

# Fog and caliph abdulmecid ii essay sample

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When one looks at the painting “ Fog” by Caliph Abdulmecid II, they see mist, or something like stubborn smoke, that lays low and thick just above the surface of the water, and a boat or gondola is emerging into the clearing. There is something veiled by the fog, and with a closer look it is a mosque, with the city of Istanbul behind it. It is an interesting painting, striking in its seemingly simplicity, but with a more thorough look, it is clear that the painting embraces a beautiful complexity. It may appear that the art piece is simply that, a piece of mere art, but behind its making is a complex man living in complex times. This brief essay attempts to explore the painting and the complexities behind it. It will become clear that the painter had a certain intention behind this painting, and that intention, whether conscious or not, was to demonstrate the complexities of Istanbul’s character at that time.

### The Painting Fog

The physical act of the painting, to mask a city and a mosque behind a mist so as to make it seem as though the mosque is a ghostly facade floating above the sea, takes impressive skill. Fog is a painting demonstrating a mix of Islamic and Western influences from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The mosque hidden by the veil of mist has roots in Islamic art where art does indeed reflect the beliefs of the people and culture. In Islam, it is considered blasphemy to draw or sculpt a human or animal, in fear of committing idol-worship.[1] Therefore, and as in this picture, buildings, particularly those representing the Islamic faith, were often the focus of pieces of Islamic art. The mosque behind the fog is definitely derived from this artistic thought.

Fog is also a product of art themes and styles from the West. In fact, it was influenced by the theme of sea which was popular in the West. It was the famous Russian painter Ivan Aivasovsky who was particularly good at painting the sea. In fact, he devoted his life to expressing the Black Sea's beauty through his art. Aivasovsky perfected the skill of using light to bring movement to sea by bringing the waves alive. At an exhibition at the Dolmabahce Palace featuring Aivasovsky's work in 1874, the painter of was inspired by the sea, and thus blended his own background and experiences into his own piece of art: Fog. It is this part of the painting, the "unseen", non-visual part that adds so much complexity to the painting, and gives it its depth of meaning and historical importance. The painter is none other than the last Caliph of Turkey, Calips Abdulmecid II.

#### The Painter, the Last Caliph of the Ottoman Empire

On May 29, 1868, Abdulmecid Efendi II was born at Dolmabahce Palce of Instabul. He would be the last Caliphate, that of the Ottomans.[2] On the orders of the Turkish government, the Caliphate was abolished on March 3, 1924. The Caliphate had always been known as something "good" by the Islamists, but the last years, particularly those under Abdulmecid II's cousin's (Sultan Abdul-Hamid II) rule, were of corruption and greed, and had the beginnings of the Armenia genocide.[3] On November 1, 1922, the Sultanate was abolishd and Abdul-Hamid lost his title of Caliph. A couple of weeks later, Abdulmecid II was inaugurated as the Caliph, the last Caliph of the Ottoman Empire.[4] It was a mere two years later, on November 21, 1924, that the Caliphate was abolished, and Abdulmecid, along with his

family, were sent into exile off the shores of Turkey. He spoke French fluently, and ended his years in Paris, where he died in 1944.

Abdulmecid II is not simply known for his title as the last Caliph of the Ottoman Empire, but is also known as a very important painter from the later period of Ottoman art.[5] He was a cultured, enlightened individual who loved painting.[6] His teachers were both of Islamic and Western origins. He appreciated both forms of art, and this fact was reflected in his paintings, particularly in *Fog*.

#### The People and Things that Influence an Artist

There are people and things that influence and inspire artists to paint.

Fausto Zonaro, an Italian from Venetia but who lived in Istanbul for much of his life, is one of the people who had the power to influence and inspire.

Members of the Ottoman family were also his admirers, and therefore Fausto soon found himself as painter of the court and providing lessons to the princes.[7] Zonaro painted, among other things, scenes of the sea, including masts and minarets, smoke and mist, with a light and water blend. His seascapes and western style had a profound impact on one of his students, Abdulmecid II.[8] Abdulmecid II began to paint. In fact he loved painting, and many of those paintings were left behind when he was sent into exile. Years before his exile, however, he created the painting *Fog*, and though it was Zonaro who commenced Abdulmecid's technical and creative painting abilities, it was a poem that inspired his well known piece *Fog*.

Tevfik Fikret was born in 1867 and died in 1915. He was a famous poet whose real name was Mehmed Tevfik. One of his most famous poems is Sis (the Fog). In this poem Tevfik describes Istanbul as a “slutty virgin widow,” and was forbidden by Abdulmecid’s cousin Abdülhamid II who was Sultan and Caliph at that time. His reign was a brutal one indeed, and Tevfik’s poem described the same. It is a poem that reveals deep pain, injustice and a strong forceful tone that highlights the pressures of unfairness of that period in Turkish history. The poem in essence is about rich people in Turkey who devour everything that is of the people. The people, on the other hand, are gullible and believe that those in power are looking out for their better good. Upon reading this poem, Abdulmecid II was inspired, and the product of that inspiration was his painting Fog, named after the very poem. The meaning and substance of the poem still speaks with familiarity today, and is therefore a timeless piece that can be passed along and understood by other generations. The same can be said for the painting.

#### Conclusion: Timeless Meaning in Fog

Considering Abdulmecid II’s background and experiences, one is able to read into the painting Fog a little better to understand the full complexity of a painting whose meaning seems simple at first glance, that is a recreation of a mosque in the wake of a foggy morning. The way the mosque is painted, almost hidden by a veil of mist and floating as if a ghostly façade on the sea, holds in it great symbolism. Another meaning for façade, one that is figurative, is that the outward appearance of a building is maintained to conceal an unpleasant truth. This façade floats on top of a sea, the latter of

which is symbolic of a tidal wave of emotions. Then there is the veil of this foggy mist. In Islam women must veil themselves, to hide themselves from men or the male sex.

Of course, coming out of the veil is a boat, emerging from the fog as though it, or whoever is sailing it, has seen the “light” and is going toward it, leaving the past behind that veil. Turkey during this time period was in a “hazy” period. It was seeking and attained a secular state. Prior to that secular state, Caliph Abdulhamid reigned, and during that period there was much corruption and ill-will. The people needed change, and needed a society where Islam did not rule all aspects of their lives. With the abolishment of the Sultanate and the Caliphate, Turkey became more Western. Today, it is still the meeting place of the East and West, the boundaries of the two are hazy, foggy. Socially, this painting represents Turkey’s recent history with its identity crisis as well as its blending of East and West. It demonstrates clarity in a history of uncertainty. That boat is emerging from the fog, but has not yet fully emerged. This painting is indeed timeless, and Abdulmecid met his intention to demonstrate Istanbul’s complex existence.

### Bibliography

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[1] Alex Brown and Ry van Beest Holle, *Art of Islam* (New York: Abrams, 1970).

[2] Mansel, Philip, “ Painting his way into history, the Last Caliph,” *Cornucopia* 34, Vol. 6 (2005): 78-97.

[3] *Ibid* .

[4] Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey, Vol. 2. Reform, Revolution, and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808 - 1975* (New York; Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[5] *Supra* at 1.

[6] *Ibid* .

[7] Mansel, Philip, “ A Preview of Ottoman Court Painter Fausto Zonaro by Osman Ondes and Erol Makzume,” *Cornucopia* 28, Vol. 6 (2003): 7-10.

[8] *Ibid* .