



# Sources of inspiration in Turkish modern furniture design

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## Abstract

An analysis of the sources of inspiration for the design of a new product can reveal how knowledge is reflected from one product to another, and conveys the elements shaping a specific era. This paper examines sources of material, information and inspiration of designers in the Modern period in Turkey between 1930 and 1980, within the context of furniture design. To achieve this, an inquiry was conducted on the sources of inspiration considered to have enlightened design philosophy in order to reveal the relationship between national and international styles. Interviews were conducted with designers of the time, within the context of the "DATUMM: Documenting and Archiving Turkish Modern Furniture" scientific research project. These interviews shed light on sources of inspiration during this significant period, materials used, applied methods, reflections of habits, and cultural effects.

## Keywords

Turkish modernist furniture, design inspiration, oral history, furniture, DATUMM: Documenting and Archiving Turkish Modern Furniture

## Introduction

This study examines the inspiration, adaptation and transformation of ideas to understand the factors affecting Modernist furniture design in the development of a new, Modern Turkey between 1930 and 1980. Inspiration from the Western world shows a desire to become more civilized and modernized. As cultural products, architecture and furniture design reflects changing economic, political and cultural values within the society (Sözen, 1996). The aim of the paper is to understand through oral history how design understanding in Turkey was shaped in the context of a developing country with limited resources. Since a significant number of designers from this era are still producing, it was possible to access a national and trans/national living design history in terms of their Western sources of inspiration. This study also aims to understand the aesthetic preferences of users as well as designers during this specific period, within the context of the "DATUMM: Documenting and Archiving Turkish Modern Furniture" scientific research project, A1308001/BAP-A024-K, supported by Izmir University of Economics (IUE) (Tuna Ultav, Hasirci, Borvali, Atmaca, 2015a).

Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire was self-sufficient in technical and architectural fields. There was no desire to import ideas from abroad because all human resources were supplied from within the empire along with the necessary education to work in these fields, particularly the Hassa Architects belonging to the palace.. However, a different approach began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with interest in Western science and technology, starting first in the military forces (Kuruyazıcı, 2002; Sözen, 1996). Similarly, the West was studied during the early years of the Turkish Republic, with the globally influential Modern movement being adopted in an effort to create a new national identity. A pure, rational, economic design concept took hold, being first applied by German and Austrian architects commissioned to help construct a new architectural language for the nation. Shortly after this, Turkish interior architects, such as Hayati Görkey and Sadun Ersin, were sent abroad to bring back new experiences to share with students and staff at the Istanbul National Academy of Fine Arts – today's Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University. Görkey educated his students in an exceptional contemporary approach in tune with Western developments, while

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Ersin, a student of Görkey, followed by many others, became akin to a Renaissance man, designing interiors, furniture and technological equipment, as well as painting, experimenting with new materials, and even making his own musical instruments. Designer Önder Küçükerman took a similar approach, experimenting with materials such as plywood, and designing equipment such as record players and lighting fixtures. These products were all in keeping with contemporary international trends (Küçükerman, 1974).

*Moderno*, founded in Istanbul in 1953 by architect Fazıl Aysu and interior architect Baki Aktar, was a milestone furniture store in terms of the Modernization process, as well as for the design and production of furniture in a period of limited production. The firm provided a workspace for significant artists and designers, including İlhan Koman, Şadi Çalık and Sadi Öziş, enabling the production of creative furniture (Karakuş, 2011). Inspired by the products of this company, designers Turhan Uncuoğlu and Yıldırım Kocacıkloğlu created a showroom named *Interno* in the mid-1960s, which housed designs of Modernist greats like Le Corbusier. This showroom also served as a gallery to educate designers in contemporary design issues, and allow them to follow leaders such as Hayati Görkey, Sadun Ersin and Utarit İzgi on the Modernism path. *Interno* in Istanbul, and *Butik A* (today called MPD, *Mobilya, Planlama, Dekorasyon* / Furniture, Planning, Decoration) in Ankara, established by Bediz and Azmi Koz, which are still open today, were among the first established showrooms. Their aim was to create awareness about Modernist approaches learned from abroad, and provide a combination of furniture and services (Tuna Ultav, Hasirci, Borvalı, Atmaca, 2015b). These were pioneers of the period, producing high quality interiors and furniture, which became a benchmark for Turkish Modernist design. Given the importance of this era, the interviews reported in this study make a major contribution to contemporary design history by increasing our understanding of cross-cultural communication during the Modernist period. This first-hand access to information from the designers themselves or those close to them, enables the identification of sources of inspiration in the history of Modern Turkish furniture (DATUMM, 2013-14).

## Types of Inspiration

Inspiration, here, is grouped under five headings: Western Inspiration, Western Materials, Local Interpretations, Western Habits and Formal Resemblances to Contemporaries.

### Western inspirations

Bediz Koz from MPD, explained the European influence in the 1960s:

“We were influenced by the Western approach. In those years, there was no chance to go abroad very often... At first, when we started our business, there was only *Domus* magazine. Later, we subscribed to this magazine and followed the current trends. Gio Ponti, Mangiorotti, and his use of marble... Then Scandinavian and Danish design became very popular in Europe. There was a shop in Paris selling Danish products called *Maison de l'art Nouveau*. We visited those places when we had the chance.”

According to Karakuş, in the early years, this newly developing aesthetic was in the process of development, bridging the gap between the designers' work and their own cultural environment (Tuna Ultav, Hasirci, Borvalı, Atmaca, 2015b). Moreover, the influence of American and North European design can be seen during the 1960s. Regarding American influences, Önder Küçükerman highlighted the importance of American PX stores (military post stores) and magazines:

“PX stores were huge chain markets which were established in military zones of friendly territories. Nowadays, young generations do not even know they existed... The catalogues of PX stores became guidelines for us. These catalogues had every type of information, even on which shelf to keep size 43 feathered hats.”

Küçükerman also noted the importance of the Fine Arts Academy's library, stacked with books from around the world, brought back by Osman Hamdi in the early years. In the 1960s, the library had a similar function to today's internet, making resources available from around the world. However, Küçükerman also emphasized the crucial influence of the Western world, which he described as an “illusion” created with images and beautiful details, which had no equivalence in his home country at the time.

“In 1965, the London based group Archigram had a lot of popularity. I used to travel to their trade fairs for the company I worked for. I still recall visiting Archigram's office. When I entered, what I encountered was an illusion. Within a small room, all the images we had seen so far were illustrations on A3 paper. The projects that we considered real and grand were all, in fact,

illusions... Beautiful images, but not corresponding with where we lived.”

Küçükerman thus shows the importance of studied reflection rather than blind application with no context. By bringing context into practice, ERSRA was one company that prioritized function over aesthetics when it was commissioned to design furniture for Turkey’s State Supply Office (SSO). The requirement to create functional, compact furniture that could be easily transported anywhere in Turkey necessitated certain purifications in design, which was followed by more aesthetic concerns. After completing the SSO contract, ERSRA transferred to the private sector. They started by imitating and being influenced by other company’s products, but later evolved their own style.

As a part of the European influence, the effect of Italian design can be seen during the 1970s. After education in Italy with Babür Kerim İncedayı, Yavuz Irmak opened his own furniture atelier, strongly influenced by Achille Castiglioni:

“In those years, the Modern movement spread to Turkey with architecture, interior architecture and furniture design all together. First, education was influenced by the trends that came from Germany and Northern Europe. Afterwards, I was influenced by Italian design. Some of the furniture of Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe were produced by some ateliers here. We were obliged to follow that path... Above all, Modernism was a free space and you were free to do whatever you wanted. I was influenced by the Memphis group, but we never designed something so extreme... Furniture had to fit a certain style or character.”

Irmak also mentioned the scarcity of journals, except for “Schöner Wohnen”, and recalls asking overseas travelers to obtain these for him. Traveling was a matter of economy so the Milan fair was the best choice. As İncedayı pointed out, it was crucial to see where and how things were produced:

“You needed to do something new, to use new material. It was important to create what was needed. Styling was just a part of it; it had to be functional. Otherwise, it would be a work of art. In Italy, I learned to use materials and technology, to produce in an efficient way, save material, like how to reduce the amount of mould, to build a bridge between design and technology.”

Sadık Aktar recalled his father, Baki Aktar’s visits to international fairs:

“He frequently went abroad, and sent postcards to my mother asking how I was. They were sent from Milan, Paris, Barcelona, etc. Most probably the things he saw in fairs influenced him because it was the time after the Second World War, and the whole world was hungry for new things.”



Fig. 1: Formica table-tops and use of metal legs



Fig. 2: Patterns from kilims on coffee tables (SIM company)



Fig. 3: Ceramic table tops designed by Füreyâ Koral Atelier

### Western materials

With increased communication and new materials, new production techniques were introduced to Turkish designers. Synthetic materials were much appreciated, such as American Venetian blinds and shades, artificial leather brand Vinylex and Formica. American officers stationed in Turkey decorated their houses with these materials, which were later bought by locals when they moved. These products were in high demand because they were considered Modern (Gürel, 2009).



Fig. 4: Furniture representing Western habits



Fig. 5: Çiper's designs



### Local interpretations

The designs of the late Fikret Tan can be traced to his inspiration by a combination of Turkish and other cultures. According to his son, Yalın Tan:

“My father had an extreme interest in vernacular architecture... He was keen on being adventurous, looking at his heritage, traveling around the villages. The effects of this wandering are visible in his work. These trips, and especially the journeys that he made to Paris, influenced him a lot. But his great appreciation of Turkish culture and Turkish art is visible in every detail.”

For Bediz Koz, regarding the material used in new Modernist furniture, Turkish wood, especially good quality oak, was key. Due to a lack of conventional materials for furniture production, Designers creatively adopted other local materials, such as water pipes, hazelnut sieves and fishing nets. As Neptün Öziş recalled:

“Designers wanted to use perforated metal sheets, for example, but it was not possible to find these. They looked at what they had... found hazelnut sieves, for example, and they used these... They looked at fishing nets, and inquired into how they could use these in furniture. They stretched the fishing net in metal frames to form chairs.”

Other examples of local interpretation during the 1960s include the wooden coffee tables by SIM Furniture Factory, and the ceramic-topped tables designed by the Füreya Koral Atelier, designed for the main building of The Grand National Assembly of Turkey (GNAT) by Sadun Ersin.

### Western habits

Some of the furniture produced reflected Western rather than Turkish cultural habits. Some examples are the day bed, music box and wicker armchair (which can be seen at the Florya Atatürk Marine Mansion), the wine trolley designed by Sadi Öziş, and the wine rack designed by Danyal Çiper.



Fig. 6: Ersin's sofa and coffee table



Fig. 7: Ersin's coffee table

### Formal resemblances to contemporaries

Learning from foreign contemporaries, Danyal Çiper, adopted Frank Lloyd Wright's organic architecture. He followed Louis Sullivan's principle that “form follows function”. Çiper's great attention to the living environment, and his organic architectural style can be seen in all his designs, which free the room from the box. In both his furniture and living spaces, his user-focused approach meant that the furniture naturally led to the space and the space to the building. Çiper is known in Turkish architectural history for the amount and quality of detail in his spaces. One well-known Turkish architect, Şevki Vanlı, described Çiper as Wright's post-1945 architectural representative in Ankara, and a romantic Modernist (Cengizkan, 2013; Gür, 2013).

The formal resemblances to contemporaries can be seen in much work of this period. For example, the sofa designed for relaxation areas by Sadun Ersin, following the Interior Design Contest launched for GNAT in 1959, resembles DeStijl's work with its Cartesian joints.

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Fig. 8: Kare Metal's chairs (Left: Öziş archive) and Sadun Ersin's fiberglass chair (Bottom: Ersin archive)

GNAT in 1959, resembles DeStijl's work with its Cartesian joints.

Ersin's 1939 design for a biomorphic and sculptural coffee table for the GNAT resembles the Japanese-American artist and industrial designer, Isamu Noguchi. Ersin's coffee table below shows reflections of biomorphism due to the surface designed by the Füreya Koral Atelier.

Sadi Öziş and his company, Kare Metal, frequently worked with materials like fishing nets and welded steel, while chairs designed in 1959 by Sadi Öziş and İlhan Koman resemble Harry Bertoia's welded chair manufactured by Knoll in 1952. According to Uzunarslan, Öziş had been experimenting with welded steel and chicken wire since the early 1950s, and they were the first to use chicken wire in furniture. Since Kare Metal and Bertoia were in contact, it is possible that the designs may have evolved through sharing visuals (Tuna Ultav, Hasırcı, Borvalı, Atmaca, 2015b). Interestingly, in 2015, Knoll allowed Kare Metal's related furniture designs to appear in its production catalogue. Ersin's fiberglass chair design of the 1970s also shares common features with the Eames lounge chair.

Mustafa Plevne, founder of Metal Mobilya, described how his company studied Modern furniture, and learned by making replicas from photographs, improving the joints and details, and changing the material and form. Known for its sleek, stylized furniture that could be taken to pieces for delivery, SIM Furniture Company was notable among its contemporaries. SIM came close to the approach taken by IKEA in Sweden, and similar concepts during this period.

## Conclusion

Through interviews, this study analyzed the sources of inspiration of Turkish Modernist designers' production of Modernist furniture. It found that these designers gained inspiration from international, mostly Western sources, which they obtained from design magazines, books and occasional visits to design fairs abroad, mainly in Europe.

In the process of the evolution of Modern furniture design, designs were studied, lessons were learned from abstractions before being combined with local materials, details and techniques. Apart from these inspirations, it was also observed that similar approaches emerged around the same time, despite the lack of any information from abroad. Further stages of this study will require more detailed interviews with designers, individual studies of prominent designers of the time, and analysis of furniture in specific types of buildings, including educational institutions and railway stations. At this point, the significant amount of data already obtained from interviews and visuals provides a clear view of how knowledge was transferred throughout the Modernist period. However, much more work remains to be done in this key period in Turkish design history before other data is lost forever.

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