

# The Blue Interpretation of Art: The Blue Mosque

## *Sanatın Mavi Yorumu: Sultan Ahmet Camii*

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**T**he Blue Mosque is a temple located opposite the Hagia Sophia like an unending fight of supremacy that will last for centuries, a silent war of the Byzantine and Ottoman periods of İstanbul that has been the capital of two great empires.

Although the Blue Mosque gives its name to the square where it is located by erasing all traces of the past, this area was known as the *Hippodrome* during the Byzantine period; and as *Horse Square* during the Ottoman period. A part of the Byzantine Imperial Palace was located in the same area. Palaces belonging to the Ottoman senior offices were found in the area in the 16th century. However, Sultan Ahmet had other plans for this region. The greatest desire of this ruler, known for his religious devotion, was to build a mosque that would symbolize the love of God inside him and would leave Hagia Sophia behind with its glory (Figure 1). After a

prolonged period of indecision, he made the choice to realize his dream. This area was prepared for the construction of the mosque that would take the name of Sultan Ahmet I himself by using the financial capacity of the Ottoman Empire which was rich enough to meet all the wishes of the Sultan at that time (Figure 2). According to Evliya Celebi, the land was bought and five palaces including the palaces of Semiz Ahmet Paşa and Sokollu Mehmed Paşa were destroyed together with Arslanhane for the construction of the Sultan Ahmet Complex (Figure 2).

The complex's architect was Sedefkar Mehmed Ağa who was the apprentice and foreman of Mimar Sinan for 21 years. The architect did not deviate from the style of his master while planning the Blue Mosque and he made use of Mimar Sinan's structural approach based on not dividing the space and advanced it in terms of light and spaciousness. The



**Figure 1:** City walls, the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia in the historical peninsula.

construction of the mosque that was placed at the center of the complex was started in 1609 (Figure 3, 4). However, the completion of some of the functional structures of the complex continued until 1620 after the death of Sultan Ahmet in 1617.

The functional structures of the Sultan Ahmet complex were spread over a wide area and the mosque was arranged in a staggered fashion according to the lay of the land around the mosque and it is one of the largest structural complexes of Istanbul. The functional structures of the complex during the period it was first established consisted of the mosque, Sultan's pavilion, madrasa, school, dar-ül kurra (religious school for the study of the Quran), health center (hospital), hospices, mausoleum, public fountains, shops, arasta (Bazaar), hammam (Turkish bath), lodging, cellars and houses. However, certain structures of the complex have been eliminated or changed over time. The buildings on the arasta side south of the mosque suffered extensive damage from the Ishak Pasha fire in 1912.

The caravanserai has been located on the basement with a rectangular plan extending along the Qibla wall under the mosque. A madrasa is located in the east, with an axis

perpendicular to the mosque, north of the outer courtyard wall surrounding the mosque. The Mausoleum of Ahmet I is located at the north of the Madrasa and muvakkithane (time adjusting room) behind the Mausoleum. The Dar-ül kurra is located adjacent to the southwest part of the mausoleum. There is fountain in the northern corner of the outer courtyard. The health area was built to the southwest of the mosque and hospices to the east of it. Sipahi Bazaar (arasta), is located much further down the mosque and on the qibla side perpendicular to the axis of the mosque with a concept that fits in with the topography. The Hammam is located at the south part of the arasta and the school is located at the east, leaning on the outer courtyard wall.

The Blue Mosque is the most important structure of the complex and is located in a very spacious courtyard surrounded by low walls with windows, together with a courtyard and fountain with porches and the Sultan's pavilion (Figure 5). This spacious courtyard is entered from eight doors including three in the front. A slimmer fountain sitting on six marble columns is located at the middle of the courtyard. The arches of the fountain are decorated with motifs of tulips and carnations so as to make a connection with the floral motifs used plentifully in the interior space. The Mosque has a plan consisting



Figure 2: Sultan Ahmet Square.

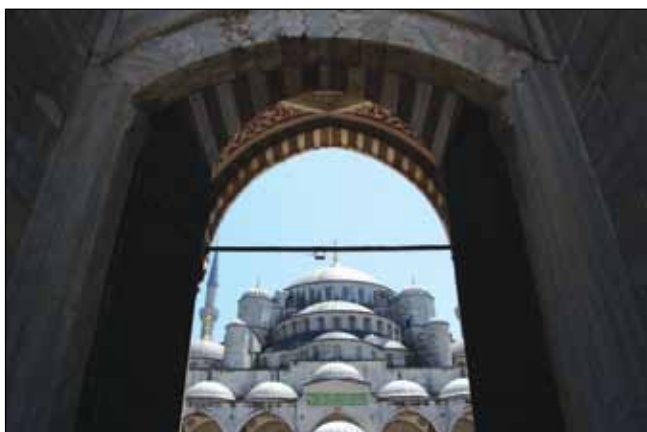


Figure 3: Entrance to the courtyard through the porches.



Figure 4: Courtyard with porches and domes

of almost square sections and stands on a high subbasement. One of the two sections making up the plan are the harim (the prayer part) and the other is the courtyard. The harim part of the mosque covers an area of 64x72 meters. The middle stand of the mosque is covered with a central dome sitting on four filpaye (literally elephant feet) with four large arches. Half domes of equal diameter added to the central dome in four directions are based on the main body walls together with the exedras and the independent domes on the corners of the plan square (Figure 6). The individual piers are connected to each other and to the wall piers on the main body wall with arches. The piers rise as the outer octagonal weight towers. Piers protruding inside and outside on the eastern and western walls are hidden with two-story outer side halls at the front. Lodges with two floors at the same depth as the piers are present in the north, east and west directions in the interior space. In addition to the individual piers and wall piers, there are four lodge piers on the entrance side and two on the sides serving as secondary carriers.

The Blue Mosque is the only mosque with six minarets among the imperial mosques. Two of the minarets are located at the east and west corners of the courtyard, while the other four are located at the four corners of the mosque. The minarets in the Ottoman Architecture are usually plain, but the bodies of the minarets are decorated to be different from each other in this structure, going beyond the conventional approach. There are many stories on the conspicuousness of the mosque with six minarets. The best known of these rumors is that Ahmet I actually wanted the minarets made from gold, but Sedefkâr Mehmed Ağa who did not have sufficient allowance decided to play a prank in order to disregard the request and complained of severe hearing to build six (altı in Turkish) minarets instead of a golden (altın in Turkish) minaret.

The most important characteristic of the Sultan Ahmet Mosque that attracts everyone passing from İstanbul and causes it to be known as "Blue Mosque" is the tiles ornamenting this magnificent architecture. Tiles which are the products of İznik and Kütahya workshops and decorated with complex branches and flowers such as stylized tulips, hyacinths, carnation and, blue, red, turquoise and black colors on white ground cover the upper parts of the walls and stands until reaching to the domes. Tiles decorate the walls by creating more than fifty compositions especially at the top floor of the mosque. 21043 tiles create the richest collection following Topkapi Palace. They were provided by Kâşici Hasan in order to be used in the ornament of the mosque. The space is stained blue with carvings dominated by the blue color all over, starting from the window level constituting the third row from the piers to the domes by integrating with tiles (Figure 7,8,9). Floral patterns in harmony with the tiles are predominant in the carvings. The artistic side of the Architect Sedefkâr Ağa is clearly seen in this harmony observed in all ornament sections of the structure. The carvings are in good condition and preserved in their original states, but the drawings were plastered and covered in 1883. Some carvings with inconsistent colors and different dimensions and details

despite being similar to the classic era patterns were made instead of plastered ornaments, again in this period. The mosque recovered its original chisels again with the works that began in 1976. Stained-glass windows, compositions with flower motifs ornamenting the 260 windows in the period the structure was constructed have led to the admiration of foreign travelers coming to İstanbul, especially in the early 19th century and 20th century. Today, however, the windows have lost their artistic value as a result of being damaged



**Figure 5:** Courtyard with porches and fountain.



**Figure 6:** Main dome carved ornament.



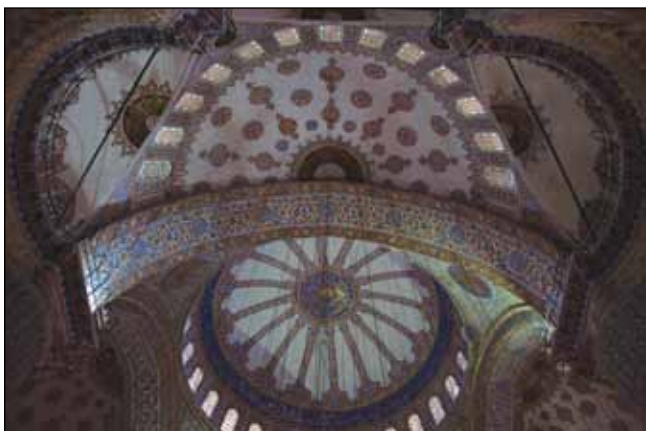
**Figure 7:** Main dome pedestal and pendants carved ornament.

and stained over time. Nevertheless, the large number of windows compared to other examples of architecture adds a spaciousness and light to the place not seen in the Classical Era until this structure and reveals the brilliance of the tiles and carvings (Figure 10).

The marble minbar and mihrab emphasize the reality of the place with all simplicity with white in the middle of the



**Figure 8:** Main dome, pedestal and pendants carved ornament.



**Figure 9:** Main dome, half dome and carved ornament of exedras.

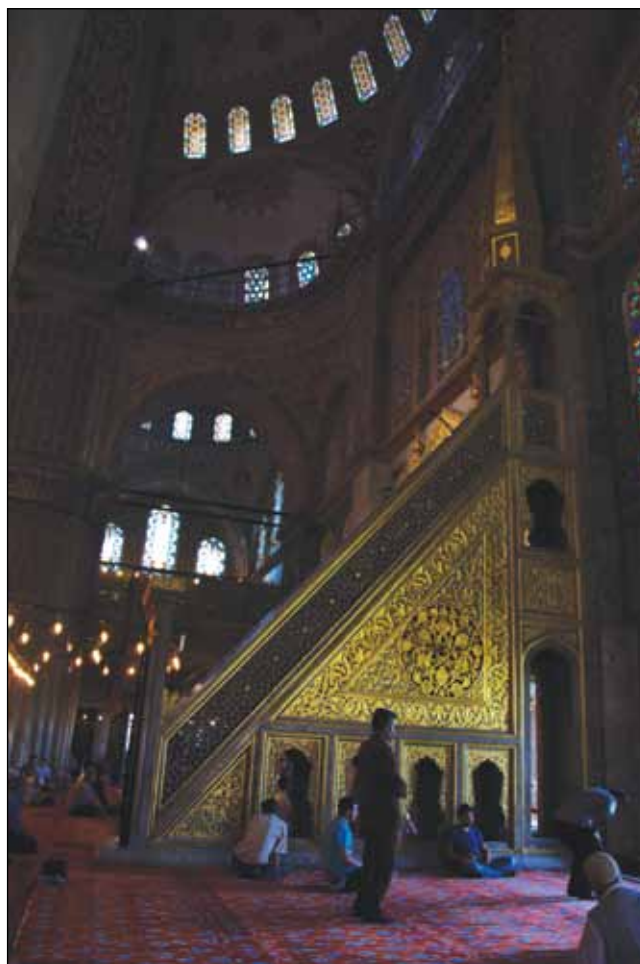


**Figure 10:** Blue Mosque interior.

diversity created by the floral ornament within the all blue atmosphere created in the interior space of the mosque. The concave part of the mihrab was left completely plain and the mirror parts were finished with golden gilts and decorated with floral patterns. The marble columns extending on either side of the mihrab reinforce this simplicity further. The minbar was decorated by engraving gold-gilded and embossed geometric interlaced motives in the form of lace on the marble (Figure 11). The Muezzin lodge is positioned adjacent to the pier in the direction of the mihrab and stands on ten octagonal columns. It is again in marble to create a harmony with the mihrab and minbar, and has marble a parapet with geometric hemstitches. The preaching chair and the window frames in the mosque are ornamented with geometric and floral compositions engraved with pearl inlays (Figure 12, 13).

The odor emitted by 3 ostrich eggs on the main dome prevents spider webs in the mosque. Two clocks that were given by Queen Victoria as a gift accompany the decorations of the mosque in the interior space.

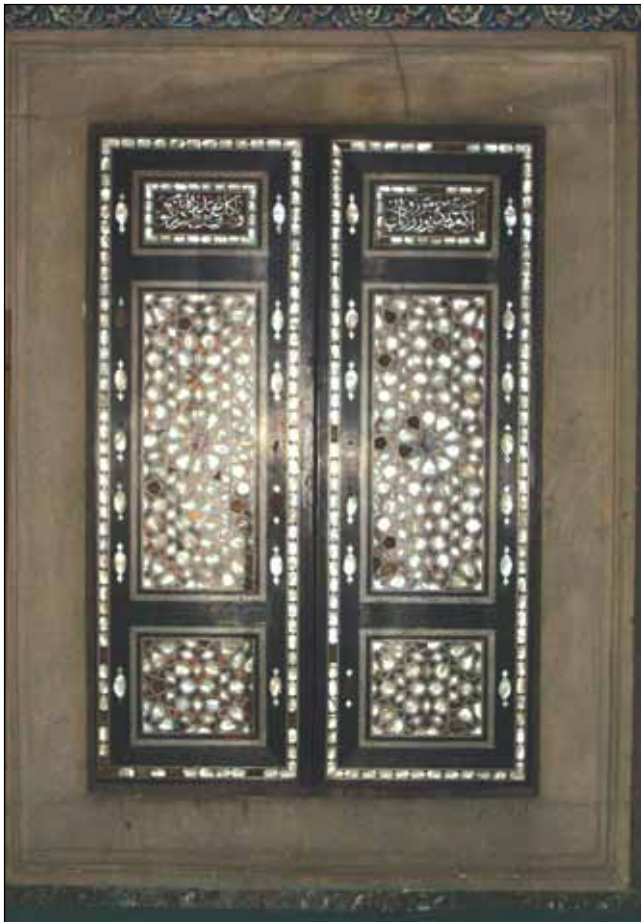
The Sultan's lodge located on the east section of the Blue Mosque's mihrab constitutes one the most beautiful



**Figure 11:** Minbar ornamented with golden glitter and embossed geometric interlaced motifs.

examples of Ottoman Architecture in this regard together with the Sultan's lodge of the New Mosque. The side lodge on the left creates a ledge in the form of a balcony towards the mihrab and the Sultan's lodge is situated on this ledge. The Sultan's lodge is carried by ten colored marble columns. A hall with a door where the minaret entrance is also present can be found under these columns; one passes through a wooden door present here and climbs to Sultan's lodge with the stairs and enters a space through an ostentatious door with an inscription above. There is an entry to Sultan's lodge from the mosque as well as Sultan's pavilion. The çilehane of Sultan Ahmet I is in the southeast corner of the Sultan's lodge. One enters here through a secret passage entered from the window opening at the very left part. The presence of this çilehane is also one of the secrets of Blue Mosque. The Sultan felt the fear of God quite markedly. He sometimes distanced himself from daily affairs and seeks shelter in this narrow room, chained from both of his arms in order to repent the sins he thinks he had committed. During this state of seclusion that (Figure 14) lasted for days and nights, he stayed away from any kind of pleasure and only prayed.

The turquoise tiles with written verse on the Sultan's lodge of the Blue Mosque and the ceiling under the Sultans

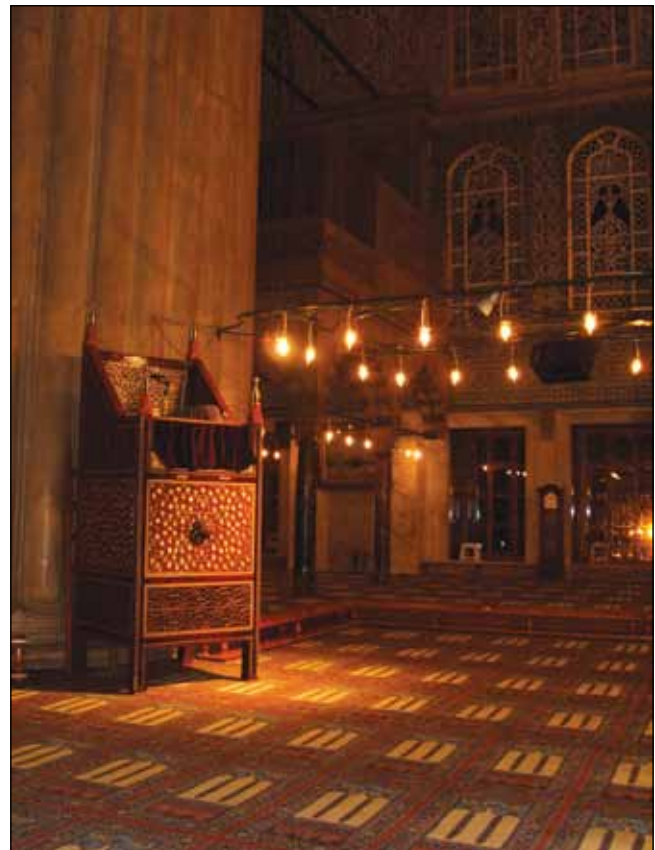


**Figure 12:** Window cases ornamented with geometric patterns engraved with inlaid pearl.

lodge decorated with colored carvings have no match. The inscription written in gold gilt on turquoise tiles winding around the entire space is written with celi sulus calligraphy.

The most important novelty Sedefkâr Mehmed Ağa brought to the Ottomans both in the architectural and social regard is the use of a Sultan's pavilion. The first application of these pavilions that have become venues where the Sultan rested before and after the prayer and conducted state affairs in later periods is presented at the Blue Mosque. Here the Sultan's pavilion is located at the southeast corner of the mosque with its ramped entrance and it is connected to the Sultan's lodge at the interior part of the mosque with a walkway with porches at the east corner of the mihrab wall. There are Sultan's rooms at the upper floor and premises and carer sections on the lower floor of the pavilion that is thought to have had a wooden roof. The rooms of the Sultan open to a spectacular view of the Marmara Sea.

The Sultan's pavilion of the Blue Mosque has been the scene of many important events; statesmen held meetings in this building day and night during the Janissary rebellion in 1822 and the decision of abolishing the Janissary was taken here. After the first application in this mosque, building pavilions in imperial mosques became a tradition and pavilions were even added to earlier mosques. Sultan's pavilions also reflect the civil architecture understanding of the period. The



**Figure 13:** Preaching chair ornamented with pearl inlay.

pavilion was damaged in a fire in the 18th century and the wooden parts were destroyed. A new pavilion was therefore constructed again in wood in the Empire style on the masonry walls remaining from the fire in the 19th century. The pavilion was ruined again in a new fire that occurred in 1912 and was restored by the General Directorate of Foundations. This



**Figure 14:** Çilehane (Suffering house) of Ahmet I placed inside a window of the Blue Mosque.



**Figure 15:** The view of the Blue Mosque from the madrasa domes.

pavilion endured until 1949 and the recently constructed pavilion recently constructed was also burnt as a result of a fire that occurred during the renovation in 1949. The Sultan's pavilion was also reconstructed during the renovation of the Blue Mosque and Complex in the 1960s. These works in the Sultan's pavilion were completed in 1963 and an attempt was made to reintegrate the structure as much as possible. During the reconstruction projects, the original traces detected on the masonry parts of the building and other solid examples of that age and especially the New Mosque Sultan's pavilion were taken into account as the basis. Today, this pavilion part connected to the mosque is used as the Istanbul Foundations Carpet and Rug Museum.

The presence of both a çilehane and the Sultan's pavilion is in fact proof of religious architectural work being put to civilian use.

Ottoman architects had a number of concerns regarding the factors they were required to take into account while creating their works. They were expected to create majestic works to remind others of servitude, to make the place available without dividing it as much as possible, and to embellish the place created with an embellishment program according to Islamic traditions. Apart from all these, the most important feature that they needed to pay attention to was to enable acoustics that could give people a sense of the divine.

Creating such a holy bond between the place and those who pray is a unique specialty and Sedefkâr Mehmet Ağa, who was quite knowledgeable about music, used the advantages of his knowledge to the utmost in the mosque's construction and choice of material. The Blue Mosque has the largest number of different marble types among Ottoman mosques and it owes its acoustic uniqueness to architect's choice of marble. The use of marbles in carved walls and columns as surfaces, in the minbar and mihrab where the sound is prominent during prayer, and to the ceilings of the gathering place to which the sound hit and rebounded within the interior space maximized the acoustics of the structure and made it a unique place of prayer for the Islamic world (Figure 15).

Such things are hidden in the stance of the Blue Mosque across the West's legendary temple for centuries... An expression of divine feelings of a sultan who felt them at the center of his being; the work of an architect who exhibited his mastery and taste together with the preferences he made for the details while fulfilling the requests of his leader; the first example of Ottomans integrating religious and civil architecture.

Two structures revealing all the architectural accumulated knowledge of two different civilizations today, Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque, carry the traces of a quiet struggle and continue to welcome guests who come from all over the world to watch them with admiration...