

Funding the “Creative Minority”: John Marshall, Füreya Koral, and Modern Art in the Middle East

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Abstract

The purpose of my research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) was to identify the ways that American philanthropic foundations' arts-focused initiatives connected to social science programs for modernizing the Middle East in the 1950s. This research is a central component of my forthcoming book, *Metrics of Modernity: Art and Development in 1950s Turkey*. At the Rockefeller Archive Center, I found that John Marshall, Associate Director for the Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation, was unusually forward-thinking in his belief that arts-focused philanthropy could help drive development in the Middle East. In what follows, I argue that the Turkish ceramicist Füreyâ Koral, to whom Marshall offered one of the foundation's very first artist's fellowships in 1956, served as a test case for Marshall's hypothesis that the modern artist had an important role to play in the modernization of the Middle East.

Funding the “Creative Minority”: John Marshall, Füreya Koral, and Modern Art in the Middle East

One Sunday night in October 1958, the famous Turkish ceramicist Füreya Koral hosted a lively gathering of Istanbul’s bohemian elites in her small studio, located across the street from the fashionable new Hilton Hotel. A who’s who of the local art world showed up, including Adalet Cimcoz, the founder of Turkey’s first modern art gallery, the eminent novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, and the artists Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Eren Eyüboğlu, and Aliye Berger. “After the theater,” reported one attendee, a throng of “assorted actors and actresses” appeared at the door.¹ “The first event of the evening was Füreya’s opening her big kiln where for some hours she had been baking what appeared to be a ceramic fish, decorated with pieces of tile,” continued John Marshall, Associate Director for the Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation, who recorded the night’s events in his diary the next day. “When carried to her big work table and hammered with a mallet, the real fish was revealed, moist and tender, and cooked to a turn.” As the night wore on, Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu sang folk songs in “a really moving deep bass” and the guests began to dance. For Marshall, the fête, which went on until three in the morning, was “a memorable glimpse of Istanbul artistic society, remarkable for its cosmopolitan taste, wit, and general gaiety,” a snapshot of a community that he had come to know well on annual trips to Turkey since the late 1940s.² But it was the night’s hostess, the ceramics artist who went only by the name of “Füreya,” whom he admired most. Citing her “remarkable range of knowledge and acute taste,” Marshall named her “one of his most reliable informants in Istanbul.”³

Following their initial meeting in 1955, Marshall positioned Füreya as a test case for his personal hypothesis that the modern artist had an important role to play in the modernization of the Middle East. Throughout the 1950s, Marshall endeavored to convince his colleagues at the Rockefeller Foundation to incorporate the visual arts into the organization’s aid programs for developing countries. “My central concern in recommending assistance to Turkey has been

the contribution that the foundation might make to the modernization which the country is attempting. In my view, the humanities have an important place in that process,” argued Marshall in a 1958 inter-office memo.⁴ Marshall believed that the future of the Middle East lay in the hands of a local “creative minority” whom he defined as “that still restricted but rapidly growing group of Muslims privileged in having a secular and increasingly westernized education.”⁵ According to Marshall, these select few would guide their countrymen into modernity by acting as living examples of the values of Western capitalist democracy. Marshall perceived Füreya, a woman of “remarkable knowledge and acute taste,” as an exemplary member of this creative minority, and promoted her as an ideal candidate for a fellowship. In June 1956, when she was awarded \$3,800 to spend four months studying ceramics in the United States and Mexico, Füreya became one of the first modern artists the Rockefeller Foundation had ever supported.⁶

Füreya was connected to Marshall’s two primary areas of interest, to which he funneled a growing amount of Rockefeller funds in the 1950s: the field of the visual arts and the region of the Middle East. Marshall had a history of steering the Humanities Program in innovative new directions. In the 1930s, when he first started working for the organization, he had pressed for the organization’s engagement in the field of communication.⁷ Following World War II, the Rockefeller Foundation expanded its Humanities Program, motivated by the desire to mitigate the perceived failure of the foundation’s science-focused programs to forestall the war. Marshall began to advocate for fellowships in the visual arts, which he considered to be “universally understandable” and therefore the ideal means to promote intercultural understanding.⁸ “I should certainly hope that from now on the arts could figure much more largely in the operation of the cultural services,” he argued in 1955. “More than is perhaps believed in Washington, nations are judged by their achievements in the arts, probably more by their universally understandable achievements in the non-verbal arts.”⁹

Marshall also refocused the Rockefeller Foundation’s Program on the Middle East, a geographic region with which it had not previously engaged. In 1948, he became the first Humanities staff member to visit the area; until 1958, when he took a new job within the foundation, Marshall spent at least a month per year in the Middle East. In Beirut, Cairo, Istanbul, and Ankara, he forged relationships

with government officials, social scientists, artists, and journalists. During his yearly visits to Turkey, he tracked a wide range of projects across the humanities, including the establishment of an American Studies program at University of Istanbul, the national orchestra's need for instruments, the restoration of the Hagia Sophia, and the training of archivists. The tireless cultural officer was single-handedly responsible for an eight-fold increase in Rockefeller aid to Turkey in the 1950s: almost forty percent of all the fellowships awarded to Turkish candidates in a sixty-year period were distributed under his watch.¹⁰ Turkish authorities considered Marshall's services to their country so important that they honored him with the Medal of the City of Istanbul in 1956.¹¹

When back in the US, Marshall attended conferences about the Middle East and built sustained relationships with a community of prestigious scholars responsible for securing a place for Middle East Studies in the American university after World War II. Marshall took a critical view of American academia's predominately historicist approach to the Islamic world, once noting that the Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies "seems to lack clear definition of purpose" and later expressing "skepticism" at scholars who believed "that the Near East represents survivals from ancient times."¹² Within just a few years, Marshall had come to be regarded as enough of an expert that Princeton University consulted him when seeking a successor for the renowned Arabist Philip Hitti, and MoMA called on Marshall when it considered sending an exhibition to the Middle East in 1952.¹³

Emphasizing that "aid for the Near East . . . should be focused on what the educated minority of the Near East can do for themselves," Marshall argued that artists, too, should be considered as human channels through which American foundations could advance their interests.¹⁴ The notion of the "creative minority," so important to Marshall's thinking, was first theorized by the British historian Arnold Toynbee in the 1930s. By the 1950s, this concept had seeped into American philanthropic and government circles concerned with the developing world.¹⁵ In Marshall and his colleagues' view, the ideal member of the creative minority possessed two features. First, the person had to be cosmopolitan enough to function in the elite circles to which the Rockefeller travel grants were designed to provide exposure. (This requirement entailed the ability to speak English, a

skill available only to the most highly educated elites.) Second, the person had to demonstrate the potential to share knowledge gained in the United States with the younger populations of their modernizing homelands following their return.

Füreya, whom Marshall described as “a cultivated and attractive person” and one “who has traveled widely, makes her way easily everywhere and has, incidentally, virtually perfect English,” unquestionably possessed the required cosmopolitan skill-set.¹⁶ (In contrast, the francophone Turkish artist Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, who received a Rockefeller grant in 1960, was scathingly evaluated by Marshall at the end of his tenure as having “seemed a reasonably cosmopolitan figure in Turkey,” who had ultimately shown himself “basically more provincial than he appeared to be.”)¹⁷ Füreya also fulfilled the foundation’s requirement that grantees impart new knowledge to younger practitioners: when advocating for her as a potential grant recipient, Marshall confidently reported that Füreya “already has two assistants working with her, and undoubtedly will be the figure round whom any further development in this field, traditional in Turkish art, centers.”¹⁸

Marshall cast Füreya as a catalyzer of modernization who, once imbued with American know-how, would return to her country as the embodiment of a solution to the biggest problem facing Turkey’s creative classes: material shortages under economic duress. The Turkish artists, musicians and writers with whom Marshall was in dialogue, told him that the greatest impediment to their work was the lack of materials available on the local market. The Istanbul orchestra lacked strings, reeds, and mutes, and students at the Istanbul Fine Arts Academy needed canvas and paint. When Füreya moved back to Istanbul from a prolonged European residency in 1951, the Fine Arts Academy did not even possess a kiln. “So long as Turkey is in her present general economic difficulties, research in every field, and progress in the arts, are seriously handicapped by all the consequences of lack of foreign exchange,” explained Marshall to his colleagues in a 1955 special report where he sought to articulate how the Rockefeller Foundation could provide solutions to this problem.¹⁹ This, according to Marshall, is where artists like Füreya could make a difference. If a “creative minority” of leader artists could be taught how to make the most of materials available on the Turkish domestic market, and encouraged to share this technical

knowledge with others, the nation's modern art sector could progress, steering Turkey towards American values along the way.

John Marshall's efforts to think across traditional divisions between the arts and the social sciences were unusual in the context of the Rockefeller Foundation's existing programs. My book, *Metrics of Modernity*, demonstrates that such claims regarding the relationship of art and development were actually quite commonplace in the postwar period.²⁰ Marshall's working relationship with Füreya Koral, which is the subject of one of the book's chapters, illuminates the ways in which an international community of intellectuals endeavored to integrate aesthetic modernism into the socioeconomic modernization of the Middle East.

¹ John Marshall diary, October 13, 1958, Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter RAC), Rockefeller Foundation Archives (hereafter RFA), Record Group (hereafter RG) 12.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Marshall, "Humanities: Visual Arts (EXPANDED PROGRAM)," 1, December 30, 1958. RAC, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 805R, Box 7, Folder 67.

⁵ John Marshall, "The Near East 1951," November 13, 1951, 6. RAC, RFA, RG 3, Series 911, Box 15, Folder 2.

⁶ GA H 5669, Grant in Aid to Füreya Koral, June 20, 1956. RAC, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 805R, Box 7, Folder 69 "Fureya H. Koral, 1956–1957."

⁷ William J. Buxton, "John Marshall and the Humanities in Europe: Shifting Patterns of Rockefeller Foundation Support." *Minerva* 41 (2003), 133–153.

⁸ Ali Erken, "The Rockefeller Foundation, John Marshall, and the Development of the Humanities in Modern Turkey." *Divân: Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Dergisi* vol. 20, no. 38 (2015), 119, 131.

⁹ John Marshall, "United States Cultural Services," 9, enclosed in John Marshall diary, March 30, 1955, RAC, RFA, RG 12.

¹⁰ Kenneth Rose and Murat Erdem, "American Philanthropy in Republican Turkey: The Rockefeller and Ford Foundations," in *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations* 31 (February 2000), 147.

¹¹ John Marshall diary, April 7, 1956, RAC, RFA, RG 12.

¹² John Marshall diary, May 31, 1955 and December 14, 1955, RAC, RFA, RG 12.

¹³ John Marshall diary, "John Marshall interview with Lewis Thomas," Sept 9–10, 1953; John Marshall interview with René D'Harnoncourt, Julian Fleishman, Joseph Reed, and Porter McCray, John Marshall diary, October 21, 1952, RAC, RFA, RG 12.

¹⁴ John Marshall, "The Near East 1951," November 13, 1951. RAC, RFA, RG 3, Series 911, Box 15, Folder 2.

¹⁵ This premise was echoed in the U.S. government's Leaders and Specialists Grant Program, of which the Rockefeller Foundation was a funder, and whose stated aim was to

bring “persons of recognized leadership and influence” to the U.S. in order subsequently disseminate American values in their home countries. See Nancy Jachec, “Transatlantic Cultural Politics in the Late 1950s—The Leaders and Specialists Grant Program,” *Art History* 26, no. 4 (September 2003), 551.

¹⁶ John Marshall interview with Tunç Yalman, January 23, 1956. RAC, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 805R, Box 7, Folder 69.

¹⁷ John Marshall to Boyd Compton, August 28, 1962. RAC, RFA, RG 1.2, Series 805R, Box 7, Folder 68.

¹⁸ John Marshall diary, March 31, 1956, RAC, RFA, RG 12.

¹⁹ John Marshall, “Opportunities for the RF in Turkey,” 3, enclosed in John Marshall diary March 30, 1955, RAC, RFA, RG 12.

²⁰ See, for example, “Art in Non-Industrialized Countries,” UNESCO report, late 1940s, RAC, Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Papers, RG 4, Projects III4L, Box 135, Folder 1323 “MoMA–René D'Harnoncourt.”