Reinvented as Theme Park: Istanbul in the Imagination of Nineteenth-Century Europe

Conference
Friday, 28th November 2025
Pera Museum Auditorium, Istanbul

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İSTANBUL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Front cover: Constantinople in Budapest. Plan of Lipót Kellner (Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library Budapest Collection, No. 010398.)

As a result of the globalization process in the nineteenth century, with various reasons, handicrafts from the Ottoman Empire together with others from Western and Eastern Asia appeared in Europe, achieving high interest. Through traditional, applied artworks from these lands, the term “Orient” gradually became associated with a unique, handcrafted, high-quality product concept in industrializing Europe. The artefacts could be seen in publications, newly established collections, museums as well as thematic streets or pavilions of world's fairs and resulted in several phenomena such as Japonism, Chinoiserie, and Orientalism. These categories however became an imaginary impression of the related lands.

The influence of these fashion trends also appeared in the Historicist architecture of the late nineteenth century. In some European cities of the era, it was evident in certain specific public buildings that the architects drew inspiration from contemporary sources—artefacts or illustrations—to evoke “Oriental” motifs. A larger-scale architectural manifestation of “Oriental” influence can be linked to world exhibitions and theme parks, sometimes associated with entertainment, as one of the new functional needs of the period.

This one-day conference will provide an imaginary journey to cities such as London, Budapest, and Copenhagen. The presentations will analyze how Istanbul was reflected in some building complexes, theme and amusement parks in these cities during the late nineteenth century. The conference will explore the historical context of the era, discuss the historical imaginations shaped building complexes, and analyze case studies as well as the origins of the architectural sources appeared in European cities that were associated with specific locations like Istanbul during the mentioned period.

The program is organized by the cooperation of the Pera Museum, the Istanbul Research Institute, the Liszt Institute – Hungarian Cultural Center, and the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul.

Advertisement for "Constantinople in Budapest."
Károly Gerster, 1896
National Széchényi Library, Map, Poster, and Small Print Collection, PKG 1914e/123

Program

10.00–10.30 **Greetings and Opening Remarks**
M. Özalp Birol, Pera Museum & Istanbul Research Institute
Áron Sipos, Liszt Institute - Hungarian Cultural Center

10.30-11.10 **Keynote Speech**
The Ottoman Elsewhere: Images, Imperial Self-Fashioning, and the World's Fairs
Gizem Tongo, British Institute at Ankara & Khalili Research Centre, University of Oxford

11.10 - 11.30 **Coffee Break**

Session One
Theme Parks and World's Fairs in Context
Chair: Olof Heilo, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul

11.30 - 11.50 Constantinople as Spectacle: A Controversial Theme Park in London
Péter Tamás Nagy, Qatar Museums

11.50 - 12.10 Dreaming about the Orient in Tivoli Gardens: How Desires of the Muslim World Shaped the Structures, Sounds and Tastes of the Copenhagen Amusement Park in the Nineteenth Century
Garbi Schmidt, Roskilde University

12.10 - 12.30 Reflections of 'The Magical Orient' in International Exhibitions in the Late Nineteenth Century
Zsuzsanna Emília Kiss, Budapest University of Technology and Economics

12.30 - 12.50 Kütahya Tiles at World's Fairs and Exhibitions: The Revival of a Neglected Craft in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries
Yavuz Selim Güler, Pera Museum

12.50 - 13.10 **Discussion**

13.10 - 15.00 **Lunch Break**

Session Two
Istanbul in Budapest
Chair: Gizem Tongo, British Institute at Ankara & Khalili Research Centre, University of Oxford

15.00 - 15.20 Turkish-Hungarian Relations in the Late Nineteenth Century: Turanism, Trade, and Diplomacy
Gábor Fodor, ELTE - Research Center for the Humanities, Institute of History

15.20 - 15.40 Istanbul in a Bay of the River Danube
Gergő Máté Kovács, Liszt Institute - Hungarian Cultural Center

15.40 - 16.00 "The Protection of This Initiative is a Public Duty for the Capital" – the Construction of the Istanbul in Budapest Theme Park
Olivér Perczel, Budapest City Archives

16.00 - 16.20 The Legacy of Kálmán Gerster and the Plans for the Istanbul Complex in Budapest in the National Archives of Hungary
Anikó Schmidt and Enikő Török, National Archives of Hungary

16.20- 16.50 **Closing Remarks**
Reorienting the Construct, Reconstructing 'the Orient': Towards Global Historicisms
Péter Tamás Nagy, Qatar Museums

The Mosque at Olympia, Constantinople in London theme park,
Bolossy Kiralfy, *Constantinople or the Revels of the East...* London, 1893.

The Bazaar Building in Tivoli
Photo by Frederik Riise *Museum of Copenhagen, Photo ID: 331049.*

Abstracts

The Ottoman Elsewhere: Images, Imperial Self-Fashioning, and the World's Fairs

Gizem Tongo
British Institute at Ankara & Khalili Research Centre, University of Oxford

Framed through the notion of the "Ottoman elsewhere," this keynote explores the spatial and epistemic projections through which the Ottoman Empire was imagined, visualized, and materially reproduced in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century World's Exhibitions. These fairs staged imperial and colonial power, showcasing technological innovations, industries, and a variety of objects alongside exoticized peoples for public consumption and judgement. The Ottoman Empire was a regular participant, keen to project a civilized and modern image. Drawing on textual and visual primary sources, the talk situates representations of "Ottoman-ness" in those displays within the broader frameworks of globalization, imperialism, and the culture of display, while highlighting the microhistories of objects, collectors, and artists. It demonstrates that the empire's image was not merely circulated abroad but actively shaped and constrained by contemporary ideological and political frameworks, sometimes compromised and sometimes challenged by Ottoman agents themselves, revealing the complex dynamics between representation, self-representation, and imperial self-fashioning.

Gizem Tongo is an art and cultural historian of the late Ottoman Empire, with particular emphasis on the Greater War period (1914–1923). She holds a doctorate in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford (St John's College), where she was a Lord Dulverton Scholar, and completed postdoctoral fellowships at Oxford and the British Institute at Ankara. She has taught at Oxford, Middle East Technical University, Boğaziçi University, and Hacettepe University, and has given public lectures at the Victoria and Albert Museum since 2018. She has also co-curated two exhibitions: Mihri: A Migrant Painter of Modern Times at SALT Galata, Istanbul (2019), and Occupied City: Politics and Daily Life in Istanbul, 1918–23 at the Istanbul Research Institute (2023–2024). Currently, she is a British International Research Institutes postdoctoral fellow and a research associate at the Khalili Research Centre at the University of Oxford.

Constantinople as Spectacle: A Controversial Theme Park in London

Péter Tamás Nagy
Qatar Museums

In 1893–1894, the Olympia Exhibition Centre provided a venue for a multisensory entertainment district or theme park titled Constantinople in London, which incorporated several exhibitions, a grand theatre, a bazaar, bars, and restaurants. The architectural settings partly emulated iconic monuments of Istanbul, purportedly recreating the city's atmosphere, and partly reified tropical images commonly associated with "the Orient" at the time. My talk will first focus on the physiognomy of this show, walking us through the main structures and identifying their models. Then, the second section will provide a synopsis of the spectacle play produced for this theme park by the Hungarian-born impresario and theatre director Bolossy Kiralfy (1848–1932), analyzing structures of its stage décor. Lastly, my paper will touch upon the reception of this theme park, including the reasons for the Turkish consul's initial protest. The underlying argument will highlight some of the debatable aspects of (mis-)representing Constantinople as a spectacle.

Péter Tamás Nagy is an architectural historian of the Islamic world with a background in Arabic studies. Some of his research has focused on the Maghrib, on which he completed his doctorate at the University of Oxford in 2021. Another of his long-term projects aspires to present emulations of Islamic architecture in Hungary in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his current position at Qatar Museums, he investigates the heritage of Doha, primarily studying royal palaces and their artistic connectivities across the Indian Ocean.

Dreaming about the Orient in Tivoli Gardens: How Desires of the Muslim World Shaped the Structures, Sounds and Tastes of the Copenhagen Amusement Park in the Nineteenth Century

Garbi Schmidt
Roskilde University

To visitors, Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen appears as something distinctly Danish. This is notable because, upon entering the park, one notices architecture that reflects influences from the Muslim world and Southeast Asia. This architectural style has been a part of the amusement park since its early days. Back then, music composed for and performed in the park, as well as the food and drinks available, were inspired by the Muslim world. This paper examines how the Muslim world contributed significantly to shaping Denmark's cosmopolitan identity and architecture in the nineteenth century, a legacy that remains visible today.

Garbi Schmidt is a professor of Cultural Encounters at Roskilde University in Denmark. Her research focuses on migration to Denmark past and present, including how migration has shaped the capital of Copenhagen over the last centuries.

Reflections of 'The Magical Orient' in International Exhibitions in the Late Nineteenth Century

Zsuzsanna Emília Kiss
Budapest University of Technology and Economics

During the nineteenth century, thematic streets and pavilion complexes appeared at several international exhibitions. At exhibitions held in London, Paris, Vienna, Philadelphia, and Chicago, the public was able to meet with objects from the "East" in different combinations and contexts. Despite the fact that these complexes were mainly created based on authentic sources such as written or drawn publications and photographs, the individual taste and concept of their designers were reflected. In this presentation, several examples of these world exhibitions and themed building complexes will be inspected with the aim to analyze the reflection of the "Magical Orient", to define the possible models used for the "Constantinople in Budapest" ensemble and to outline some architectural approach in the era of late Historicism.

Zsuzsanna Emília Kiss has received her MSc., Specialised Engineer Degree for the Preservation of Built Heritage from Budapest University of Technology and Economics, M.A. in Archaeology at Loránd Eötvös University in Budapest. Participated in several research projects and documentation of historical buildings. Works as Lecturer at Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Department of History of Architecture and Monument Preservation.

Kütahya Tiles at World's Fairs and Exhibitions: The Revival of a Neglected Craft in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Yavuz Selim Güler
Pera Museum

In the late eighteenth century, the ceramic production in Kütahya, struggling with economic recession and military conflicts in the Ottoman Empire, could not compete with mass-produced European ceramics and porcelain in the late eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, only a handful of masters remained to pass down their craft.

In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, however, restoration projects regenerated Kütahya's tile and ceramic workshops. Meanwhile, Kütahya's products were displayed at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London (1855), the Paris International Exposition (1867), and the Vienna World's Fair (1873). While the Kütahya tiles and ceramics displayed in London were not of high quality, their quality improved in the following decades. By the time of the two universal expositions, they were praised as high-quality ceramics.

This article reexamines the late-nineteenth-century revival of Kütahya ceramics and assesses how exhibitions and world's fairs shaped the development of the craft.

Yavuz Selim Güler is the Collection Supervisor at Pera Museum and an instructor in museology and Anatolian archaeology at Boğaziçi University. He has recently curated Pera Museum's exhibition "Extraordinary Minas: The Story of Inspiration and Innovation in Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics".

Turkish-Hungarian Relations in the Late Nineteenth Century: Turanism, Trade, and Diplomacy

Gábor Fodor
ELTE - Research Center for the Humanities, Institute of History

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, sympathy for the Turks rose in Hungarian public opinion due to the Habsburgs' absolutist policies, however, this rapprochement was not one-sided. During the age of Turanism, the ties between the two countries has continued to strengthen. However Hungarian politics saw Turanism as an important economic incentive for the development of Hungarian imperialism towards the Balkans and the East, the longing for the imaginary and mythical East has not been limited to being a tool of politics, trade and science; architects and, along with them, the entertainment industry have also begun to produce their own unique products.

In this presentation, the speaker attempts to briefly summarize the history of Turanism in Hungary with particular regard to plans and ideas relating to the Ottoman Empire and the Turks.

Gábor Fodor was graduated from the departments of Turkology and History of the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, where he also finished his PhD. His main research interest covers the Turkish-Hungarian relations in the 19-20th century in general, in particular the Hungarian autobiographies and memoirs from the late Ottoman period and the Hungarian scientific endeavors in Istanbul.

Istanbul in a Bay of the River Danube

Gergő Máté Kovács
Liszt Institute - Hungarian Cultural Center

At the end of the nineteenth century, during the era of Historicism, motifs from Islamic regions appeared on some buildings in Budapest. Although the designers of these buildings mostly used existing analogies, in many cases they created an imaginary world. This was also the case at the building complex located at the bay fenced off during the regulation of the Danube, which was handed over to a newly established theme park by an 1895 decree of the Council of Ministers. In 1896, the building complex designed by Kálmán Gerster, called 'Constantinople in Budapest', was a unique and famous highlight of contemporary life of the city. The mostly lightweight, set-like structures were intended to evoke buildings of Istanbul, although the forms used were in many cases of the origin of North African or Iberian Islamic buildings. The complex did not have a long life, but its memory has survived to our present day.

Gergő Máté Kovács has received his Ph.D. (2020), MSc. (2013), Specialized Engineer Degree for the Preservation of Built Heritage (2018) from Budapest University of Technology and Economics, B.A. (2017) in philology of Eastern languages and cultures (Turkish studies) at Loránd Eötvös University in Budapest. Kovács worked on preservation projects of Ottoman buildings in Hungary, took part in survey works of historical buildings in Hungary and Türkiye and participated in research projects and organization of exhibitions. He serves as Cultural Attaché at Liszt Institute - Hungarian Cultural Center in Istanbul.

“The Protection of This Initiative is a Public Duty for the Capital” – the Construction of the Istanbul in Budapest Theme Park

Olivér Perczel
Budapest City Archives

The 1000th anniversary of the existence of the Hungarian Kingdom was held in 1896. Entrepreneurs interested in the hospitality and entertainment industries tried to take advantage of the expected tourist traffic of the millennium year. For the special year, two new entertainment districts with an oriental architectural style and a special atmosphere were built in Budapest. The “Ős-Budavára” [Ancient Buda Castle] was located right next to the millennial exhibition, while the “Konstantinápoly Budapesten” [Constantinople in Budapest] was located on the Buda side of the Danube.

In the complex of Constantinople of Budapest, the entertainment and cultural elements were mixed. Behind the Istanbul setting, it offered an exhibition, theatre, fair, restaurants, cafes, a bazaar, bars, and a boating lake. At the same time, in the dedicated buildings, the Hungarian population could get to know the life of the Turkish people, their home furnishings, the religious beliefs, clothing, and customs of the Muslims.

The presentation will discuss the circumstances of the construction of the amusement park, the recreation and entertainment opportunities there, the range of programs, and the successes and failures of the enterprise.

Olivér Perczel is a historian and archivist, and has been a staff member of the Budapest City Archives since 2003. He received his doctoral degree in 2024, and his topic is the entertainment opportunities and locations of the Budapest City Park from the beginnings to 1950. A volume will soon be published from the dissertation.

The Legacy of Kálmán Gerster and the Plans for the Istanbul Complex in Budapest in the National Archives of Hungary

Anikó Schmidt and Enikő Török
National Archives of Hungary

The Hungarian Architectural History Collection was established in 1925, following a recommendation by Kuno Klebelsberg, who was the Minister for Religion and Education at the time. The collection was housed in the National Archives. It is unclear exactly when the Gerster legacy was added to the archives. According to the prevailing view in the literature, this occurred in 1930, after Gerster's death. According to his will, his siblings Irma and Károly inherited all his property, both movable and immovable. They may have transferred the plans to the archives directly or indirectly.

The legacy was placed in the map collection of the archives. Due to a lack of space and events during the war, it was neglected for decades, which made research impossible. In 1952, the archivist Nóra Polónyi organized and arranged it. During this process, Polónyi divided the material into eight series, occasionally including unsigned plans that appeared to be part of the collection. Furthermore, the arrangement and numbering were inconsistent: several types of material of different natures were found under one number, while plans for a single building were placed under several numbers. The second series includes the plans for Constantinople in Budapest.

The section system was introduced to the archives in 1959. At this time, the collection of plans became Section T and the Gerster Legacy received the registry number T 8.

Anikó Schmidt received her PhD in Turkish Studies from the Faculty of Humanities at Eötvös Loránd University in 2018. She graduated from the same university with a degree in Turkish in 2009 and a degree in history in 2005. She has been working at the Hungarian National Archives since 2013 and has been the head of the Private Archives and Collections Department since 2023.

Enikő Török received her PhD in Medieval and early modern Hungarian history from the Faculty of Humanities at Eötvös Loránd University in 2003. She worked in the Map Collection and later in the Book Cataloguing Department of the National Széchényi Library. Since 2006, she has been an archivist responsible for the Collection of Maps and Plans at the National Archives of Hungary in Budapest, taking part in the archives' map digitization projects. She is a senior investigator of state grants from the National Research, Development and Innovation Office (2013–2015, 2019–2023 and 2024–2027).

Reorienting the Construct, Reconstructing "the Orient": Towards Global Historicisms

Péter Tamás Nagy
Qatar Museums

The nineteenth-century representation of Istanbul in Europe, the leitmotif of this conference, belonged to the broader phenomenon of Orientalizing architecture. From synagogues to baths, theatres, exhibition pavilions, factories, and houses occasionally co-opted elements of Islamic architecture in their visual appearance at the time. Although generally viewed as an autonomous subject, in which the active 'West' imitated the passive 'Orient', one of the proposals of my talk will be to reorient this – biasedly Euro-centric – perspective. By setting Orientalizing architecture in its coeval framework of the global nineteenth century, this paper will remind us how numerous buildings around the world took inspiration from older monuments to assume one of the revival styles. Second, it will argue that 'the Orient' was far from being a passive member of this relationship but, in fact, various local patrons and designers actively embraced historicisms, of which my talk will present examples from Türkiye, Egypt, India, and Malaysia. The resulting argument will not only provide an alternative for the simplistic East–West narrative but also propose a fresh reconstrual of Orientalizing architecture.

Péter Tamás Nagy is an architectural historian of the Islamic world with a background in Arabic studies. Some of his research has focused on the Maghrib, on which he completed his doctorate at the University of Oxford in 2021. Another of his long-term projects aspires to present emulations of Islamic architecture in Hungary in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his current position at Qatar Museums, he investigates the heritage of Doha, primarily studying royal palaces and their artistic connectivities across the Indian Ocean.

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