

THE IMPACT OF SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS ON CREATIVITY IN MODERN ART AND AN EVALUATION THROUGH FİKRET OTYAM'S WORKS

O IMPACTO DE SÍMBOLOS E MOTIVOS NA CRIATIVIDADE NA ARTE MODERNA E UMA AVALIAÇÃO ATRAVÉS DAS OBRAS DE FİKRET OTYAM

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Abstract

Throughout history, art has evolved in parallel with the development of humanity, functioning as a bridge between the past and the present. In this process, symbols and motifs have assumed an important position as some of the most powerful means of expression in the evolution of art. With the emergence of modern art, the traces of the past were blended with contemporary forms; artists developed new modes of expression that extended from local culture to a universal language. In this context, art has undertaken the role of both constructing identity and cultural memory by merging local cultural values with the aesthetic perception of its time. The aim of this study is to examine the role of symbols and motifs in the formation of modern art and to reveal their impact on the artist's creativity. The research adopts an art-historical and iconographic analytical approach, evaluating the transformation of traditional motifs in modern art through the artistic practice of Fikret Otyam. The scope of the study aims to demonstrate how symbols and motifs unique to Anatolian culture are reinterpreted in Otyam's art and how they are reflected in modern artistic expression. As a result, the local symbols found in Fikret Otyam's works unite the lifestyle and cultural memory of the Anatolian people with a modern visual language. Drawing nourishment from tradition yet shaped by contemporary sensibility, Otyam created an original symbolic language, becoming one of the prominent

Resumo

Ao longo da história, a arte evoluiu em paralelo com o desenvolvimento da humanidade, funcionando como uma ponte entre o passado e o presente. Neste processo, os símbolos e motivos assumiram uma posição importante como um dos meios de expressão mais poderosos na evolução da arte. Com o surgimento da arte moderna, os vestígios do passado fundiram-se com formas contemporâneas; os artistas desenvolveram novos modos de expressão que se estenderam da cultura local para uma linguagem universal. Neste contexto, a arte assumiu o papel de construir tanto a identidade como a memória cultural, fundindo os valores culturais locais com a percepção estética do seu tempo. O objetivo deste estudo é examinar o papel dos símbolos e motivos na formação da arte moderna e revelar o seu impacto na criatividade do artista. A investigação adota uma abordagem analítica de carácter histórico-artístico e iconográfico, avaliando a transformação dos motivos tradicionais na arte moderna através da prática artística de Fikret Otyam. O âmbito do estudo visa demonstrar como os símbolos e motivos únicos da cultura anatólica são reinterpretados na arte de Otyam e como se refletem na expressão artística moderna. Como resultado, os símbolos locais encontrados nas obras de Fikret Otyam unem o estilo de vida e a memória cultural do povo da Anatólia com uma linguagem visual moderna. Alimentando-se da tradição, mas sendo moldada pela sensibilidade



representatives of cultural continuity in modern Turkish painting.

Keywords: Modern Art. Symbol. Motif. Cultural Memory. Fikret Otyam.

contemporânea, Otyam criou uma linguagem simbólica original, tornando-se um dos representantes mais proeminentes da continuidade cultural na pintura turca moderna.

Palavras-chave: Arte Moderna. Símbolo. Motivo. Memória Cultural. Fikret Otyam.

1 INTRODUCTION

The history of art is founded upon the continuity of symbolic expressions that shape the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual world of humankind. From prehistoric cave paintings to contemporary art practices, symbols and motifs have served as both the carriers and transformers of humanity's modes of self-expression. Beyond their purely aesthetic dimension, these elements represent the visual codes of collective memory, embodying layered meanings that are transmitted from culture to culture and from era to era. Throughout history, artists have reinterpreted this symbolic heritage, rendering visible not only their individual experiences but also their social identities.

With the emergence of modern art, a distinct rupture occurred from traditional modes of representation. Art transcended the limits of formal aesthetics and evolved into a field of intellectual action. During this period, symbols and motifs were redefined—not merely as decorative elements, but as vehicles of meaning that made visible the artist's inner world, political stance, and social critique. Thus, art ceased to be a purely visual form of representation and instead transformed into a dynamic mode of communication, in which cultural identity, belonging, and memory are continuously questioned.

In this context, understanding the role of symbols and motifs in modern art requires an integrative approach that encompasses aesthetic, anthropological, sociological, and cultural interpretations. Each symbol reveals a society's mode of thought, value system, and historical experience, thereby forming one of the most essential building blocks of the universal language of art.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of symbols and motifs on the artist's creativity within the context of modern art and to reveal how these elements have shaped contemporary forms of expression. In this regard, Fikret Otyam's artistic practice has been selected as the primary case study. Otyam is an artist who drew inspiration from Anatolia's traditional cultural heritage, reflecting the folk life, beliefs, and symbolic

universe of the region in his works through a modern interpretation. In his art, motifs and symbols function not merely as visual components but as reflections of social identity, cultural memory, and human emotion.

The study is based on an artist-centered iconographic and formal analysis method. Through this approach, the symbolic modes of expression in Otyam's works are analyzed; the transformation of traditional motifs within modern art is evaluated in terms of formal language and thematic content. Furthermore, the research discusses how Otyam utilized symbols and motifs as tools of cultural continuity, establishing a delicate balance between modernity and locality.

This research aims to address the position of symbols and motifs in modern art from aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual perspectives. Within this scope, the study analyzes the function of symbolic expression in the artistic creation process, its role in the construction of cultural identity, and its transformative influence on creativity. Ultimately, the objective is to elucidate the relationship between symbolism and creativity within the multilayered structure of modern art and to identify the fundamental principles that contribute to the universal language of artistic expression.

2 SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS IN MODERN ART

The understanding of modern art manifests itself through innovative perspectives and original modes of expression that transcend long-established traditions. Within this artistic practice, individual freedom of expression and experimental techniques emerge as essential elements reflecting the artist's essence and interaction with the surrounding world. At the core of modern art lie the movements of abstraction and symbolism, which enhance the depth of meaning in artworks and add an intellectual dimension through the artist's use of form and symbol.

Gustav Klimt, one of the prominent representatives of Symbolism, made effective use of symbols in his works. In his famous painting *The Kiss* (1907–1908) for instance, he established a connection between eroticism and spirituality through golden spiral and geometric motifs inspired by Byzantine mosaics. Artists such as Klimt, through their innovative treatment of themes and forms of expression, enabled the outward manifestation of the artist's inner journey and social relationships in original ways (Whitford, 1990; Néret, 2000; Weidinger, 2012)..

As one of the pioneers of abstract art, Wassily Kandinsky aimed to create spiritual vibrations by combining geometric forms such as circles and triangles with color symbolism (Kandinsky, 1912). His approach represents a search for spiritual reality that lies beyond form itself. As the boundaries of modern art have expanded, the innovative reinterpretation of traditional motifs and symbols has become a vital source of artistic creativity. By employing symbols and motifs, artists seek to provide the viewer not only with an aesthetic experience but also with intellectual and emotional depth.

In modern art, creativity develops through the reinterpretation of traditional elements in unique and diverse contexts. This process strengthens the influence of art upon social and cultural layers. The use of symbols and motifs emerges as a form of expression that both nourishes the artist's creativity and expands the perceptual world of the viewer. The inclusion of historical references and cultural quotations in modern artworks provides the audience with a deeper level of understanding. In this way, the artwork gains meaning within a historical and cultural context, establishing a rich and multidimensional dialogue with the viewer.

The concepts of symbol and motif are among the fundamental cornerstones of creativity within the multilayered structure of contemporary art. Symbols represent abstract ideas or social norms and evoke powerful, multi-layered associations in the mind of the viewer. Through these symbols, artists express their inner emotions, intellectual processes, and social critiques using a visual language. Motifs, on the other hand, endow an artwork with formal and conceptual unity through the repetition of specific themes and cultural patterns. By consistently emphasizing motifs, artists create a distinctive mode of expression and, in doing so, enhance the aesthetic depth of their works.

According to Carl Gustav Jung, symbols are "*the images of the collective unconscious.*" Jung argued that every culture produces its own archetypal symbols, and that art represents the contemporary reproduction of these archetypes (Jung, 1964).

Paul Klee, influenced by African and Eastern art, incorporated simple lines, sun motifs, and animal figures into modern painting Klee, P. (1920). For Klee, the artist intuitively grasps the invisible laws of nature and constructs a new language of expression:

"Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible the invisible." Klee, P. (1920).

René Magritte turned toward the symbols of the subconscious by presenting everyday objects—such as apples, hats, and curtains—in unfamiliar contexts (Wikipedia, 2025; RenéMagritte.org, 2025; Atal, 2014). Magritte’s approach demonstrates that a symbol is not merely an object or a figure, but rather a gateway into the artist’s inner world. In this sense, symbols deepen communication with the viewer while also enriching the universal language of art.

The power of symbols to materialize abstract thought enhances the expressive potential of art. Each symbol enables the artist to convey emotions and ideas through a unique visual language. In this process, symbolism can be defined as the endeavor to make visible not only what is seen but also what is unseen — the spiritual, metaphysical, and intuitive dimensions of existence. As Wassily Kandinsky stated in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912):

“Every work of art is the external expression of an inner necessity born within the artist; form is the vehicle of this spiritual vibration.” Kandinsky, W. (1912).

Motifs appear as visual elements that are repeated in artworks but acquire new meanings with each recurrence. Although they may not carry as much conceptual weight as symbols, they serve as essential components that bring aesthetic richness and compositional unity to the artwork. In Marc Chagall’s works, motifs such as lambs, village scenes, and religious imagery combine Jewish culture with Russian folklore, forming a symbolic language of expression (Chagall Museum, 2024; Özkan, 2019; *The Art Story*, 2025).

Similarly, Fikret Otyam associated motifs with themes of rural life, tradition, and nature, creating a strong sense of local sensibility in his paintings. Otyam’s motifs synthesize the elements of Anatolian culture with modern modes of expression, producing an original artistic language. This approach not only supports the artist’s creativity but also enhances the thematic depth of his works.

In conclusion, symbols and motifs in modern art serve as fundamental elements that enrich the artist’s intellectual universe, nourish creative expression, and establish an emotional connection with the viewer. These two components play an indispensable role in the development of the universal language of art, shaping the ways in which artists reinterpret and re imagine the world.

3 SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS IN THE WORKS OF FIKRET OTYAM

Fikret Otyam's art presents a rich cultural depth embodied in symbols and motifs that contain multiple layers of meaning. The symbolic language employed by the artist functions not only as an area for aesthetic interpretation but also as a mirror revealing the historical and social traces of the past. The natural elements and traditional motifs frequently encountered in Otyam's paintings play a central role in expressing his personal experiences, life philosophy, and devotion to Anatolian culture. In particular, the symbols incorporating the rich folkloric elements of Anatolia enable the fusion of local values with a universal artistic expression.

The birds, trees, and animal figures often featured in the artist's works attract attention as symbols representing both unity with nature and the continuity of life. These symbols effectively reflect the artist's modest worldview and his emphasis on living in harmony with nature. Otyam's motifs, on the other hand, frequently appear in scenes depicting daily life, local traditions, and rural culture. These motifs highlight the artist's keen sense of observation and social sensitivity, granting his works both visual richness and intellectual depth.

The function of motifs in Fikret Otyam's art is not limited to creating visual richness; they also carry profound cultural and social meanings. Otyam's symbols and motifs strengthen his distinctive expressive language and stand among the essential elements that nourish his individual creativity. These components not only enhance the depth of meaning within his art but also evoke powerful associations with collective memory. In the artist's landscape and figurative compositions, symbols often refer to the cultural values, traditions, and lifestyles of the regions he depicts. At first glance, his compositions may appear simple, yet through symbols they gain multi-layered meanings, inviting the viewer into a process of deep intellectual reflection.

The motifs present in Otyam's paintings are often enriched with traditional patterns, natural elements, and cultural themes. These motifs not only lend originality to the artwork but also reinforce the narrative, strengthen the social context, and enhance thematic depth. In particular, motifs such as earth, trees, and animals symbolize a way of life intertwined with nature and reflect the productive, labor-oriented culture of Anatolian people. In this regard, the motifs in Otyam's art are regarded as an important means of preserving regional identity and cultural heritage.

The symbols used by Fikret Otyam serve to add depth to the subject matter and to evoke an emotional response from the viewer. By blending traditional and local motifs with a modern artistic sensibility, Otyam created original forms that reinforced his social messages. Elements such as agricultural fields, village life, animal figures, stones, trees, and water stand among the fundamental components symbolizing the continuity of life, harmony with nature, and cultural solidarity in his works. These symbols not only clarify the artist's message but also enhance the expressive power of his compositions.

Otyam's art reflects the ways of life and social realities inspired by different regions of his country. Motifs such as fields, village houses, and agricultural workers are concrete indicators of the artist's effort to carry the essence of rural life into modern art. These motifs generate visual dynamism while enabling the viewer to establish an emotional and cultural connection with the work. In Otyam's selection of motifs, the coexistence of traditional elements with new formal explorations demonstrates his creative vision and innate sense of innovation. The reinterpretation of rural motifs through contemporary forms imbues his art with an expressive power characteristic of modern art.

In this context, the function of motifs is not merely aesthetic, but also symbolic and communicative in nature. The repetition of motifs within a composition establishes rhythm and unity, while simultaneously emphasizing the themes and meanings that the artist seeks to convey. Therefore, in Fikret Otyam's art, motifs stand out as essential elements that materialize the artist's intellectual world, reinforce the expressive power of his works, and enrich their depth of meaning.

In Otyam's artistic production, folk beliefs and mythological figures also hold an important place. Among them, the Şahmaran figure serves as one of the most powerful vehicles of expression within the artist's symbolic universe. In Anatolian folk belief, Şahmaran is regarded as a protective being against evil and natural disasters, as well as a symbol of fertility and good fortune (Uğurlu, 2008: 1699).

In Otyam's works, depictions of Şahmaran, with a human head and a serpent's body, remain consistent with traditional iconographic representations. The crowns adorning the heads of these figures and their bodies terminating in serpent heads show formal resemblance to the classical Şahmaran image found in folk art. Through such representations, Otyam establishes a bridge between mythological symbolism and modern artistic expression, turning ancient cultural imagery into a living visual language.

Figure 1.*Fikret Otyam, "Untitled", 1998.*

The artist strengthened the mystical impact of the figure by employing vivid and contrasting colors and composed the body of Şahmaran through rhythmic patterns defined by clear contours. This approach reflects both the decorative narrative tradition of folk art and the reinterpretation of traditional iconographic forms within a modern framework. In doing so, Otyam visualized cultural continuity by merging the symbolic heritage of the past with the expressive power of modern art.

In addition to the Şahmaran figure, one of the most frequently recurring motifs in Fikret Otyam's paintings is the peacock, an element borrowed from the Anatolian mosaic and folk art traditions. In Otyam's work, the peacock functions both as a symbolic element and as a decorative component. The artist used this motif not merely as an aesthetic embellishment but also as a bearer of cultural meaning. Through this dual function, the peacock motif reflects Otyam's intent to integrate visual beauty and symbolic significance, allowing traditional imagery to gain new life within a modern artistic context.

Figure 2*Fikret Otyam, Untitled, 2003, Oil on Canvas*

The peacock is a figure that carries deep symbolic meanings in Anatolian folk art. In Otyam's works, this motif—much like in other cultures—frequently appears as a recurring element derived from Anatolia's traditional crafts. In forms such as carpets, kilims, glass paintings, and embroidery, the peacock is favored both for its formal richness and semantic depth. By reinterpreting this cultural heritage through a modern formal understanding, Otyam created an original field of expression in his art.

In his 2003 untitled painting (Figure 2), the peacock appears at first glance to function merely as a decorative element, yet it serves as an integral component of the composition, supporting the overall visual balance of the background. This approach reveals that Otyam did not treat symbols solely as decorative ornaments but as structural elements that deepen layers of meaning within his works.

The peacock is a figure that symbolizes varied meanings across cultures in Anatolia. In Islamic belief, for instance, it is often regarded as a symbol of paradise, and has long been a prominent motif in traditional weaving arts, particularly in carpets and flat-woven textiles (Deniz, 2005: 91). Otyam combined this symbolic significance with a contemporary aesthetic perspective, reinterpreting the continuity of cultural heritage through his unique artistic language. Thus, the peacock motif in Otyam's works emerges as a symbol simultaneously rooted in tradition and reshaped through modern modes of expression.

In Yazidi belief, the peacock is interpreted quite differently from its symbolic meaning in Islam. Within the Yazidi faith system—particularly among the communities living around Midyat in Anatolia—the peacock is known as Melek Tâvûs or Melik-i Tâvûs, and is regarded as a figure that represents the wrath of God. Melek Tâvûs is considered the first and the highest among the seven angels created by God.

According to Yazidi teachings, the consequences of good and evil are not experienced in the afterlife but in this world. Therefore, Melek Tâvûs is viewed as the guardian of humanity's trials and moral struggles. In this belief system, Melek Tâvûs also symbolizes the divine will manifested on earth, embodying both punitive and forgiving aspects—a reflection of the dual nature of divinity (Hançerlioğlu, 2000: 724).

This interpretation underscores the complex and paradoxical symbolism of the peacock figure in Anatolian culture, illustrating how a single motif can acquire multiple spiritual and cultural meanings depending on its contextual framework. Otyam's inclusion of such motifs in his art demonstrates his deep awareness of the diverse symbolic layers embedded within Anatolia's cultural heritage.

One of the most distinctive universal stylistic features of Fikret Otyam's paintings is his dominant use of vivid and luminous colors (Figure 3). The artist's color choices generate a powerful emotional impact on the viewer, creating a dynamic visual atmosphere throughout his works. This characteristic stands as one of the most prominent elements that enhance the expressive power of his art.

Figure 3

Fikret Otyam, Peasant Girls, Pastel on paper, 30 x 40 cm, 1996



In Otyam's compositions, despite his tendency toward a naturalistic perspective, the forms are often arranged within a structure leaning toward two-dimensionality. This approach recalls the frontal and direct viewpoints commonly found in children's drawings and folk art. The absence of concern for anatomical accuracy in his figures reveals the artist's prioritization of formal simplicity and expressive clarity over technical precision. This stylistic choice clearly reflects the influence of the Naïve Art movement, which is recognized as a branch of modern art.

Naïve art, which emerged in the late 19th century in the West, is defined as an artistic approach independent of academic conventions, emphasizing sincerity, intuition, and emotional authenticity. Rather than conveying reality through literal representation, it foregrounds the emotional reflections of the artist's inner world. Characterized by formal simplicity and the use of intense colors, this movement aligns closely with the aesthetic principles observed in Otyam's works.

Among the artists who successfully applied **naïve stylistic characteristics** in **modern** Western art are Gabriele Münter, August Macke, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Alexej von Jawlensky, Paul Klee, Natalia Goncharova, and Mikhail Larionov. Like these artists, Fikret Otyam developed an expressive language based on direct observation, simplicity of narration, and the intuitive use of color. Through this approach, he reinterpreted the

unique imagery of his own cultural geography within a universal artistic framework, merging local authenticity with modern sensibility.

Figure 4.

Fikret Otyam, Semah, Pastel on Cardboard, 100x150 cm. Hacibektaş Atatürk Evi Müzesi (Hacibektaş Atatürk House Museum).



4 CREATIVITY, SYMBOLISM, AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN FIKRET OTYAM'S ART

Fikret Otyam assumed the responsibility of an artist and intellectual within the cultural, social, economic, and political context of his time, producing works that reflected this deep sense of commitment. His interviews, photographs, and paintings all center on the multifaceted experiences of human life, capturing the realities of his era through various artistic mediums. Otyam found a freer space for exploration in terms of both subject matter and style after joining Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's studio, where he further refined and deepened his artistic vision (Otyam, 1997: 37).

The values inherited from his family, his moral outlook, his adoption of Eyüboğlu's artistic philosophy during his university years, his closeness to Alevi culture,

and his sincere affection for humanity all served as fundamental influences shaping the direction of his art. These factors clearly manifest Otyam's devotion to Anatolia, its people, and its cultural values (Figure 4). His art thus becomes a visual synthesis of personal ethics, cultural identity, and social consciousness, embodying both individual creativity and collective memory.

Symbols and motifs are among the fundamental elements shaping the artist's creative vision. According to Mircea Eliade, myths and symbols ensure the "continuity of the sacred." Eliade asserts that each symbol "recalls sacred time," and that art itself represents a modern form of this act of recollection. In line with Eliade's approach, the symbols in Fikret Otyam's works serve both to enhance the depth of visual expression and to strengthen cultural messages.

By transforming abstract concepts into tangible forms, symbols create powerful subconscious imagery in the viewer, while motifs, through their repetitive structures, bring rhythm and harmony to the composition. The symbols frequently encountered in Otyam's works reflect his engagement with social issues, traditional values, and themes of nature. Through these symbols, cultural codes and historical narratives are made visible; simultaneously, motifs represent the diverse aspects of life and the universal experiences of humanity.

In this way, Otyam's use of symbols and motifs externalizes his inner world, guiding the viewer into multi-layered fields of meaning. Moreover, these elements provide the artist with a domain of both originality and intellectual freedom, embodying an innovative approach that pushes the boundaries of modern art.

Creativity can be defined as the ability of an individual to transform thoughts, emotions, and imagination into original forms. This capacity enables personal experiences, cultural accumulation, and intuitive associations to evolve into productive artistic expression. In the field of art, creativity allows for the development of new modes of expression through the innovative use of symbols and motifs, breaking away from traditional frameworks. In Otyam's art, this creative process becomes visible through the original reinterpretation of symbolic and motif-based elements.

Symbols function as visual instruments reflecting the artist's social critique, sense of irony, and outlook on life, while motifs reinterpret familiar cultural images, generating new layers of meaning. In this context, motifs are not merely decorative components, but carriers of profound cultural and intellectual messages. The symbols and motifs in

Otyam's works serve as essential elements that expand his imagination and enable him to construct unique compositions. Thus, these components not only enhance the artist's aesthetic power but also nourish his creative thought process, reinforcing the connection between creativity, cultural memory, and expression.

Motifs function as visual codes of cultural memory. With each new interpretation, the artist renews memory, constructing a bridge between the past and the present. In this sense, the use of motifs becomes an integral part of the reproduction process of cultural identity. According to Jan Assmann, cultural memory is a symbolic transmission system that enables societies to preserve and sustain their collective identity (*Cultural Memory*, 1992). From this perspective, motifs symbolize social continuity by carrying the visual traces of past beliefs and rituals into the present.

The works of Fikret Otyam bear the marks of the social transformations that took place during the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. The social, cultural, and economic changes of this period served as crucial dynamics shaping the artist's creativity and his use of symbols and motifs. In Otyam's paintings, scenes from folk culture, rituals of daily life, images of agricultural production, and figures of rural life stand out as themes that reflect the collective memory and cultural continuity of society.

Ernst Cassirer defines the symbol as the fundamental mode of human expression, stating that "*Man is an animal symbolicum — a symbol-making being*" (Cassirer, 1944). According to Cassirer, art represents the most intense and universal expression of symbolic forms. In Fikret Otyam's art, symbols transcend individual modes of expression and become part of a collective identity. Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss describes motifs as the "formal order of thought," emphasizing that cross-cultural similarities are embedded within the structural functions of motifs (Lévi-Strauss, C. (1962). In this context, the symbols and motifs in Otyam's works are not merely aesthetic elements, but structures that carry cultural memory.

The Anatolian symbols featured in the artist's compositions make the connections between past and present visible. By blending imagery derived from traditional folk culture with contemporary modes of expression, Otyam reinforces the role of art in constructing social and cultural identity. His work thus becomes a visual synthesis where heritage and modernity coexist, reflecting both the continuity and evolution of cultural expression

The relationship between art and society reveals the dynamic interaction between creativity and the cultural–social structure that shapes it. Fikret Otyam’s art transcends individual sensitivity, emerging as a powerful reflection of social consciousness and cultural memory. By combining local elements with modern techniques, the artist contributed to the preservation of both social identity and cultural heritage. In his works, symbols function not merely as aesthetic forms but as expressive instruments that represent the values, memory, and way of life of society.

In conclusion, Fikret Otyam’s art constitutes a unique field of expression where individual creativity and collective memory, tradition and modernity, the local and the universal intersect. The reinterpretation of cultural elements through symbols and motifs grants his art both depth and universal significance. In this regard, Otyam stands not only as the voice of the Anatolian people but also as one of the foremost representatives of cultural continuity within modern art.

5 THE ICONOGRAPHIC APPROACH IN FIKRET OTYAM’S ART

Analyzing the layers of meaning embedded in the symbols and motifs within Fikret Otyam’s art requires a methodological depth that extends beyond purely formal observation. In this context, Erwin Panofsky’s iconographic analysis method provides a functional theoretical framework for interpreting the multi-layered symbolic structure present in Otyam’s paintings (*Panofsky, 1955*).

Panofsky identifies three levels of interpretation in the analysis of artworks: the pre-iconographic (descriptive), the iconographic, and the iconological. These stages form a chain of analysis that moves from the artist’s formal choices toward an understanding of his intellectual and cultural universe. Through this model, one can uncover how Otyam’s compositions operate not only as visual representations, but also as conceptual constructs reflecting broader social, cultural, and philosophical dimensions.

5.1 Descriptive (pre-iconographic) level

At this initial level, one observes recurring elements in Otyam’s paintings such as female figures, goats, soil, and water. These components, at first glance, appear as descriptive elements representing the daily life of rural Anatolia. However, as Panofsky

points out, this stage pertains only to the recognition of visible forms, where meaning has not yet been fully revealed (*Panofsky, 1955: 28*).

5.2 Iconographic level

At this stage, the forms transform into symbolic codes of social and cultural memory. In Otyam's works, the female figure embodies the productive, resilient, and sustaining spirit of Anatolia; the pomegranate symbolizes fertility and abundance; and water signifies the cyclical and continuous essence of life. These symbols intertwine with folk culture, mythology, and belief systems, becoming carriers of cultural continuity (*Eroğlu, 2014*).

5.3 Iconological level

The artist's worldview and his relationship with social consciousness are revealed. This stage corresponds to what Panofsky defines as the process of "grasping the intellectual world behind the work" (*Panofsky, 1955: 30*). In this sense, Fikret Otyam's art is not merely a pictorial tradition depicting Anatolia, but also a process of identity and memory construction.

The symbolic relationship between woman, nature, and the earth in Otyam's paintings makes visible the historical resilience and social solidarity of the Anatolian people (*Özsezgin, 2005*). Through this interpretive depth, Otyam's works transcend regional documentation, evolving into a visual discourse on cultural endurance and collective identity.

When analyzed through Panofsky's iconographic framework, Otyam's symbols emerge not merely as formal expressions but as components of a conceptual discourse. The female figures in his works function as cultural memory elements that carry the historical weight of Anatolia, while images such as the goat, pomegranate, and water represent both the balance between nature and humanity and a conscious link to the past. These symbols reveal Otyam's endeavor to reinterpret traditional meanings through the language of modern art.

In conclusion, Fikret Otyam's art embodies the depth corresponding to Panofsky's "iconological meaning", since his works are not merely aesthetic productions, but also

manifestos of cultural memory. The reinterpretation of traditional motifs within a modern context contributes to the preservation of local identity and the formation of a universal artistic language. Thus, in Otyam's art, form, meaning, and thought achieve a profound synthesis, transforming art into a space of both individual and collective expression.

6 EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

6.1 The position of fikret otyam's symbolic expression within the context of modern art

Fikret Otyam's art represents a significant turning point in the history of modern Turkish painting. The artist created a unique symbolic framework in which traditional motifs intersect with the modern language of expression, allowing local culture to engage with universal aesthetics. The symbolic structure in Otyam's paintings carries the cultural memory of Anatolian people into a contemporary visual idiom, producing a human-centered sensibility that stands in contrast to the abstract orientation of modernism.

In this regard, Otyam's art offers a locally grounded model of modernity, positioned in dialogue with but distinct from Western-centric modernist paradigms. In his works, figurative representation intertwines with symbolic depth, giving rise to a layered narrative of meaning. Elements such as the female figure, nature, water, earth, and traditional garments are interpreted not only as social and cultural symbols (Özsezgin, 1997), but also as signs of resistance, belonging, and identity.

Otyam's artistic stance, while continuing Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's vision of "establishing a universal plastic language through local motifs," extends this approach into a more political and socially engaged dimension (Antmen, 2010). In this context, Otyam's symbolic language is positioned as a distinct aesthetic that enables the universal representation of local culture within the framework of modern art.

6.2 The Reproduction of traditional motifs in a contemporary context

The reproduction of traditional motifs in contemporary art can be understood not merely as a formal citation, but as the rebirth of meaning itself. Fikret Otyam transferred the motifs found in Anatolian carpets, kilims, garments, and everyday objects onto the pictorial surface, thereby updating their significance within the framework of collective memory.

From the perspective of Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory (1995), this process may be interpreted as the reconnection of the symbols of the past with the meaning systems of the present. Otyam approaches motifs not as *representations of an authentic past*, but as indicators of transformation within continuity. In this way, symbols belonging to Anatolian culture acquire renewed functions within a contemporary context.

This approach reflects the artist's endeavor to merge tradition with modern aesthetics, bridging cultural memory and contemporary art. In Fikret Otyam's art, the reproduction of motifs is not simply a formal choice, but rather a form of cultural resistance—a deliberate artistic stance aimed at making the local visible (Eroğlu, 2014).

Otyam reinterpreted symbols unique to Anatolia, including kilim patterns, folk garments, and traditional objects, through the plastic language of modern art, becoming the voice of the local within the global art narrative. In his works, the motif transcends its role as a mere decorative element and transforms into a narrative medium that makes themes of identity, belonging, and collective memory visible.

In this sense, Otyam preserved the tangible traces of Anatolian life within the abstract formalism of modernism, carrying the symbolic depth of local culture onto a universal aesthetic plane. The motifs in his paintings are not merely ethnographic elements, but also markers of historical memory and cultural continuity. This approach positions the artist as a kind of visual anthropologist, uniting the abstract modes of modernism with the symbolic world of Anatolia.

6.3 The balance between cultural identity, locality, and universality

Fikret Otyam's art stands among the few artistic practices that successfully achieve a balance between locality and universality. In his works, local symbols are

redefined within a universal aesthetic framework. This approach can be associated with Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concept of "cultural hybridity."

By merging local cultural codes with a universal artistic language, Otyam develops a pluralistic understanding of identity that serves as an alternative to Western-centered modernism. Local motifs transcend folkloric representation and come to symbolize the lived experiences and cultural resilience of Anatolian people. In this regard, the artist embodies an aesthetic stance that preserves local identity against the homogenizing tendencies of modernity (*Bozdoğan, 2001*).

The facial expressions, color usage, and spatial compositions in Otyam's paintings reinforce the individual's connection to their cultural roots. Thus, his art is neither a mere folkloric depiction nor a derivative imitation of universal modernism. On the contrary, it establishes a dialectical balance between the two extremes, constructing a distinct form of Turkish modernism.

6.4 General conclusions on the impact of symbols and motifs on creativity

The function of symbols and motifs in the artistic creation process extends beyond the formal level; it also encompasses cognitive, emotional, and intellectual dimensions. As seen in the case of Fikret Otyam, the artist's creativity is deeply nourished by the depths of cultural memory. This notion aligns with Ernst Cassirer's (1944) idea that "*man is a symbolic animal*."

Symbols act as a bridge between the artist's unconscious and collective memory. Otyam's creative approach activates this bridge on both formal and conceptual levels, generating a powerful cultural resonance within the viewer. Hence, the use of symbols and motifs lies at the core of meaning production in art, becoming one of the fundamental sources that fuel creativity (*Jung, 1968*).

From this perspective, Fikret Otyam's art vividly reveals the transformative potential of symbolic expression in modern art. His works exemplify an aesthetic continuity where cultural memory merges with modern forms, extending from the local to the universal.

7 CONCLUSION

Fikret Otyam's art represents an artistic universe where symbols and motifs are masterfully intertwined, embodying profound meanings and distinct modes of expression. Each symbol he selects carries the traces of his inner journey and his rich cultural heritage. In this respect, his works not only offer viewers new perspectives but also open spaces for intellectual reflection.

The multi-layered nature of symbols in Otyam's paintings creates both aesthetic and intellectual depth. Traditional motifs, reinterpreted through a modern lens, generate thought-provoking reflections on individual and collective themes. The artist's keen observation and creative sensitivity establish a powerful bridge of communication between the artwork and the viewer.

In Otyam's works, symbols function as carriers of meaning that interact with social and cultural dynamics, transcending their purely aesthetic dimension. This interaction reveals the multi-layered nature of art, transforming it from a mere aesthetic production into a social narrative.

In conclusion, Fikret Otyam's art offers a unique field of expression where individual creativity intersects with collective memory, tradition merges with modernity, and the local connects with the universal. Symbols and motifs reinforce the role of art in processes of social transformation and individual liberation, inviting the viewer on an intellectual and emotional journey. In this sense, Otyam's art stands not only as the voice of the Anatolian people, but also as the universal expression of cultural continuity within modern art.

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Figure 1. Otyam, F. (1998). İsimli [Pastel boya]. In *Fikret Otyam: Gazeteci Ressam*. Türkiye Halk Bankası Kültür Sanat Yayınları.

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Figure4.Otyam,F.(t.y.). *Semah* [Pastelboya]. <https://fikretotyam.com/resimleri/detay/semah/70>

Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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