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# Zehra Çobanlı's Harmony of Tradition

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**A**CERAMIC ARTIST AND AN INSTRUCTOR, WHOSE works depend mainly on research and sharing knowledge with others – she is the chairman of the ceramic department in Anadolu University Fine Arts Faculty – Professor Zehra Çobanlı has taken her place in ceramic art since her youth. After her graduation from the Marmara University, Fine Arts Faculty, Ceramic Department, in 1981, she began her academic career. She obtained her Master of Arts degree in Mimar Sinan University on the subject: *Çanakkale Ceramics of the 18-19th Century*, and obtained a Proficiency of Art from Marmara University.

Then she began her studies abroad. Following an experience at Ferro Ceramics Company in Holland, she stayed in Australia, at East Sydney Technical College between 1986-1989, working with the techniques of high-fired stoneware. After her appointment to the Anadolu University, she was awarded the Monbusho Scholarship and studied at Tokyo Fine Arts and Music University in 1993. Having spent nearly two years in Japan, she returned to Turkey and was granted a professorship in Anadolu University.

Çobanlı has participated in many national and international group exhibitions: Turkey, Finland, Italy, NCTR., China, Korea and Australia and she has held solo exhibitions in Japan and Turkey. She has won national and international competition awards. She was awarded the State Ceramic Competition Prizes in 1990-1991 and in the 2001 Korea

Ceramic Biennale, her work was exhibited. Her works are included in public and private collections. She has written articles in many magazines on the subjects: *Ceramic Slips* and *Traditional Turkish Pottery Villages*, *Kinik* and also *Education On Ceramics* and other research topics. In 1982 she was honoured with the Award of the Ministry of Culture in Turkey with her scenario of the documentary film titled *Çintemani*.

As the result of being an academician, Çobanlı's works do not repeat themselves, so a continuous development and transformation based on research and investigation can be observed. This motivates creativity and brings development with it. Zehra Çobanlı explains transformation in her artistic works by underlining the words of Kaya Özsezgin: "Nietzsche, in one of his short notes left behind, says that the snake who does not shed its skin will die. In the same way, spirits not able to change their opinions also die; they are not spirits anymore. To fit the continuous condition of life we need to change to obtain vitality of life. It can be said that the object of art, as a product of an artist's activity that forms it, can save its presence by changing the context of development."

Çobanlı sees this as a synthesis of love and productivity and gives importance to team work, efficient use of time, taking work seriously and being efficient with technical equipment. In this way, she believes that the technical and aesthetics elements complement each other and that learning and experience can be shared.

*Kadim Fendi. Installation. 1997. Stoneware, brown slip, gold. 135 x 135 cm.*





Zehra Çobanlı, being in search of new form, shape, colour, texture and materials, undertakes research, experiments and trials; in this manner she prevents repeating herself. While doing this, she finds a fresh theme for each work and creates a new idea, a new narration for each exhibition. This can be easily observed in her exhibitions today. The numeric figure 40 that has been used in traditional idioms of Anatolia has been a theme for her and for a certain time she has used a repetition technique in design and changed the idioms into thematic subjects. She exhibited these works at IMKB Art Gallery in Istanbul in 1998. In this exhibition she focused on the colour of natural earth – brown and its various tones – to reflect the natural texture and the colour of clay using a single engobe, thus simplicity. She created a contemporary ceramic installation based on traditional Turkish sayings. *Bir Fincan Kahvenin, Kirk Yıl Hatiri Vardir*. (A little kindness may remain forever, a cup of coffee commits 40 years of friendship) Trying to explain this saying, she prepared 40 ceramic coffee bowls. *Kirk satir mi, kirk katir mi?* (40 knives or 40 mules) Illustrating this, she made 160 horse shoes and 40 ceramic knives. Another composition named *Power of Women* with the theme of the relationships of men and women was also part of this exhibition.

In her lyric visual works, because of the effect of her studies she made in Japan, it can be seen that she was affected by the art of calligraphy. Çobanlı states that while studying at the Tokyo Fine Arts and Music University, she worked with Miura Koheiji in 1992 and found the simplicity and natural characteristics of Japanese art. She emphasises the harmony of the form, designed with the materials prepared by herself, perfectly complementing the surface. Çobanlı insists on making up materials herself, including clay, glaze, slip and coloured clays on which she uses brush decoration with glaze and airbrush with slip.

Through her technical knowledge, she prevents any disintegration of the materials by using compatible preparations. As well as aesthetic conformity, technical expression is important to her.

She has undertaken research on the materials she uses by observing their technical reactions and wrote a book, *Ceramic Slips*, published by Anadolu University, indicating the history of ceramics with slip around the world, the chemical structure of slips, their preparation, the methods of application, the different kinds of slips and decorative techniques applied with slips, and firing.

For the anniversary of the 700th year of the Ottoman Empire, she was inspired to take part in a concept to initiate the development of new designs with calligraphic compositions. She participated in an exhibition at the British Council in 1999 celebrating the anniversary, collaborating with Ismet Keten, who reproduces Ottoman sultans' monograms in acrylic paint on silk working specially with original Ottoman drawings belonging to Ministry of Culture. In contrast to Keten's conventional approach, Çobanlı created original and individual works using Ottoman motifs, including the signatures of sultans, as an element of design, transforming them into something new. She never neglects tradition, she uses it in a different way – tradition is a reference in her art.

In deference again to tradition, she created pieces featuring Ottoman Tugra with the significance of number 40 in Anatolian tradition for this exhibition as a way of honouring traditional Ottoman culture and art. In this way she takes the traditional and national features to the international arena.

She insists on the importance of the integration of the design of her ceramics with colours. Çobanlı was attracted to the Tugras for their fascinating beauty and she modernised the signatures of Ottoman sultans as fragments on her ceramics.

*Coffee Culture. 40 Piece Installation. 1995. Stoneware, brown slip, gold and platinum. Each piece 9 x 5.5 cm.*





With the colours of blue and white she emphasises the Oriental flavour of her ceramics. Dr.Kiymet Giray points out that the magnificent colour of Ottoman blue is used by the artist with technical skill integrated with a modern viewpoint. The clay coloured with cobalt oxide accentuates her specialised style. She prefers the colour blue because it has meaning for her, being the colour of the sky reflecting freedom, and the colour of oceans reflecting romantic presentation.

*Vase. Ottoman Signatures. Blue slip, black glaze. 35 cm/ft.*



In the artist's works, sometimes the Tugra is seen as a fragment on a matt slip surface or as a bright glaze in a stoneware plate; we can see the motifs of Kütahya, Iznik, Selçuk and Haliç from Ottoman tiles on a vase. According to Levent Çalikoglu, Çobanlı balances the form with pattern, successfully achieving an aesthetic value. Çobanlı also uses some silver pieces on the handles of the lids to integrate the meaning of the form and reflecting Ottoman motifs.

Saying that the artist makes references to the thematic preferences of Ottoman Çini, Dr. Kiymet Giray states that Çobanlı's ceramics attain a sense of form with the square tiles as well as with the carnation water flasks where the long cylindrical body is transformed into a convex mouth. He points out that she makes new designs with the Ottoman sultan's monograms with their symbolic values and her power of calligraphic interpretation; and her use of gold or platinum on some ceramics makes references to the lustre defining the distinction given to the sultan, particularly during the Selçuk Period.

At her exhibition in Tokyo Green Gallery, in Japan, 2000, the artist harmonised the Japanese forms and traditional Ottoman patterns in simplistic and unique ways. She used designs such as tulips that became traditional in Ottoman art on her tea boxes, tea ceremony pots, sushi pots, decorative wall plates and vases.

*Bowls. 2000. Blue and beige clay, black glaze. 8 x 14 cm.*





Atila Galatali in his article of 1991 underlined Zehra Çobanlı's unique and professional character and productivity and emphasised her development and ability to foresee targets and reach them. Çobanlı's ceramics support Atila Galatali's view that is still true for today – that finding new expression from the mixture of traditional and functional forms it is possible to make unique works again from traditional designs, textures and colours.

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*Form with silver handle. 2000. Blue clay, dark blue glaze. 8 x 14 cm.*



*40 Boxes. 1997. Installation, stoneware, blue slip. 60 x 60 cm.*

