

REPRESENTATIONS OF OTTOMAN INTERPRETERS BY WESTERN PAINTERS

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This study explores the representations of Ottoman interpreters in a number of selected paintings and engravings by western artists. The purpose of the paper is to describe and analyse the position of the interpreter as a political and diplomatic figure within the pictorial composition, basing itself in historical facts about Ottoman interpreters. I will start the paper by a brief discussion on the history of the interpreting profession in the Ottoman Empire and then move on to exploring the paintings where I will touch upon issues such as the traditional costumes, postures and physical positions of interpreters. I will question whether these elements were uniform in different representations by different artists or whether they displayed certain variances.

Key words: art history, interpreting history, interpreters in the Ottoman Empire, visual representations of interpreters, interpreting and politics, interpreters and society.

Until the second half of the 18th century the Ottoman Empire continued its relations with the West employing an “ad hoc” diplomacy. Interpreters played a significant role in the field of diplomatic and economic relations between the Ottoman government and Western states. The Ottomans used the word “tercüman” to refer to interpreters. This word originated from Syriac language and passed into Arabic. This word was adopted as “dragomanno” in Italian, “drogman” in French and “dragoman” in English (*Enfants de langue et Drogmans* 1995, p. 17). The most significant dragoman in the Ottoman Empire was the dragoman of the Sublime Porte. This service is thought to have been introduced in the early 16th century and in the beginning converts were employed for this job. Yunus Bey, who died in 1551, was one of these dragomans descending from a Greek origin. Yunus Bey had close and good relations with the first French diplomats in the Ottoman Empire. Another 16th century dragoman Murad Bey descending from Hungarian origin, had great knowledge of Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Croatian and the ability to speak Latin even though he was not fluent. However he translated Cicero’s work *De Senectute* into Ottoman (*Enfants de langue et Drogmans* 1995, p. 17).

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Dragomans of the Sublime Porte translated treaties, official documents, interpreted conversations, and sometimes were employed in diplomatic missions. The increase in the political and economic relations between the Ottoman Empire and the West enhanced their tasks and the importance of their role. The title of dragoman of the Sublime Porte became a position which was inherited among relatives in the late 17th century. A number of Greek families who dwelled at Fener area in the Ottoman capital had a monopoly over the title of dragoman (*Enfants de langue et Drogmans* 1995, p. 17). Among those families were Scarlattos, Mavrocordato, Ghika, Callimachi, Soutzo, Ypsilanti, Mavroyeni. The families resided at the Fener area in the Ottoman capital which was why they were called "Phanariots". Some members of these families were appointed by the Sultan as princes of Wallachia or Moldavia and ruled for limited periods. European courts acknowledged their rank and in the Ottoman hierarchy they almost ranked with the Grand Vizier (Mansel 1995, pp. 148–156). Christian dragomans to the Sublime Porte were given imperial edicts which brought them some advantages such as tax exemption (Uzunçarşılı 1984, p. 74). But some princes of Wallachia or Moldavia and dragomans of the Porte who were the members of Phanariot families, spied for the Russian Empire and Austria and instigated the Greek revolt. Their activities corrupted the trust the Ottoman government felt for them (Uzunçarşılı 1984, pp. 72–73; Mansel 1995, pp. 160–162). In 1821 an interpreting office was setup where Muslim officers were taught foreign languages and the position of dragoman was taken from the possession of Phanariot families completely (Uzunçarşılı 1984, pp. 73–74).

On the other hand Western ambassadors and merchants employed dragomans in their relations with the Sublime Porte and the Imperial Palace. Those dragomans were chosen among the Latin Catholic families of the Galata area of the city. They were given imperial edicts issued by the Sultan which provided them some advantages, like the other dragomans at the service of the Porte. These dragomans did not inspire confidence in Western ambassadors and merchants due to the fact that they were Ottoman citizens and were not fluent in Western languages. The Venetian Republic sent some of its young citizens to Istanbul to learn Oriental languages and to work as dragomans. Those dragomans were called "Giovani della lingua". This example inspired the French government to establish a school for educating dragomans. With the encouragement of the minister to the King Louis the XVIth the school was established in 1669 and was given the name "L'Ecole des Enfants de langues" (*Enfants de langue et Drogmans* 1995, pp. 18–19). In the year 1700 twelve students were given scholarship by the King of France in order to complete "L'Ecole des Enfants de langues" in the Pera region at Istanbul. Those were Oriental boys and would study religion, literature and Oriental languages in the College of Louis-le-Grand directed by the Jesuit order in Paris. All of their expenses would be covered by the royal treasury. When they went back to their homeland they would be employed as missionaries or dragomans by the French government. Those boys were placed in a class which was called the "Class of Armenians". They wore cloak-like robes as their daily costumes, and during ceremonies they were attired with silk loose robes and long red wool cloaks with blue lining. Because the school did not fulfill the government's ex-

pectations it was rearranged in 1721. According to the rearrangement, ten French pupils would be accepted to the college in Paris. After their graduation they would be sent to the Saint-Louis Monastery controlled by Capuchin monks in Istanbul, where they would practice what they learnt in Paris. After the expulsion of Jesuits from France “L’Ecole des Enfants de langues” was articulated to the university regime and lost its importance in the course of time. The school for boys of language in Istanbul was inactive during the French Revolution. The lack of communication with France and the fact that almost all the dragomans left the Ottoman capital made it impossible for the school to enrol new students. A new school for interpreters named “L’Ecole nationale des langues orientales vivantes” was established under the National Library in 1795 by the Convention Assembly. But in 1796 the school was taken under the control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and survived until 1873. So the school in Pera, Istanbul stayed became redundant. Talleyrand, the minister of foreign affairs of the time, sent four dragomans who graduated from the Paris school to Istanbul in order to rearrange the school in Pera. The school in Pera was active until 1831 when the Palace of the French Ambassador burnt down.

In the 18th century Istanbul became a popular city for European artists because of its growing diplomatic and cultural contacts with Europe as well as its geographical location. The paintings I will study for the purposes of this presentation were depicted by Western artists in the second half of the 18th century. All four paintings treat the audience Western ambassadors by the Ottoman Sultan or the Grand Vizier. These scenes were multi-figural compositions, largely affected by the Baroque and Rococo styles very much in vogue in the 18th century. The commissioners of these paintings in the West were aristocrats and the newly rising bourgeoisie which increasingly became wealthier thanks to the developing trade. The scenes depicting contacts between western ambassadors and Ottoman sultans were usually commissioned by the ambassadors themselves. The painters were western artists who accompanied the ambassadors in their diplomatic missions and some of whom lived in Istanbul. These paintings feature interior spaces with the dramatic light foregrounding colours, a technique used by Baroque masters such as Velazquez or Rubens in their multi-figural group compositions.

(*Illustration 1*) The first example I would like to share with you is by Jean-Baptiste Van Mour (1671–1737) dated 1727 and titled *The Arrival of the Dutch Ambassador Cornelis Calcoen in the Palace to Meet Ahmed III*. Van Mour was a French painter of Flemish origin who arrived in Istanbul in 1699 when his friend Comte de Ferriol was appointed to the city as the French Ambassador. In addition to his commissions by the ambassador, he painted scenes from the daily life of Istanbul as well as landscapes of the city. His collection of 100 engravings was published in Paris and was soon known all over Europe. The artist stayed in Istanbul after Comte de Ferriol left and served his successors who took office as French ambassadors in the city. He also received commissions from other European ambassadors in the Ottoman capital (Özel 1994, pp. 366–367). A first look at the painting reveals crowded groups of figures in the imperial courtyard. There are two dragomans following two high ranking palace officials in the foreground. They are followed by the Dutch ambassador and



Illustration 1

Jean-Baptiste Van Mour: *The Arrival of the Dutch Ambassador Cornelis Calcoen in the Palace to Meet Ahmed III*, 1727, oil on canvas, 91.5 × 125 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

his suite. There are janissaries gathered in the courtyard occupying the middle and background. When the Sultan would receive western ambassadors, he would gather janissaries in the second courtyard of the Topkapı Palace and have them served rice in large containers which would be followed by the payment of their salaries (Uzunçarşılı 1984, pp. 293–296). This ceremony was organised in order to make an impression on the ambassadors. The ambassador would first be received by the Grand Vizier, dine with him and then introduced to the Sultan after he and his suit were dressed with the special “hilat” kaftans. This painting shows the ambassador and his suit, on their way to the Grand Vizier’s office. The interpreters following the court officials walk in front of the ambassador with their dark blue gowns with fur collars and their black fur caps. The janissaries gathered in the courtyard are waiting to eat the rice they are served. The artist designed the portico circling the courtyard with round arches and doric pillars carrying the arches which does not reflect the reality unlike the figures and costumes which are depicted quite realistically. During his time in Istanbul, Van Mour was commissioned many audience ceremonies by western painters. The painter was very familiar with the strict and unchanging rituals of the Ottoman court and therefore kept the figures, the costumes and the positions of the figures constant in all of these compositions, while he only changed the Sultan and the ambassador’s suite (Boppe 1998, pp. 20–21). In this painting, the costumes



Illustration 2

Gian Antonio and Francesco Guardi: *An Ambassador Passing through the Second Courtyard of the Palace with His Suite*, 1742–1743, oil on canvas, 97.6 × 130.6 cm, Ankara, British Government Art Collection

used by the figures are realistic, but the location is the product of the artist's imagination. One of the two dragomans in this painting is the interpreter of the Sublime Porte, while the second one works for the Dutch ambassador (Boppe 1998, p. 21). The interpreters at the service of western ambassadors in Istanbul or other Ottoman cities sometimes wore costumes decided by the embassies, while they sometimes preferred to wear Oriental dragoman costumes (*Enfants de langue et Drogmans* 1995, pp. 53–56). Yet, whatever the case, these costumes were always designed so as to reflect the prestige of their profession and displayed some unchanging elements such as a woollen gown with a fur collar and a dark fur cap.

(*Illustration 2*) This second painting was included in the 43-painting collection of paintings on the Ottoman Empire commissioned by Marshall Count Mathias von der Schulenburg who was a Saxonian condottiere to Gian Antonio Guardi and Francesco Guardi. It is titled *An Ambassador Passing through the Second Courtyard of the Palace with His Suite*. The Guardi brothers are Italian artists who lived in the age of Rococo and produced views of Venice and capriccios. All travellers who visited Italy wanted to take back paintings of Venice with them which led to the rise of a school of painting composed of painters working to meet the demand for Venetian views. Canaletto and the Guardi brothers are the most famous representatives of this school (Gombrich 1980, p. 351). The theme of this composition is identical to that of

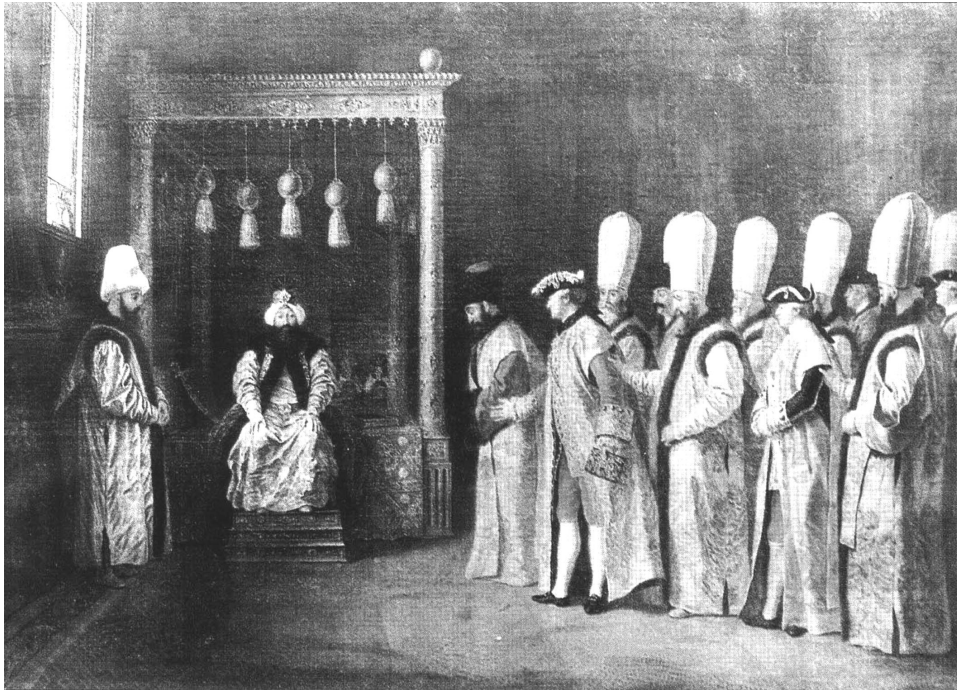


Illustration 3

Antoine de Favray: *Sultan's Audience Granted to Ambassador Saint-Priest*, before 1771, oil on canvas, 96.5 × 126 cm, Paris, Private Collection

Van Mour's painting. The Guardi brothers must have seen one of the numerous paintings by Van Mour treating the same theme. The main difference in this composition is that the style is marked by free brush strokes and stronger colours. Another difference is the fact that the artists used imaginary figures rather than real personalities used in the original painting. However, the costumes appear authentic due to the fact that they were borrowed from Van Mour's painting. In the meantime, the gestures of the figures are very much exaggerated. The purpose here is to depict an imaginary Oriental ceremony rather than create a painting with a documentary value. The Guardi brothers have never been to the Orient and apparently, deemed it sufficient to be inspired by western artists who lived in the Ottoman capital like Van Mour. Although this composition treats an Oriental theme, the design is carried out in accordance to a western taste. The gestures in the painting as well as a concubine from the Harem serving food to the janissaries on the foreground demonstrate this.

(*Illustration 3*) This painting by Antoine de Favray (1706–1792) bears the title *Sultan's Audience Granted to Ambassador Saint-Priest*. The painting was exhibited in the 1771 Salon in Paris (Boppe 1998, p. 60). After Antoine de Favray graduated from the French Academy in Rome in 1744 he became a Maltese knight and lived in Malta for 18 years where he painted portraits of knights and landscapes. He travelled to Istanbul in 1762 and worked in the Ottoman capital under the patronage of

Marquis de Vergennes, the French ambassador. He became famous in the city with the Istanbul landscapes he painted. De Favray befriended leading Greek families in Istanbul and had the chance to observe their daily domestic lives. Apart from his depictions of daily life in Istanbul the artist painted portraits of local Greek dragomans and their families (Boppe 1998, pp. 41–60). This composition depicts Sultan's audience of the French ambassador Marquis de Saint-Priest on 28 November 1768. Such receptions would be carried out when ambassadors arrived in or departed from Istanbul. The documents do not have any information as to whether the artist personally took part in this ceremony. But since he was under the ambassador's patronage, this is rather likely. The painting was met with great popular interest when it was exhibited in the 1771 Paris Salon because the public had never seen such a realistic composition on the Orient. Moreover, the Ottoman Sultan appeared before the eyes of western spectators with such a realistic portrait for the first time. However, there were some criticisms raised suggesting that the French ambassador did not resemble his real appearance (Boppe 1998, p. 60). The figures in the painting can be identified as real-life persons. These include the Sultan, seating firmly on his throne, Grand Vizier Nişancı Mehmed Emin Paşa to his left, Nikolaki Draco, the interpreter of the Sublime Porte, Marquis de Saint-Priest, Baron Bietzel, first secretary Lebas, and chief interpreter Deval to his right. This painting characterised by a style reminiscent of the multi-figural interior compositions by Velazquez or Rubens brings Oriental and Western figures together. In the paintings by Van Mour and the Guardi brothers we had seen western ambassadors on their ways to the Grand Vizier's office. This painting depicts a Western ambassador in direct contact with the Sultan. The ambassador and his suite wear "hilats". Their positions in the ceremony are strictly regulated by conventions according to which the dragoman must stand between the Sultan and the ambassador (Uzunçarşılı 1984, p. 71). Just like the other figures, the position and the gestures of the dragoman remain constant, as well as his costume. The dragoman depicted as such is an unchanging element of audience scenes. He always occupies a salient position in the composition, visually expressing the salience of his professional function.

(*Illustration 4*) Another painting by Antoine de Favray is titled *Audience Granted by Sultan Mustafa III to Ambassador Vergennes 17 December 1768* and depicts a farewell visit paid by the ambassador. This composition provided inspiration to a larger oil painting treating the same theme and the previous painting I discussed. Here it is evident that the rules of the ceremony remain unchanged and the figures stand in positions and gestures conventionally attributed to them.

(*Illustration 5*) This example is engraving number 73 from *Turquie* by Joseph Marie Jouannin and Jules Van Gaver featuring a total of 97 engravings. In French the picture is titled *Audience d'un Ambassadeur Européen vers 1788* (Jouannin and Van Gaver 1840). The picture is interesting from two points of view; first of all, Joseph Marie Jouannin was a dragoman serving the French King and travelled in Anatolia on a mission given by General Brune, the French ambassador in Istanbul. Following his Anatolian trip he wrote *Turquie* where he gave an account of the history of the Ottoman Empire until the reign of Mahmud II and depicted various cities and monu-

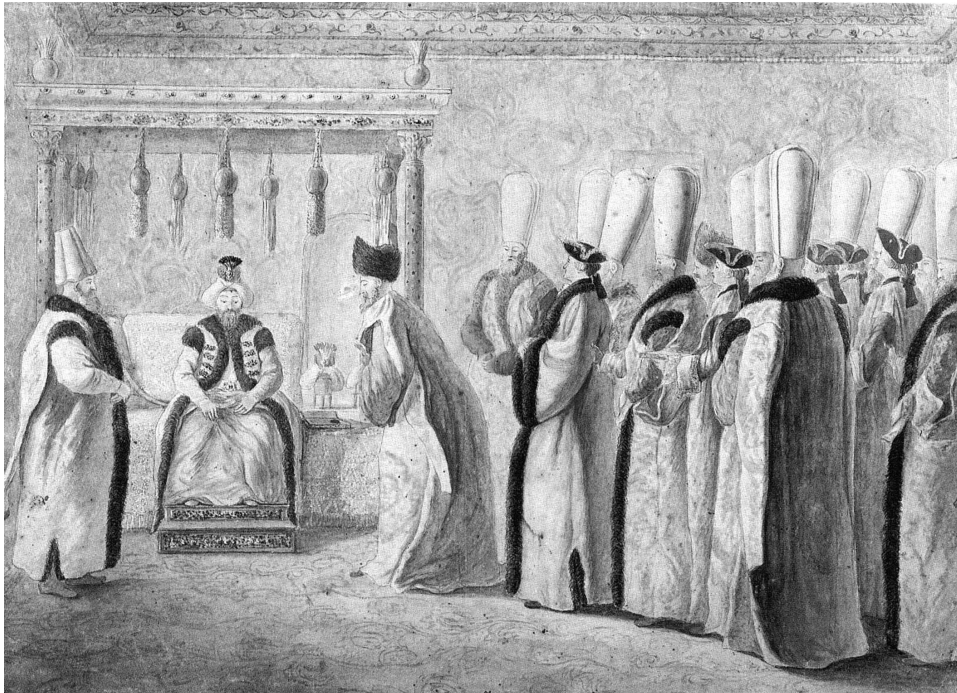


Illustration 4

Antoine de Favray: *Audience Granted by Sultan Mustafa III to Ambassador Vergennes 17 December 1768*, 1768, gouache on paper, 35 × 49 cm, Paris, Private Collection

ments in the Empire. Furthermore Joseph Marie Jouannin served as the principal of Ecole des Jeunes de Langue de Pera in 1803–1810 (*Enfants de langue et Drogmans* 1995, p. 36). Secondly, although the picture is credited to Charles Lalaisse in the bottom left corner, it is clearly inspired by Jean-Baptiste Van Mour's *Sultan Ahmed III's Audience Granted to Ambassador d'Andrezel, 17 October 1724* (Illustration 6) (*Enfants de langue et Drogmans* 1995, p. 69). In both paintings which feature a multi-figural composition, the composition is visible from a wide angle and the artist is situated higher than other figures in the composition. In the composition by Charles Lalaisse Sultan Abdulhamid I and his two sons, Mustafa IV and Mahmud II sit on the throne. The viziers stand in front of the throne, while the interpreter of the Sublime Porte stand on the right-hand side, followed by the interpreter of the ambassadorial delegation, the ambassador and the accompanying members of the court. This scheme is a constant in both representations. In the painting by Jean-Baptiste Van Mour, the ambassadorial interpreter is the only figure facing the spectator. This interpreter figure is used as an element shaping the relationship between the painting and the onlooker which forms an interesting allegory when the primary function of an interpreter is considered: While the interpreter mediates between the Ottoman court and the foreign diplomatic mission, his pictorial representation mediates between the pictorial universe and the audience.



Illustration 5

Charles Lalaisse: *Audience d'un Ambassadeur Européen vers 1788*, 1840, steel engraving, 10.3 × 15 cm, Joseph Marie Jouannin and Jules Van Gaver: *Turquie*, Firmin Didot Frères, Paris, 1840, pl. 73

In conclusion, based on the six paintings I showed, the following evaluation can be made:

In paintings treating audience granted to ambassadors by the Ottoman court the composition is carried out according to a fixed scheme. This scheme has been predetermined by Ottoman court rules. The scheme dictates the position of the dragomans who are always placed between the Sultan or the Grand Vizier and the Western ambassador. The paintings adopting this scheme largely reflect the reality. The dragomans appear as significant figures in the paintings, complementing the composition featuring two major figures, the Sultan or the Grand Vizier and the western ambassador. In other words, the dragomans are not depicted as an invisible “veil” serving a transparent function between the two parties in dialogue, but rather as a visible, dominant and indispensable element in these compositions.

The function and position granted to interpreters in the above examples are by no means original or innovative. A historical example to the way interpreters have been depicted in visual representations comes from ancient Egypt where two interpreters are shown in a rather prominent position, mediating between two parties (*Illustration 7*). The use of interpreters in diplomatic or military settings is likewise a historical phenomenon. In the Ottoman Empire, the main reason for the need to

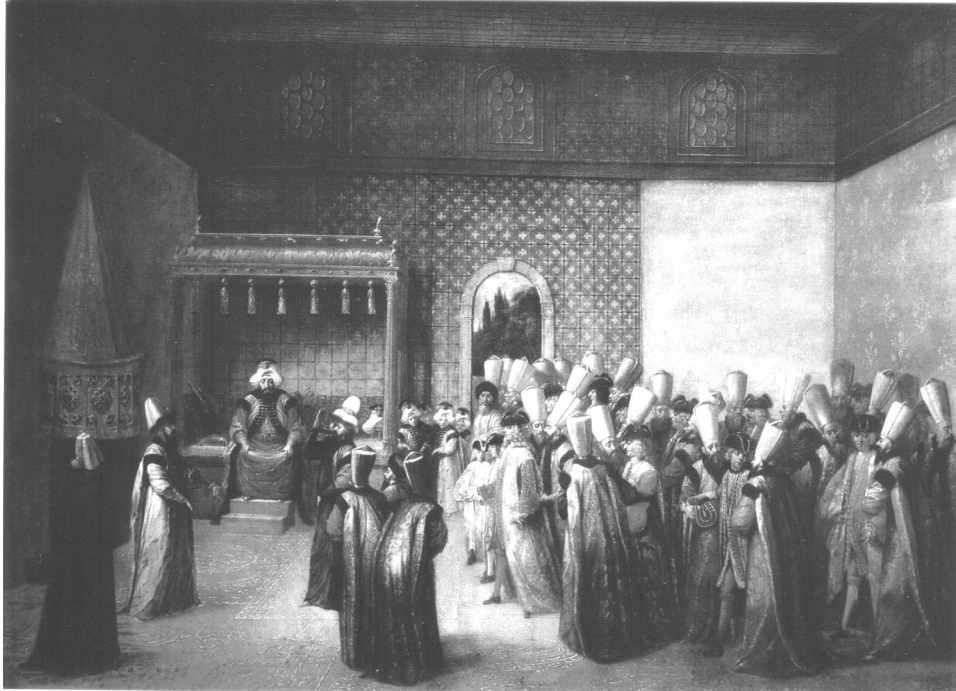


Illustration 6

Jean-Baptiste Van Mour: *Sultan Ahmed III's Audience Granted to Ambassador d'Andrezel*, 17 October 1724, after October 1724, oil on canvas, 90 × 121 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Bordeaux

employ interpreters stemmed from the fact that Sultans and the court elite refused to learn the language of western powers. As Bowen states, this attitude was also common in ancient Egypt and Rome where “other languages were held in low esteem with the consequence that the elite made no effort to learn such languages, except Greek” (Bowen et al. 1995, pp. 246, 279). This no doubt placed interpreters on a shifting ground – in the Ottoman Empire they were both much needed and at the same time scorned for dealing with perceivably low-esteem languages. Their crucial role of being linguistic and cultural intermediaries granted them a place at the state protocol which is also clearly visible in the examples given above. However, their social status should not be inferred from these depictions alone; their knowledge of foreign languages and cultures did not guarantee interpreters instant access to respect and prestige.

The dragomans are almost always easily identifiable in the scenes of audience in which they are placed because their costumes are their professional hallmark. The long gowns they dress with their fur collars and dark fur caps are in a way their uniforms and these costumes give away their occupation in the paintings, as they did in real life.

On the other hand, the artistic depiction of the dragomans as strong and visible figures contradicts with some aspects of their professional reality. The dragomans



Illustration 7

*Memphian Tomb of Horemheb, 1333–1306 BC, stone relief,
Rijksmuseum voor de Oudheid, Leiden*

were usually Ottoman subjects of Greek or Armenian origin who were educated in the west in various languages. They were familiar with Persian and Arabic apart from Ottoman and western languages. For westerners they always remained an Oriental, while for Ottomans they were “windows opening up to the west”. This led to the fact that they always remained in between the two cultures and were deprived of the full trust of either party. This placed them on a shifting ground – both socially and materially. Although western painters granted them a fixed and salient position in their paintings, and although they played a key role in shaping the political and diplomatic relations between the East and the West, the social and material standing of interpreters in the Ottoman Empire was characterised with distrust and ambiguity. Thus their visual representation forms an interesting case where art does not imitate life.

The dragomans in the Ottoman Empire did not earn high incomes but above this, they were bothered by the fact that they had no opportunities for advancing their careers. Counselors and dragomans belonged to two different classes and it was rather difficult for a dragoman to be promoted to the position of counselor. Dragomans complained about this situation and demanded that the most skilled dragomans be promoted as counselors. They saw this as their right as they were confident in their skills and knowledge. In 1796 dragomans wrote a letter to French ambassador Aubert-Dubayet expressing the following recommendations and demands: “A good interpreter has received a good education; knows the laws, customs and languages of Eastern countries. Is there any reason for the government to dishearten them by not

announcing that they could be promoted as counsellors in the future?" The dragomans showed Knight Mouradgea d'Ohsson who served at the Swedish embassy and was later promoted as the Swedish counsellor as an example. Despite these clear demands, the dragomans were turned down and were refused the chance of professional promotion, perhaps due to age-old inclinations above everything else. In the Ottoman Empire a dragoman who wanted a change of career could only return to France to try his luck to join the group of four Oriental clerk-translators reporting to the king (*Enfants de langue et Dragmans* 1995, p. 84).

Although dragomans in the Ottoman Empire belonged to the most refined and learned sections of the society, they lacked the kind of prestige and earnings that they aspired to, and most likely also deserved. While they occupied a prominent place in the diplomatic protocol, their social status remained ambiguous. The visual examples given above indicate that interpreters took on important, difficult and even dangerous tasks since they were involved in the shaping of relations between the Ottoman Empire and other states. These tasks were clearly recognised and appreciated by western artists who placed interpreters in prominent positions in their paintings. However, historical sources reveal that the social and material standing of dragomans was incommensurate with their professional performance and achievements.

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