

TREE OF LIFE IMAGERY IN BEDRİ RAHMİ EYÜBOĞLU'S ART IN THE CONTEXT OF SYMBOLS AND MEANINGS

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, symbols have been used by various civilizations as tools of communication for different purposes. From the earliest civilizations to the present day, symbols have played roles in numerous domains such as war, religion, art, communication, and expressions of identity *tamgas*. In Turkish culture, symbols also hold great significance. Elements such as tribal tamgas, religious symbols, and representations of plants and animals are considered parts of the cultural heritage that reflect the lifestyle, beliefs, and values of the Turkish people. In this respect, symbols can be regarded as an integral component of Turkish cultural identity.

The cultural continuity of societies relies heavily on the transmission of cultural heritage across generations, making artists crucial figures in this process. By serving as a bridge between the past and the future, artists contribute to the preservation and perpetuation of culture. In this context, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu holds significant cultural and artistic importance, as he integrates folkloric elements of Turkish art into the present through a modern perspective.

This study examines how symbols have been addressed by Turkish artists and explores the cultural and artistic dimensions of the *Tree of Life* motif in the works of Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, within a framework that traces the journey of civilization from the local to the universal. Through the symbol of the *Tree of Life*, the study evaluates the depth of Turkish culture as reflected in Eyüboğlu's works, and the relationship of this motif to contemporary art.

Keywords: Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Symbols

INTRODUCTION

The objects we see around us possess a unique perceptual structure and depth. This also encompasses the creation of a communication dimension. This process is quite difficult and complex. Humankind, who previously communicated through signs, has over time created a tangible and intangible symbolic communication network and has used this system extensively throughout history. The formation of symbols begins with communication and evolves into symbols that form the culture of every society.

Symbols are a significant phenomenon that forms the basis of Turkish culture. Numerous symbols have been used for reasons such as war, religion, and communication. These symbols, inspired by animals and plants, also appear in works of art. While they appeared in numerous forms in the past, such as rug motifs, tiles, miniatures, and wall ornaments, today, artists from the post-Republican era and today continue to use these symbols in their works. It is not surprising to encounter symbols in the works of artists who blend the past and present in Postmodern and Metamodern art.

Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu is a prominent artist who blends traditional motifs with a contemporary approach in Turkish art. The Tree of Life motif, frequently encountered in his works, holds profound meanings from both mythological and cultural perspectives. How this motif finds its place in Eyüboğlu's artistic expression and the messages the artist conveys through this symbol emerge as important topics to explore. In this context, the study's problematic is shaped around the following questions:

- What meanings does the Tree of Life motif hold in Turkish culture?
- How did Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu interpret and use this symbol in his works?
- What is the place of this motif in Eyüboğlu's artistic understanding?
- How can the artist's role in translating the symbol from the local to the universal be evaluated?

This research explores the symbols of great significance in Turkish culture and the values attributed to them. The aim was to gather information on how Turkish artists have handled symbols in a folkloric manner, emphasizing the cultural significance of the Tree of Life, a theme we encounter in Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's works, on the journey of civilization from the local to the universal. Cultures are valuable to societies. The intergenerational transmission of culture is crucial for ensuring social continuity. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, who brought Turkish art to the present day with a modern approach, has been recognized as significant in this context and has become a subject of study.

Methodology

This study used a literature review as the research method. A literature review involves the systematic examination of previous academic and artistic studies on a specific topic. Establishing a theoretical framework in the field of fine arts

requires a detailed analysis of sources on art history, art theories, and artists' practices. Therefore, the study method falls within the scope of a qualitative research approach and was conducted with an interdisciplinary perspective (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

In art research, not only academic texts but also artists' statements, exhibition catalogs, critical reviews, and visual materials are important sources (Barrett, 2011). This study reviewed academic publications on art theory, contemporary art approaches, and aesthetic evaluations, and examined written and visual documents belonging to artists. The literature was categorized under specific themes and evaluated using content analysis.

Furthermore, the sources used in the study were obtained from reliable academic databases. Prominent views in the literature are comparatively examined, and how the theoretical background shapes the interpretation of artworks is examined. In this context, the literature review both established the theoretical basis of the research and provided the opportunity for an in-depth analysis of existing knowledge in the field (Arnheim, 2004).

Symbols in Turkish Art

Humankind has incorporated elements such as images and symbols into its lives to communicate, carrying these images and symbols to the present day. Symbols, imbued with material and spiritual meanings, are indispensable elements of Turkish art. Nomadic lifestyles, wars, and beliefs led to the emergence of symbols. Symbols eventually transformed into artistic materials, enabling the emergence of Turkish art.

When examining the belief in the Sky God, the value attributed to animals and plants is quite significant. Beyond symbolizing strength, animals were used as symbols of tribes, in religious rituals, and for the manifestation of zodiac signs. Plants, on the other hand, hold divine significance. Their long lifespan and healing properties have enhanced the sacredness of plants, especially trees. When examining the trees considered sacred, beech, pine, juniper, plane, cedar, cypress, oak, and willow trees come to mind. Trees such as hawthorn, mulberry, olive, sweetgum, terebinth, pomegranate, and fig are known for their healing properties (Yaşa, 2022, p. 14).



Image 1. Examples of the Tree of Life in Turkish art, (Anonymous)

Plants have been used to connect the afterlife with this world, to be close to God, and to symbolize certain important Goddesses or good spirits. The most important of these plants is undoubtedly the Tree of Life. The cosmic tree, the Tree of Life, connects the earth and the sky (Yaşa, 2022, p. 12). The Tree of Life, which holds profound meaning for the Turks, appears in numerous works in various forms. It has been used extensively in rug details, ornaments, tiles, wall paintings, and reliefs.

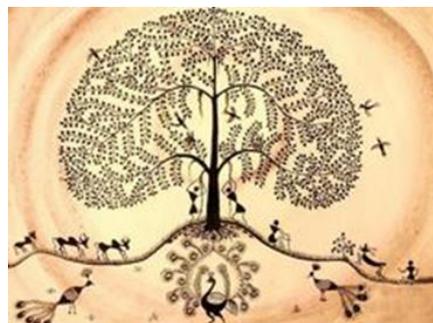


Image 2. Tree of Life depiction in Turkish art, (Anonymous)

Trees, a natural form symbolizing the sacredness of the spiritual, physical, and afterlife, have often symbolized divinity or a religious entity (Ağaç and Sakarya). The Tree of Life motif is found on shamans' drums and other artifacts, and is mentioned in epics and myths.

The Tree of Life is alone and unique; this can be described as Unity. The attributes of the Creator are symbolized in the Tree of Life (Yaşa, 2022, p. 14). When examined before and after Islam, the Tree of Life motif is among the themes consistently discussed in Turkish culture.

The Tree of Life motif, which bears a resemblance to the Tugba Tree in the holy book Quran, has an important place in the artistic understanding of the Seljuk and Ottoman States. The Tree of Life was used in the Seljuk and Ottoman States as relief, decoration, and wall painting in architecture; as a symbol and ornament in tiles, stamps, and inscriptions; and as a space and ornament in miniatures. It's possible to see symbols from past to present. When examined within botanical culture, the Tree of Life has achieved a respected status. It has been used by artists in many areas. This has made the Tree of Life significant and has made it a highly significant art object in Turkish culture.



Image 3. Example of the Tree of Life from the Seljuk Period, Sivas Gök Madrasa, (Anonymous)



Image 4. Ottoman Period Topkapi Palace, Detail of Wall Panel Decorated with Cypress Tree Motif, (Anonymous)

The fact that this motif has been reproduced in diverse cultural contexts and art forms throughout history demonstrates that the Tree of Life has become a timeless symbol. When considered within the context of plant culture, the Tree of Life's representation of fundamental concepts such as sanctity, fertility, life, and death has given it a respected and central position. Eliade (1959) describes such tree images as "archetypes representing the cosmic axis between heaven and earth." Its frequent use by artists across different periods and disciplines has elevated the Tree of Life beyond being a mere decorative element; it has become a significant symbolic art object in Turkish art history.

The Use of Symbols and Folkloric Elements in Contemporary Turkish Art

Symbols are important parts of culture. They are used extensively in Turkish culture, particularly as a mystical tool, a means of communication, a symbol, and in artistic materials. When examining the word "symbol," it is defined as "symbol" in English, "symbole" in French, "Symbol" in German, and "symbolon", "sumbol", and "symbolum" in Greek. Synonyms for the word "symbol" include "remiz", "ikon", "timsal", and "alامت" (Güngör, 2022, p. 73). A symbol can be defined as a simple sign that represents an idea or thought that cannot be perceived through the senses (Güngör, 2022, p. 73). Symbols can be examined in two ways: abstract and concrete. Conceptually, they appear to concretize the abstract or to abstract the concrete. Symbols possess folkloric characteristics because they have different meanings for each nation. Folklore, an element that reflects culture, is understood to mean folklore. Folklore can be defined as the scientific understanding of the people's mold, spirit, and genre.

While the term folklore was a hot topic in Europe in the 1800s, it became a hot topic in Turkey in the 1900s. Mehmet Fuat Köprülü, in his 1914 article titled "A New Science: Halkiyat-Folklore" (A New Science: Halkiyat-Folklore) for the İkdam newspaper, discussed the development of folklore in Europe, its value, and its importance for the country. The term "folklore" was first explicitly addressed in this article (Kalaycı, n.d., pp. 1, 7).

The intensive use of folkloric elements in modern art was observed between 1940 and 1970 and continues to this day (Yazgaç, 2018, p. 1032). After artists began producing Anatolian-themed works during the Republican era, artists like Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu began presenting folkloric elements in their works in a modern way. During the Republican era, artists initially drew inspiration from the West, abandoning imitation and imitation to create works that emphasized elements of national culture (Aytaç and Çıplakkılıç, 2019, p. 19). Although social issues remained on the agenda, abstract art also took its place within Turkish painting in the 1950s. In the 1960s, social, economic, and cultural developments, along with the pursuit of domestic and foreign publications, shaped the art scene in Turkey (Aytaç and Çıplakkılıç, 2019, p. 20).

When examining the post-Republican era, it can be categorized under four headings: the Independents, the D Group, the Yeniler Group, and the On Group. The Yeniler Group, which attracted attention from a folkloric and symbolic perspective, was founded in the 1940s, and the On Group in 1946. The Yeniler Group emphasized that a strong foundation for Turkish painting could only be achieved through a direct understanding of the people's reality. In 1946, ten students from Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's workshop founded the On Group. The group brings a new perspective and color to Turkish painting. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu and his students have produced works inspired by diverse sources, including embroidery, weaving, mosaics, patchwork, folk paintings, miniatures, calligraphy, tiles, traditional architectural forms, Turkish handicrafts such as carpets and rugs, handwritten manuscripts, embroidery, symbols, Karagöz plays, and folk paintings (Bayramoğlu, 2013, p. 4). Following in Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's footsteps, the On Group has produced original works, prioritizing Turkish culture. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu has become a pioneering artist on the path from locality to universality by incorporating symbols and folkloric elements from Turkish culture into his art in a modern, original, and creative manner.

The Tree of Life in the Works of Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu

As an artist who left his mark on his time, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu maintains his importance with his approach that shaped contemporary art. It is undeniable that the artist, who has gained extensive experience both domestically and internationally, has left behind countless works that have survived to this day. During his time in France, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu was fascinated by the works of artists such as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Braque, Matisse, Dufy, and Chagall, rejecting the conventions of classical understanding. Despite all the impressive examples of Western art, he aimed to achieve an original synthesis within his own culture (Negir and Korkmaz, 2019, p. 857).



Image 5. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, (Anonymous)

Enthusiastic about Anatolian culture, the artist has addressed our culture with a modern approach in his works. He has also produced numerous works related to the Tree of Life. From rug motifs to calligraphy, he has been influenced by numerous Tree of Life images and has created his works with unique style. In the artist's work below (See Image 6), it's possible to see influences from the Tree of Life imagery found in Turkish carpet patterns, as well as the Tree of Life symbol found in relief in Seljuk and Ottoman architecture. The artist's work was inspired by the Tree of Life examples in Image 1. The colors in the work consist of shades of blue and green. Blue and green are religiously significant in Turkish culture. In pre-Islamic Turkish belief, turquoise symbolized the Sky God. Green, on the other hand, became a sacred color in post-Islamic Turkish belief. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the artist's focus on these two colors in his work may have facilitated a blending of the two religions.

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Image 6. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Gouache on paper, 24x16 cm, (Artam)

In images 7 and 8, the influence of calligraphy and folkloric elements found in Turkish rugs are evident. The artist has presented the viewer with the image of the Cosmic Tree of Life by applying the colors found in the rugs in a stain-like manner. Furthermore, the use of stippling, in keeping with his style, ensures the work's originality. It's clear that the work is local in subject matter, motif-oriented in form, and technically influenced by Western influences.

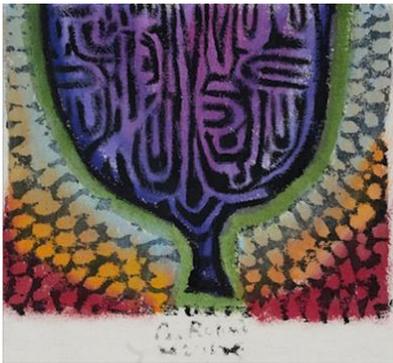


Image 7. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Print, 20x20 cm, (Sancak)



Image 8. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Fabric Print, 20 x 22 cm, (Niş Art Gallery)

The work, which resembles the Cosmic Tree of Life symbol in Turkish culture, connecting earth and sky, this world and the afterlife, presents the viewer with the artist's unique colors and indispensable markings. He presents the richness of folk art to the viewer through contemporary techniques.



Image 9. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Gouache on Paper, 24.5 x 32 cm, (Anonymous)

When images 10, 11, and 12 are examined, the influence of calligraphy is quite dominant in the works. The influence of the post-Islamic Tree of Life symbol is evident. Traces of the Tuğba tree can sometimes be seen in post-Islamic depictions of the Tree of Life. The Tuğba tree is associated with the Unity of God, or the Oneness of God. The artist's fond use of dots in image 11 is striking. In images 10, 11, and 12, dots are used within the calligraphic lines to resemble bird symbols. This use was inspired by images created in calligraphy. The practice of creating calligraphic images is thought to have originated in the Hurufi belief, which came from Iran to Anatolia in the 15th century and infiltrated religious orders (Dağlı, 2015, p. 31).



Image 10. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Gouache on paper, 19x21 cm, (Artam)

In this way, Turkish artists adopted this new form, and a uniquely Anatolian style emerged. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu masterfully employed this form in his works.



Image 11. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, The Tree of Life, (Anonymous)



Image 12. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Acrylic on paper, 35x50 cm, (Artam)

The artist's work, featured in Figure 13, re-establishes the relationship between the Tree of Life motif, frequently encountered in traditional Anatolian textile arts, and contemporary art. This motif, particularly symbolic in carpets and kilims, represents a cultural memory transmitted from the past to the present. Rather than simply copying this symbol, the artist has recreated it using the formal and conceptual possibilities offered by contemporary art, transforming the motif's meaning. In this context, the artist's work can also be examined through the lens of theories of cultural representation. As Stuart Hall (1997) emphasizes in his theory of cultural representation, cultural symbols do not carry fixed meanings; on the contrary, they are constantly reproduced within historical and social contexts.



Image 14. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Gouache on Paper, 19x59 cm, (Anonymous)



Image 14. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Gouache on Paper, 19x59 cm, (Anonymous)

The artist's reinterpretation of the Tree of Life in a contemporary context offers an example of precisely this representational process. A traditional motif is no longer merely a reflection of the past; it becomes a dynamic element that takes on new meaning within today's aesthetic and ideological contexts. The turquoise, brown, and white used in the work are also a conscious choice that references the color spectrum of Turkish cultural identity. Turquoise carries meanings of sanctity and protection in Turkish art, extending from Central Asia to Anatolia, while earthy tones symbolize devotion to nature and origins. This color choice demonstrates the artist's effort to elevate local identity to a universal narrative.

In Figure 14, the Tree of Life is positioned within a more holistic symbolic structure. With roots extending underground and branches reaching toward the sky, this tree form bridges the worldly and otherworldly, the material and the spiritual, the ephemeral and the eternal. These dualities are common themes representing the continuity of life in both traditional Turkish mythology and universal myths. As Joseph Campbell (1949) expressed in his work *The Hero's Journey*, archetypal images like the Tree of Life create a transitional space between individual and collective consciousness. The artist's restructuring of this symbol within contemporary aesthetic language creates a hybrid narrative between locality and universality. When considered within the framework of the concept of "hybrid identity" proposed by Homi Bhabha (1994), the artist's work both maintains its connection to local culture and brings this culture into the context of universal art, rendering it not fixed but dynamic and transformative.



Image 15. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, The Tree of Life, (Anonymous, 1946)

Figure 15 shows a tree. This tree is depicted in a way that more closely resembles natural forms. The artist's Tree of Life, in all its splendor, reveals its majesty to the viewer. The artist's beloved markings and distinctive style can be seen throughout the works.

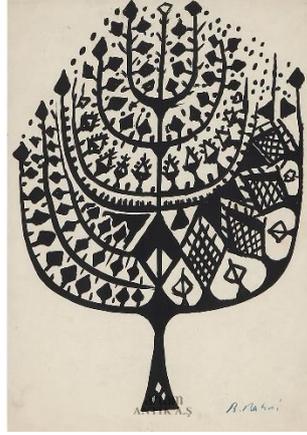


Image 16. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Work on paper, 24x35cm (Mutual Art)

Examining the work above (See Figure 16), both Turkish art and the Phrygian ceramic art of Anatolian civilizations come to mind. A Tree of Life with leaves repetitively arranged before the viewer. The patterns, reminiscent of the ornamentation seen in Phrygian ceramic art, also demonstrate the artist's keen observation.



Image 17. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Work on paper, 20x29cm, (anonymous)

In Figure 17, we encounter a different Tree of Life. The Tree of Life depicted here is reminiscent of the cypress tree. In Ottoman art, the cypress tree was frequently used in both architectural reliefs and miniatures. With its uniform appearance and upright posture, the cypress tree symbolizes divinity. Because of its resemblance to the letter elif in the Arabic alphabet, it is known as a symbol of God. Standing upright on paper, as if resembling the letter elif, the artist's Tree of Life symbol stands before the viewer in all its nakedness.



Image 18. Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Tree of Life, Work on paper, 31x17cm, (Mutual Art)

The final image features a depiction of the Tree of Life, a motif frequently seen in carpets and rugs bearing the traces of Turkish art (See Image 1). The artist presents the Tree of Life to the viewer in his own style with a modern approach. Demonstrating his unique style in his works with his unique painting technique, the artist has masterfully employed motifs, ornaments, and shapes found throughout Turkish culture. Bedri Rahmi holds a significant place in Turkish Art History, striving to convey the richness of folk art with contemporary techniques and achieve a uniquely Turkish painting. An evaluation of the works included in this study reveals that the artist has succeeded in reflecting his own culture with a modern approach. Rather than remaining fixated on Western values or adhering to his own traditions, he has found a new style and subject matter. This has moved the artist from local to universal. The trees of life he features in his works contribute to the continuity of culture, further enhancing his significance. His uniquely interpreted Tree of Life variations not only demonstrate the artist's creativity and keen observation, but also reveal his side of embracing his history and reflecting it through his art in a way that suits his time.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Artist Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, who presents the richness of Anatolian folk art in an original and creative way with a contemporary, rich technique, creating forms and colors unique to his own aesthetic, is highly significant in art history. Known for his blending of Western techniques with his own culture, the artist is a man of culture and art. Drawing on the intense color use of Van Gogh and the Fauvism school, the artist admires Anatolian mythology and culture and incorporates them into his art. In an interview, when asked about his thoughts on abstract art, he said, "I use the term embroidery instead of abstract art" (Şerifoğlu, 2011, p. 13). He is an artist who has thoughts on the importance of someone trained in art studying Western culture. He not only produces works in painting, but has also made a name for himself as a poet. His extensive reading and thinking skills have also made him a household name in literature. The artist has meditated on embroidery and rug patterns, reflecting them in contemporary forms in his works. Not content with a single element, Eyüboğlu has developed his skills by experimenting with different materials and techniques. The artist's aim was to contribute to art by presenting Anatolian culture in a new and original form, both in form and color.

In interpreting the Tree of Life theme, the artist, when necessary, departing from traditional iconographic forms, created a unique interpretation in line with his own aesthetic preferences for form and color. In this context, it is observed that the artist's use of line, form, and color gradually shifts towards an abstract narrative language. According to Erzen (2006), the contemporary artist's transformation of traditional symbols into a personal visual language ensures the continuity of cultural memory while simultaneously expanding the range of artistic expression.

This unique approach to the artist's interpretation of the Tree of Life is considered not only an individual aesthetic choice but also an example worthy of study in both art history and art education. Indeed, Göktürk (2011) argued that the reworking of cultural motifs in a contemporary context allows artists to redefine both their own identities and their bonds with society. Within this framework, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu's artistic productions serve as both a visual reference and a conceptual source of inspiration for today's young artists and artist candidates.

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