that their living environment was based on “man and nature”. settlement was completely adjusted according to the nature. It can be claimed that their living environment were based on “human and nature”. People used to change their accommodation according to the seasons. Portable furniture and other goods were preferred as they could be carried and used easily. However, the introduction of Islam in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, the move to a settled life in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century and Westernization movements in the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century led to radical changes in the mode of life of the Turkish people. Parallel to such changes in living style, it is possible to identify specific styles of furniture such as Seljuk furniture, Ottoman furniture, Ankara furniture etc.

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While furniture was, of course, used in daily life, furniture education before the Ottoman Empire and until the late period of the Empire was almost non-existent. Professional training was conducted through the master-apprentice relation. During the later period of the Ottoman Empire, (after the 1860s), vocational and industrial schools were planned in order to provide professional education. In the Republican period, these schools became common throughout the country, and polytechnics and technical teachers training colleges were opened.

These undertakings created the existing furniture education system in Turkey. Today, furniture education is provided in high schools (Industrial and Vocational High Schools), and in the universities (the departments of "Furniture and Decoration Education" in the Faculties of Technical Education and partly in the departments of "Industrial Product Design" and "Wooden Industrial Engineering". In order to discuss the subject based on the data in these three eras, it is useful to start by looking at the pre-Ottoman period.

#### Pre-Ottoman Period

Before the Ottoman era, the relations between humans and the nature were extremely important. In those times, everyday goods were used rather than furniture. However, after the acceptance of Islam, a developing understanding of furniture can be observed. Prayer oriented furniture and hand-made boxes are the most significant examples. Furniture manufacturing was carried out without design education while production was based on master - apprentice relations. During this period the technique of *Kündekari* was one of the most commonly used methods in furniture manufacturing and decoration. Hand-made religious furniture in the mosques, separators, hand-made wood ceilings, shelves (*Terece-sergen*), boxes in the ancient Turkish houses at *Samanpazarı* and a box made from ivory, located in Ankara *Etnografya* Museum are examples which survive up to the present.

#### Ottoman Period

During the early Ottoman Empire period, the influences of Islamic architecture on furniture were

evident in rules and standards. Attention was to the use of standards was paid to furniture manufacturing, space design, rugs etc by the government administration. An imperial order regulating the standards of ground-mats made in Istanbul in 1565 is an obvious indication of the existence of such standards. Another imperial order in 1567 for a room to be built in *Topkapı* Palace ruled that the room was to be designed and furnished properly (Küçükerman, 1998a). This imperial order shows that furniture such as seating furniture, boxes, sofas, separators, shelves were designed and made for the Palace. It is interesting to note that this furniture came to constitute an Ottoman furniture identity in time. Thus, such furniture was produced and used first in Istanbul and then throughout the country.

After the 1730s, the "Industrial Revolution" in Western Europe started to show its powerful effects on the Ottoman Empire and European made furniture was introduced into *Topkapı* Palace during the period of Sultan Selim III. Seating furniture, sofas, ottoman, boxes, separators, shelves were enriched with the European furniture, such as chairs, tables, cabinets. However, such richness diminished the efficiency of traditional furniture and led to a great change in furniture manufacturing and design. For example, regions of Istanbul were transformed into large international business places and office furniture, chairs, armchairs, cabinets, cases and various office equipment started to compete with traditional articles such as seating furniture, boxes, sofas, separators, shelves and rugs. During that period, all the furniture used in the West were in demand in the places such as foreign embassies, post offices, restaurants, hotels, stores and houses in Istanbul (Küçükerman, 1998a).

The new movement in the Ottoman Empire showed a different dimension in the construction of *Dolmabahçe* Palace during the period of Abdülmecit who acceded to the throne in 1839. According to Küçükerman (1998a), the newest products in the world and especially furniture products in the Paris Exhibition of 1844 and in the London Exhibition of 1851 affected on the decoration of *Dolmabahçe* Palace. According to the same author, after the 1850s, the Western furniture industry started to flow to Istanbul. It is not surprising that the demand came from places where a new identity change and living style

was occurring. Traditional furniture did not enter *Dolmabahçe* Palace which was representative of a new identity and was equipped with western furniture. The only traditional Ottoman products which had a place in the Palace were rugs. The results of this new understanding were seen in the furnishing of *Dolmabahçe* Palace and later in furniture manufacturing sector.

This new change in the Ottoman furniture industry caused a great change in the identity of the existing order and caused serious problems to the furniture industry in the long term. The existing industry in the country was not ready for such new products technically. This resulted in the importation of foreign furniture to the country.

Foreign furniture affected domestic furniture manufacturing which had been established on the basis of hand-made methods for centuries in Istanbul and other sides of the Empire. Not surprisingly, furniture manufacturers of the existing system lacked experience and technology. Domestic furniture manufacturers started to make copies of European originated furniture using the existing hand-made methods, although the furniture industry met resistance in the domestic market. Then the only way was to copy imported furniture using production techniques which they knew. At this point, an interesting synthesis appeared in the Ottoman furniture industry Manufacturers under the existing system could not adapt to the new system, because of problems with technology, methods, materials, tools and qualified staff. In addition, the imported furniture was not suitable to the identity of Ottoman furniture. These created new thoughts in the Empire.

During the reign of *Abdülhamit II*, who acceded to the throne in 1876, the great shock of change caused by *Dolmabahçe* Palace was remedied gradually and new ways were researched for designing furniture and decorating places in compliance with the realities of the country. It is possible to say that that is why new design solutions and applications were thought to be necessary by the government. Furthermore, relevant people started to think about looking for ways to use traditional wood crafts, ornamentation techniques and decoration in the new furniture manufacturing methods. Sultan *Abdülhamit II* was the leader of these new thoughts. (MDV, 1939; Küçükerman, 1998b).

In line with these new thoughts, forms peculiar to the Ottoman identity were sought as a new identity for tables, chairs and cabinets, which were the new symbols. The domestic workshops were transformed into a new production system through the new technologies. It is evident that the government itself gave support to the use of new techniques in terms of improving and creating an "Ottoman Furniture Identity". In particular, Sultan *Abdulhamit II* contributed to the new reality by establishing a furniture workshop in *Yıldız* Palace. The Sultan personally supported the new trend by making wooden furniture with the newest tools.

In the 1860s, in parallel to developing furniture industry, a radical decision was made by the Empire to disband the Guild Organization (*Lonca Teskilati*), which had trained craftsmen for the actual industry for centuries based on master-apprentice relations (MDV, 1939). Other reforms for developing the industry were the establishment of an Industrial Improvement Commission and the organization of an Industrial Exhibition in Istanbul.

These were followed by professional education which was intended to be given in industrial and professional schools for furniture, metal work, construction, architecture etc. The reason for establishing the Istanbul Regional Crafts School (IRCS) in 1868 shows the government interests as follows:

... trade and craft weakened both in Istanbul and the whole Empire and the simplest needs of people could not be fulfilled. A school named "Industrial School" should be opened to supply and train craftsmen in order to develop such losses in crafts (Önsoy, 1988, 119).

The interesting point is that there were many foreign teachers and experts teaching in IRCS. The program of the school included the departments of carpentry, chair makers, sofa makers, wood processor, and cart makers under the heading of wood professions. Furniture making was among the most important issues at that time. Each department admitted 12 students and each class had a master-teacher. Graduates from this school established the first key stones for the new furniture industry in the Ottoman Empire. It is interesting to note that the main purpose of the IRCS was first to train the staff required for the changed production order.

More Industrial Schools and Vocational Schools were opened to direct and develop the industry. This means that an education system was prepared to train Ottoman furniture manufacturers, designers and architects. Before the establishment of Industrial and Vocational Schools, it is interesting to note that first Industrial and Vocational School was opened by one of the Empire officer, *Mithat* Pasha, to train and accommodate poor, orphan Muslim and Christian children, first in Nish (1860), then in Rusjhuk (1864) (MDV, 1939).

After Abdulhamit II, for the first time, an Industrial Statistics law and the law of Industrial Support were introduced by the Empire. Industrial Crafts Schools became public schools through a law, dated 13 March 1913 and numbered 120 (MDV, 1939). Other novelties were the addition of the Decoration Department at IRCS in 1914 (Küçükerman, 1998b). In the same year, Girls Industrial Schools were opened. However, such industrial schools could not be effective, because the Ottoman Empire was in its last years and was in chaos. In addition, it can also be said that the number of teaching staff and politicians who understood the purpose of such schools was very limited.

In conclusion, the Empire intended to establish the westernization of institutions, thought and customs in its last years. Particularly, furniture and furniture education was affected in this period.

Starting with the Republic, the young inheritor of the Ottoman Empire, vocational education was taken seriously as a public issue to make it common throughout the country and to make it effective in the development of the industry.

### Republican Period

During the Republican period, the government showed much more interest in vocational and professional schools throughout the country. It intended to establish new schools with the aim of improving the actual industry. Furniture education was taken more seriously. However, it was a complex undertaking and it was difficult to name the departments because many different professions include furniture education in their program. For example, Küçükerman (1998c) claims that furniture education was provided as interior design

education which was started together with architectural education, for the first time. According to Küçükerman, those years, what meant by "interior design" was to design "furniture" and other "decorative" products and to decorate indoor places of industrial exhibitions, which had started to enter daily life. According to another source (MVD, 1939), furniture education and making was known as carpentry or decorative art in public's language and state documents. It is evident that in 1927, some students were sent abroad for carpentry, meaning furniture and decoration (MVD, 1939). That time, the sections that formed a carpentry factory were the drawing room, machinery room, handcrafts workshop, polish and paint workshop, upholstery workshop and furniture workshop. A carpenter was one who made furniture according to various techniques and methods (constructions) and who knew the processes to finish furniture (MDV, 1939).

It can be seen that furniture manufacturers and designers entered the industrial literature under these names, as a result of the reform of industrial schools remaining from the Ottoman period and establishing an interior design (furniture and decoration) department at Istanbul Fine Arts Academy in 1924. The greatest enterprise in industry-intended vocational and professional education was to bring western pedagogues to re-organize vocational training in the country in 1925 and 1926. For example, American pedagogue John Dewey, German pedagogue Prof. Kühne Kerschensteiner and finally Belgian Vocational Training General Coordinator Omar Buyse prepared reports to spread and improve vocational education in Turkey (MVD, 1939, 11). The most suitable one among those reports was Omar Buyse's report in which training qualified personnel for the industry gained a new dimension. Buyse's report in 1926 suggested the following:

- a. to improve existing vocational schools,
- b. to open new vocational schools based on the requirements of every region,
- c. to open night schools for workers who were working in the industry with the aim of increasing their knowledge and experience in art and design,
- d. to open schools to raise teachers, technicians and engineers for vocational schools and the industry (Polytechnics and Vocational Teachers Schools).

During this period, it can be seen that furniture teaching staff was brought from foreign countries, because there was no teachers - academicians in industrial and vocational schools throughout this country. For example, Austrian Prof. Philip Ginther started to teach the students to produce furniture designs with the newest tools and design concepts of that period, in 1929. In the next decade, ten well-known professionals were brought from foreign countries to undertake furniture education (MDV, 1939, p.19). Thus, a new Turkish furniture tradition for furniture education was created under the roof of the academy by foreign teaching staff. In addition, the government sent Turkish students to European countries for the first time, (in

1927) to establish vocational and professional education on strong foundations and to train its own personnel in their respective fields. Table 1 (MVD, 1939, 15) shows some of the students' numbers and fields.

According to MVD (1939), 5 students out of 6, who were sent abroad for furniture education returned to the country after completing their training and were given duties in vocational schools in Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir. It is understood that furniture department under the name "wood works", opened in 1937, and started educating students for the industry. This department changed its name frequently: wood works, wood works industrial engineering, furniture and interior design, wood works industrial education and finally furniture and decoration education.

It can be seen that the effective role of the government in education was realized by applying the Buysc's report to daily life. A three-year Technical Teacher Training College for Men was established in Ankara by a decree dated 6.11.1936 and numbered 118, upon passing Code 3007, including wood-work, metal- work in order to train qualified personnel for the industry (MVD, 1939). The purpose for establishing such a school was to raise teachers for vocational schools and qualified personnel for the industry and also to give night courses to workers. In 1949, a second branch named *Maçka* Vocational Institute was opened in Istanbul, 1959. The it was renamed the Technical Teacher Training College for Men in the academic year 1962-63 (MEB, 1987). In the same year, Istanbul Technical Teacher Training College for Men was opened, but it was closed after two years. Another school training teachers in this field was the Industrial Crafts Higher School, opened in the 1974-75 academic year (GÜ, 1998). These schools belonging to the Ministry of National Education were re-organized and transformed into Technical and Vocational Training Faculties for the universities in 1981, under Code 2547 on Higher Education and by the Decree on the Organization of Higher Education Institutions. The number of Technical Education Faculties was only two until 1994, but they suddenly reached 15 with the opening of a number of new universities. Such a fast increase created problems in time by adding new problems to existing ones. It can be claimed that that the newly opened Technical Education Faculties do not

Table 1.  
*Students Sent to Europe in 1927*

Professions	Germany	Belgium	Czech.Rep lichezech	France	Switzerland	Italy	Total
Commerce	2	6	-	3	14	1	26
Carpenter (Furniture making)	1	3	1	1	-	-	6
Barrel making	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Metal works	2	5	-	1	-	-	8
Carpenter for building woods	2	4	-	-	-	-	6
Automobile repairing	-	-	-	2	-	-	2
Locksmith	1	-	-	1	-	-	2
Electricity	6	3	-	-	-	-	9
Tile making	1	-	-	1	-	-	2
Tube works	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Tailing	-	8	-	1	-	-	9
Floristry	-	4	-	2	-	-	6
Bakery and Patisserie	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Textile	-	4	-	-	-	-	4
Embroidery	-	2	-	2	-	-	4
House work – cooking	1	4	-	1	-	-	6
Building works	1	1	-	-	-	-	1
Model making	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
Machine	4	1	-	-	-	1	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>101</b>

have sufficient classrooms and practice workshops. It is obvious that they do not have sufficient equipment for training and education. They have to accept more students than their capacity.

The relations between the furniture industry and furniture education did not reach the expected level. It is important to note that the effectiveness of vocational and industrial schools was insufficient to help to develop the furniture industry. It is evident from the results of Alkan, Şanıvar and Zorlu (1972) who claim that the re-organization in the furniture industry started with the Republic, but could not reach the required level. According to the same authors, the furniture industry was operated by craftsmen with old technology and there were no specific production methods in this area. There were 192242 workplaces dealing in handicrafts by 1965 and 8866 of them were dealing in woodworking, 3561 in furniture, 3553 in cart manufacture, 172 in production of sea vessels (Alkan et al, 1972).

However, after the 1980s, a great increase was seen in the number of small-scale furniture manufacturers (unofficially over 20.000) including some large-scale furniture manufacturers (more than 15) in the country. Furniture manufacture became an important industry, which now constitutes 3,5% of the Turkish manufacturing industry (DPT, 1997). Despite the large number of furniture manufacturers, it is interesting to note that the use of original design is not given much attention with the exception of a few large furniture manufacturers who mainly rely on the modification and/or imitation of foreign furniture, rather than developing their own original designs. According to a number of academic studies, copying and adapting products to local needs and conditions are commonly used methods in the furniture manufacturing industry (Erzurumluoğlu, 1991). There is a lack of understanding of design, a lack of well-educated designers and neglect of design by manufacturers (Er, 1994). Furniture does not fit into the Turkish traditional houses (Işık, 1992). Designing for disabled people does not play any part in design education and the furniture manufacturing industry (Çınar, 1997).

Within this context, it is possible to conclude that the furniture education fails to influence the furniture industry in Turkey. Furniture education and the furniture

industry are developing separately from each other rather than having interrelationships.

### Conclusion and Suggestions

Looking at the history of furniture education from a historical perspective, three starting points can be marked. One is that of equipping people for a profession through master-apprentice relations at very poor level. The second is for training qualified personnel for industry. The foundations of vocational and technical training were laid based on reports prepared by western training scientists due to the need for a quick transition to industry. The last one is the movements after the 1980s. However, it is possible to say that the relations between the furniture industry and furniture education given at industrial-vocational schools and universities are not sufficient. Furniture education is mostly separated from industry, meaning that its contributions to the economy of the country are unfulfilled.

The factors obstructing the effective application of furniture education starting with fine arts schools, vocational and industrial schools, technical education faculties and the others might be: a) the foundations of those schools were based on the reports of foreign education scientists, b) continuous change in the education system, c) an insufficient number and quality of teaching staff or that they were from different fields and taught the subject without proper knowledge, d) the high influence of the government on the education system, the fact that the Ministry of National Education shaped the programs of such schools and made radical changes in such programs at short notice which created problems in the implementation of these programs.

The following suggestions can be made:

- Reviewing the mission given by the Ministry of National Education to high schools and universities for industrial and profession education and adapting it to the present conditions in the 21st Century. This seems to be one of the most positive values which could be given to furniture education and industry.
- Offering solution proposals to overcome the deficiency of training given by industrial and

vocational high schools and technical education faculties in following today's technology. Training programs should aim to satisfy the requirements of employers globally by raising personnel who use computers, solve problems, work in teams, use information efficiently and who have new knowledge and skills. Within this context, programs should be prepared based on research and development studies by introducing new technologies, containing real world practices with an understanding of group-work in students and developing abilities to make decisions and to solve problems.

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