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## Grotesque Approaches in Contemporary Turkish Painting

Mevlüt Ünal   
Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi

Ahmet Dalkıran   
Selçuk Üniversitesi

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## Grotesque Approaches in Contemporary Turkish Painting

Mevlüt Ünal, Ahmet Dalkıran

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### Abstract

The Republican period witnessed significant changes in Turkish art and the art of painting was reshaped in this process. By addressing the grotesque elements in paintings depicting mythological themes, the study aims to understand the reasons why artists use these images and the social, cultural, and political contexts of these images. The study analyzes the depiction of figures in Turkish painting in a grotesque context during the Republican period and how artists integrated the influences of Western culture as well as traditional Turkish culture. Additionally, it is examined whether the use of grotesque images emerged as a reaction of the artists to the political and social atmosphere of the period or as a different narrative strategy. In this context, it offers an understanding of how grotesque images in Turkish painting reflect the artists' individual expressions, social criticism and cultural identities.

## Çağdaş Türk Resminde Grotesk Yaklaşımlar

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### Özet

Cumhuriyet dönemi, Türk sanatında önemli değişikliklere sahne olmuş ve resim sanatı bu süreçte yeniden şekillenmiştir. Çalışma, mitolojik temaların işlendiği resimlerdeki grotesk unsurları ele alarak, sanatçıların bu imgeleri kullanma nedenlerini ve bu imgelerin toplumsal, kültürel ve politik bağlamlarını anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada, Cumhuriyet döneminde Türk resmindeki figürlerin grotesk bağlamda işlenişini ve sanatçıların geleneksel Türk kültürü yanı sıra Batı kültürünün etkilerini nasıl entegre ettiklerini analiz eder. Ayrıca, grotesk imgelerin kullanımının sanatçıların dönemin politik ve sosyal atmosferine tepki olarak mı yoksa farklı bir anlatı stratejisi olarak mı ortaya çıktığı irdelenmektedir. Bu bağlamda, Türk resmindeki grotesk imgelerin, sanatçıların bireysel ifadelerini, toplumsal eleştirilerini ve kültürel kimliklerini nasıl yansıttığına dair bir anlayış sunar.

## Introduction

In the art world, grotesque images are often seen as a way of challenging norms and pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable. In mythological Turkish painting of the twentieth century, especially after the Republic, these images are used to explore the complexities of Turkey's political, social, and cultural history. Mythical creatures and figures from Turkish folklore are often depicted in these paintings, blending elements of traditional Islamic art with contemporary styles. The use of grotesque imagery in these works is particularly notable as it challenges the perceived beauty and harmony of traditional art forms. One of the best known examples of grotesque imagery in post-republican mythological Turkish painting is the figure of the "devil". These demons are often depicted with exaggerated features such as large eyes, sharp teeth, and twisted limbs. Another common theme in these paintings is the use of hybrid creatures. These creatures are often used as symbols of cultural and political.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of post-Republican mythological Turkish painting is the use of color. These works generally feature bright, bold tones and colors that conflict and contrast with each other. This creates a feeling of dissonance and uneasiness, further emphasizing the grotesque nature of the images. Despite the seemingly chaotic nature of these paintings, there is a clear sense of purpose and intent behind them. These paintings reflect Anatolia's multilayered cultural heritage and a commentary on the country's ongoing struggle with identity and modernization. For art historians and academics, the study of post-Republican mythological Turkish painting offers a fascinating glimpse into Turkey's cultural and political history. By examining the grotesque images and themes in these works, we can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that have shaped Turkish society over the past century.

It is a fact that the formal and imaginative values applied in works of art are constantly changing. A similar situation can be observed when we look at world art in this context. This issue of variability, in some cases, arises from critical approaches to previous art styles. In contrast, in other cases, it emerges as a search for new forms by taking advantage of the features of previous art styles (Susuz & Öztürk, 2023). For artists, the use of grotesque images in post-Republican mythological Turkish paintings can be a source of inspiration and experimentation. By incorporating elements of these works into their art, artists can challenge traditional notions of beauty and create truly unique and thought-provoking works. In conclusion, the use of grotesque images in post-Republican mythological Turkish painting is a testament to the power of art to challenge and provoke. These works reflect Turkey's complex cultural and political history and offer a fascinating look at the country's ongoing struggle with identity and modernization. For artists and art historians alike, it is a rich source of inspiration and insight into one of the world's most fascinating and complex cultures.

## Contemporary Turkish Painting Art

Turkish painting has undergone significant changes and developments since the foundation of the Republic. The language and style of Turkish art have diversified by being influenced by Western art and the original expression and working methods of Turkish painters (Sevindik & Okur, 2017). Our country was geographically and politically involved in the turbulent period that started in 1944 and continued with global effects until the 1970s

(Öztürk, Türe & Al, 2021). Nationalization policies in Turkey and the transformation of Turkish Painting Art were discussed and a general evaluation was made of the current situation of Turkish Painting (Boyras, 2016). Additionally, the effects of surrealism on modern Turkish painting have been investigated and the influence of Western art movements on Turkish artistic expression has been pointed out (Karaalioglu, 2017).

Contemporary Turkish painting continues its continuity as a diverse and dynamic field that reflects Turkey's rich cultural heritage. Today, Turkish painters continue to make a significant impact on the world art scene with their unique styles, techniques, and approaches to art. One of the most striking features of contemporary Turkish painting is its diversity. It can be said that there is no single style or technique that defines Turkish painting. Instead, a mixture of styles exists, including realism, impressionism, expressionism, and abstraction, among others. This diversity reflects the country's multiculturalism, which has influenced Turkish art for centuries. Turkish painters stand out with their use of bright, vibrant colors that evoke the natural beauty and cultural richness of the country. The use of bold compositions is also a distinctive feature of Turkish painting; Artists have often experimented with unconventional shapes and forms to create visually impressive works of art (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Selim TURAN, Abstract, 1951 (The Magger, 2018)

One of the most important movements of contemporary Turkish painting and a method of abstraction; traditional Turkish motifs and symbols were included in the painting. Many Turkish painters took inspiration from the country's rich cultural heritage and incorporated elements such as Ottoman calligraphy, tile patterns and geometric patterns into their works. This trend also reflects the increasing interest among contemporary artists in preserving and promoting Turkey's cultural heritage. Another tendency in Turkish painting is the use of mixed techniques. Many contemporary Turkish artists have experimented with various materials and techniques, such as collage, digital art, and sculpture, to create unique and innovative works of art. This trend has increased interest in pushing the boundaries of traditional painting and exploring new methods of artistic expression.

Despite the diversity of styles and techniques in contemporary Turkish painting, common themes emerge in many works. One of these themes is admiration for the natural world. Many Turkish painters have been inspired by the natural landscapes and wildlife of the country and produced works that reflect their beauty and magnificence. On

the other hand, another common theme has been the political and social landscape of the country. In this context, there have also been artists who used their works as tools to comment on issues such as human rights, gender equality and political corruption. It can be said that this trend reveals the increasing social awareness among Turkish artists and their concerns about using their works to create a positive change in society.

When looking at contemporary Turkish painting examples, it is seen that in the works of many Turkish artists, the interaction between painting and photography continues to develop, reflecting the ongoing development of Turkish art (Şahin, 2020). In addition, in parallel with the developments in the West, the transformation of geometric forms into abstractions and the examination of their reflections in Turkish painting emphasizes the dynamic nature of Turkish artistic expression (Çeken & Çelik, 2016). Scientific research on Turkish paintings, such as Raman spectroscopic analysis of paintings by Turkish painters, contributes to a deeper understanding of the materials and techniques used in Turkish art (Ormancı & Bakiler, 2021). The historical roots of Turkish painting extend to ancient traditions of Central Asian origin that influenced various art forms such as textiles, ceramics, and carpets (Ocakoğlu, 2018; Yetkin, 1965; Kalyoncu, 2021). The influence of Turkish art on different fields such as architecture and archaeology reflect the interconnectedness of Turkish cultural heritage with various artistic and social aspects (Kononenko, 2018; Tovsultanov, 2021).

Contemporary Turkish painting is defined by the combination of traditional techniques with modern influences, reflecting a blend of cultural heritage and global trends. The integration of digital technology and new media art has brought about a transformation in the creation and presentation of Turkish painting. This unification has led to the discovery of new forms of expression and the preservation of historical civilization through art (Zhen-jiang, 2022; Sakr & Ghonaim, 2022). Moreover, contemporary Turkish paintings often include traditional content and forms reinterpreted through the lens of modern artistic techniques, such as segmented lines, rough texture, distorted colors, and the use of dreamlike images and symbols (Sharma, 2020). This combination of traditional and modern elements reflects the evolving nature of Turkish painting, embracing innovative approaches while capturing the essence of the country's rich cultural heritage. Turkish painting has developed through a variety of influences, including Western art movements, nationalization policies, and the constant interaction between different art forms. The dynamic nature of Turkish painting is reflected in its adaptation to new concepts and materials, as well as its historical roots in Central Asian traditions. In addition, contemporary Turkish painting offers an aesthetic value that embraces the unknown and invites the viewer to interact with the work of art on a deeper, more introspective level. This aesthetic is revealed by investigating unconsciously understood meanings, and the importance of preserving encounters with the unknown in abstract painting is emphasized (Evans, 2015).

### **Grotesque in Concept Context and Its Place in Art**

The term "grotesque" encompasses a range of meanings, from the bizarre and fantastical to the ugly and unpleasant. It has been applied in a variety of contexts, including art, literature, psychology, and advertising. In art, the grotesque was originally used to describe the fantastical hybrid figures in Roman murals during the Renaissance but has since evolved to denote an ambiguous category in which disgust is intertwined with laughter

Barrow (n.d.). Moreover, the grotesque has been associated with strange, incongruous, and unpleasant elements, often arousing anxiety, and hindering the blending of interpretations (Ruch & Malcherek, 2009; Glicksohn & Yaniv, 2016). In the field of psychology, individual differences in enjoyment of grotesque works of art have been studied; men tend to enjoy such works of art more than women (Karinen et al., 2023). The grotesque has also been associated with the intense elevation of the sensually imaginable, emphasizing its role in providing meaning in a world of excess and disenchantment (Nahon-Serfaty, 2022). It has been observed that the use of grotesque images in advertisements increases persuasiveness, especially in luxury brand advertisements (An et al., 2019). This is attributed to the intense experience it provides to consumers, carrying them into the narrative and making it easier for them to access the advertisement (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010; An et al., 2019). Additionally, individual differences in liking grotesque works of art have been examined and it has been observed that some individuals are drawn to such images (Karinen et al., 2023). Moreover, the use of grotesque images in advertising, especially in luxury brand advertisements, has been shown to increase persuasiveness by attracting consumers' attention and carrying them into the ad's narrative.

In literature, the grotesque has been used as a comic strategy of subversion, mapping the crisis of masculinity, and serving as a figurehead for a holistic art that recognizes its incongruities and paradoxes (Butter, 2007; Bullock, 2012). Additionally, the grotesque has been associated with the blurring of the lines between persons and objects, resulting in a materiality characterized by a longing for lost objects (Briefel, 2022). The grotesque has also been associated with morbid maternal and masculinity concerns, as well as posthuman readings of subjectivities as abject or grotesque 'becoming' (Dixon, 2011). Moreover, the grotesque has been used to depict a caricature that exoticizes other Easterners of the third world and expands the scope of their art form (Tayyab, 2020).

The concept covers a wide range of meanings, from its applications in art and literature to its psychological and advertising implications. It is associated with elements of strangeness, incongruity, and unpleasantness, and its use varies across different disciplines, reflecting its versatile nature. In addition, studies have shown that inversion improves facial expression recognition in grotesque images; this suggests that the perception of grotesqueness may be influenced by visual cues (Psalta & Andrews, 2014). Emotional cues in grotesque advertisements have been associated with attracting consumers' attention by transporting them to the story world of the advertisement (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2021).

Grotesque approaches can be a result of the artists' creative processes, a part of the process, or one of the factors affecting the creation process. The creativity process, which is a multifaceted and complex endeavor encompassing various psychological and aesthetic dimensions, can be affected by many factors. Many studies have investigated the role of recognizing the process of creating a work of art in the cognitive processes of viewing artworks and shed light on the cognitive mechanisms involved in appreciating the creation process (Matsumoto & Okada, 2021). The relationship between aesthetic preferences and creation preferences has been investigated by many theorists and researchers, and the interconnectedness of aesthetic experiences and the creation process has been elucidated by determining the similarities between aesthetic preference and the production selection/creation process in art making (Williams et al., 2018). Focusing on how art viewing inspires creativity,

the types of artworks that encourage individuals to be inspired to create and experience inspiration through art appreciation highlight the inspiring role of art viewing in the creation process (Ishiguro & Okada, 2020). It is very difficult to define the multifaceted nature of the creative process in art, which includes psychological, aesthetic, cultural and inspirational dimensions, with precise boundaries.

## Method

Qualitative research and literature review methods were used in the study. In this context, the works listed within the scope were examined and interpreted.

## Results

### Grotesque Approaches in Contemporary Turkish Painting

In this part of the research, how the grotesque was depicted and what messages it conveyed to the audience, in its journey from the declaration of the Republic to the present day, which is considered the period of contemporary Turkish painting art, was tried to be explained by interpreting examples from the works of painters named Alaettin Aksoy, Burhan Uygur, Hale Arpacioğlu and Mehmet Güleriyüz, in alphabetical order. All these artists made some social, political, mythological, or religious criticisms and interpretations in their works, in which they worked figuratively and depicted grotesque depictions in their figures, in line with the developments of their period.

#### Alaettin Aksoy

Alaettin Aksoy was born on 25 November 1942 in Trabzon. The artist studied painting in the Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu workshop at the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts between 1963 and 1968. While he was still a student at the academy, his works were exhibited at the Paris Museum of Modern Arts within the scope of the "Young Artists Biennial" (Imoga, 2024). In his works, Aksoy approaches concepts such as people and space from the perspective of life interpretation. Working in a figurative style, the artist draws attention with his use of color, composition, and light. His works generally focus on people and places in everyday life.



Figure 2. Untitled, Oil Painting on Canvas, 24x33 cm, 1997 (Online Müzayede, 2024)

In Figure 2, we encounter the artist's reinterpretation of human anatomy and his "distortion" style. The figure, located in front of a uniform dark background, is reminiscent of the first cave people and the pre-evolutionary human form thought to be pre-human. Although not depicting the genital parts is contrary to the grotesque theory, the movement of the form, its portrait and its distortion in the portrait have a grotesque effect. The lack of symmetry in the portrait, the distortion of the limbs, and the depiction without considering proportions reflect the "imperfection" of the grotesque world, specific to humans and living things.

In another work of the artist, "Haberciler (Runners)", presented in Figure 3, the figures leave a feeling of timelessness and disconnected from space on the viewer. The five figures depicted in front of a red and textured background and a dark background are rendered in dark colors and sharply. In the work, a feeling of "incompleteness" is perceived in the small figure form at the bottom right. This deficiency may be a harbinger of any disruption that the creature may experience before it occurs in the understanding of the grotesque. The figure may not have completed its formation or may have completed it. However, he may have lost parts of his body that he had later. The grotesque universe embraces these shortcomings as they are. Likewise, the expression and exaggeration in other figures may indicate a lack of concern for presenting a "pleasant" visual to the viewer, independent of the classical understanding of beauty.



Figure 3. "Runners", Screen Printing, 40x55 cm, 2000 (Sancak Müzayede, 2024)

### **Burhan Uygur**

The artist, one of the most important representatives of Turkish painting in the 20th century, was born in 1940 in the Tirebolu district of Giresun. He completed his primary and secondary education in Tirebolu and his high school education in Trabzon. In 1961, he started to study painting at the Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu workshop at the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts and graduated from the academy in 1969. Uygur is a painter known for creating a dreamy and poetic atmosphere in his works. Using figurative and abstract elements together, the artist has created his unique language with a naive style. His works generally include people, animals, nature and mythological figures.

In 1970, he studied with Corneille at the Salzburg Summer Academy with a scholarship from the Austrian Government and also held a street exhibition in the Netherlands (Uygur, 2012, p. 25). Uygur's works have a unique



and contradictory place in Turkish painting. It can be said that he made significant contributions to Turkish painting art with his dreamy and poetic atmosphere, his own unique language and naive style.

Trying to keep up with the times with his innovative experiments, the artist did not recognize a single ground or material, and used many surfaces such as cardboard, chipboard and wood for his art, without sticking to the canvas. In Figure 4, his work applied with oil paint on chipboard is presented. There are four figures in total in the work. In the work dominated by blue tones, the figures have portraits and outlines similar to charcoal drawings. It can be said that it shows primitive effects similar to the template in the figures. Blurred and confused figure lines detract from sharpness and clarity. Grotesque theory defends uncertainty and the interlocking boundaries of figures with the principle of "non-opacity".



Figure 4. "Family", Oil Paint on Chipboard, 15x22 cm., 1974 (Artam, 2023)



Figure 5. "Red Apple", Mixed Media on Paper, 25x38 cm., 1977 (Antik Kutu, 2024)

Another work of the artist, “Red Apple” (See Figure 5), consists of two figures painted on a dark background. The depiction of the figures in the work, which is estimated to have used soft pastel material, was applied independently of anatomical accuracy and aesthetic proportions. There are no clues to establish that the figures, which are perceived as human in their external features, are exactly human. On the contrary, the movements of the limbs and primitive influences may reflect them as a different type of human or another type of human-like being.

### Hale Arpacioğlu

Hale Arpacioğlu was born in Izmir in 1952. She graduated from Arnavutköy American College for Girls. She went to the USA in 1971 and studied computer science at Portland Community College. She studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome in 1976. She participated in group exhibitions in Italy, she took part in group exhibitions in Naples in 1976. Then, she returned to Turkey in 1977 (Life Story, 2024).

Hale Arpacioğlu has gained a place in the art world with her interpretation of the female figure with an expressionist-surrealist approach in her works. She used the female figure as a tool to reflect her inner world and thoughts. She interpreted the figures in a formless and simple style. When it comes to color usage, she prefers pastel tones. Hale Arpacioğlu's works have a unique and different place in Turkish painting. She made significant contributions to Turkish painting and Turkish women with his expressionist-surrealist style, which he used to reflect the female figure, her own inner world, and thoughts.



Figure 6. Untitled, Mixed Technique on Hardboard, 40x30 cm., 1995

In the work given in Figure 6, in which the artist applied a mixed technique on a hardboard, there is a figure resembling mythological centaur figures. While the upper part of the figure, starting from the waist gives the impression of a human being, a four-legged animal form in the lower part constitutes the remaining body of the

figure. Although at first glance the impression is that a hybrid structure has been formed, it is also possible to get the impression of a person hugging a dog. It is possible that the head of an animal with its mouth open in the upper left part and the body in the lower part belong to it. Either way, uncertainty is at the forefront. These two impressions merge and evoke two different ideas in the viewer. Likewise, hybrid structures have become one of the most frequently studied images in the grotesque world.



Figure 7. Untitled, Oil on Canvas, 142x117 cm, year of construction unknown (Artium, 2024)

In Figure 7, another work of the artist, one can experience the impression of a color and stain composition at first glance. When looked at carefully and at the end of the form-shape completion process through cognitive schemas, the impression that this arrangement may belong to a portrait may arise. While the plane at the bottom of the middle could be the lip part of a portrait, the round element corresponding to the forehead and the vertical connector it is connected to remind us of the "cyclops" or "cyclops" images that frequently appear in mythology. The portrayal of mythological creatures and their derivatives outside of mythological subjects, and their independence from mythology to some extent, has become one of the organic structures frequently revealed by grotesque and carnivalesque environments.

### **Mehmet Güleriyüz**

The artist, who was born in Istanbul in 1938, completed his primary and secondary education in Istanbul. He entered the Painting Department of the Istanbul State Academy of Fine Arts in 1958 and graduated from the academy with first place in 1966. Mehmet Güleriyüz worked in a figurative style in his works, expressing the effects of socio-cultural and political transformation on people in a critical and ironic language (Kahveci, 2015). The subject of his works is the life of social segments such as women, children, workers and peasants, sections of daily life and architectural elements. Güleriyüz's works attract attention with their elements of realism, irony and criticism. When using colors, he preferred cold and dark tones (Özdemir, 2010).

In the artist's work presented in Figure 8, two figures are seen consecutively. Although the textures and forms

created with hard and comfortable brush strokes are vague, it is clear that they belong to the projection of two people. Although the expression of the figure in the back is difficult to analyze, it can be said that the expression of the figure on the right reflects negative feelings. The fact that the nose in the portrait is depicted as quite large and the exaggeration in the expression are among the principles of the grotesque theory. In grotesque theory, parts of the body that protrude beyond the body, such as the nose, navel, and genital areas, have been the images where exaggeration was most applied and stood out. The proportionally generous depiction of these limbs is again an indication of the grotesque approach.

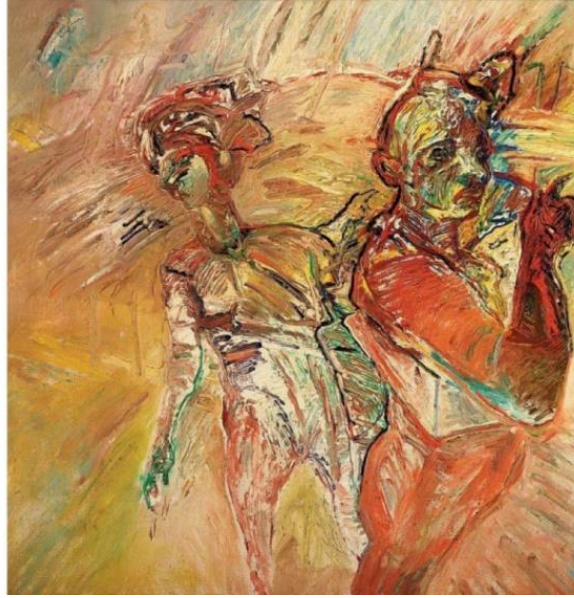


Figure 8. "Conversation", Oil Painting on Canvas, 99x97 cm, 1938 (Artam, 2024a)



Figure 9. "Let's Love Animals, Dog Love", Oil Painting on Canvas, 70x60 cm, 1978 (Artam, 2024b)

Figure 9, another work of the artist, is depicted as consisting of a dog and a human figure. In the work, a person is seen holding a dog's neck. The exaggeration of the dog's head and the way the man holds the dog's neck somehow evoke a feeling of violence and excess. The expression and lack of sharpness in the portrait can also create grotesque effects. While the name of the work is related to the theme of animal love, it can be said that such a violent movement between the figures displays an ironic structure.

In this study, the use of grotesque elements in the works of contemporary Turkish painters was examined. The works of painters such as Alaettin Aksoy, Burhan Uygur, Hale Arpacioğlu and Mehmet Gülerüz are considered as examples where grotesque effects are used in different ways. Aksoy's works reflect a realistic approach with grotesque effects. Uygur's works, on the other hand, offer an irony and critical perspective by using grotesque elements while creating a dreamy and poetic atmosphere. Arpacioğlu's works interpret the female figure in an expressionist-surrealist style and reflect her inner world and thoughts by using grotesque elements. Gülerüz's works display a critical perspective by using grotesque elements in a figurative style that deals with social and political issues.


In this context, the use of grotesque elements in the works of contemporary Turkish painters took place in different ways and for different purposes. These elements were used to reflect a realistic approach, to create a dreamy and poetic atmosphere, to reflect the inner world and thoughts, or to criticize social and political issues. The use of grotesque elements has an important place in contemporary Turkish painting, as in other cultures. Grotesque is an indispensable element of folk culture and the concept of discrediting that society develops against hierarchy. These elements continue to be an effective tool used by artists to reflect different perspectives and messages.

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**Yazar Bilgileri****Mevlüt Ünal** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8220-7480>

Necmettin Erbakan Üniversitesi  
Güzel Sanatlar ve Mimarlık Fakültesi  
Türkiye

İrtibat yazar e-posta (Contact e-mail):

*mevlutunal@erbakan.edu.tr*

**Ahmet Dalkıran** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3055-4971>

Selçuk Üniversitesi  
Güzel Sanatlar Fakültesi  
Türkiye