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SIYAH KALEM

"WIND OF THE STEPPE"

52 facsimile reproductions of paintings by Master Mehmed Siyah Kalem in Topkapi Palace Museum

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FOREWORD

Interest in the paintings of Siyah Kalem is relatively recent. They attracted the attention of art historians about thirty years ago, and since they do not fit into any accepted art category have been a subject of controversy. For a time an attempt was made to explain them in terms of Far Eastern-Buddhist and Persian-Islamic influences. Yet an art as distinctive as that of Siyah Kalem cannot be attributed to external influences alone, since that would be to dismiss its originality right from the start. So although studies on the basis of these hypotheses have provided certain valuable clues as to their place of origin, they have not furthered understanding of the pictures. Despite the passage of thirty years, Siyah Kalem’s art remains an enigma.

Today, however, circumstances are far more conducive to the solution of this enigma. In 1977 ADEVA (Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, Graz) published my monography on Siyah Kalem, which included reproductions of all the Siyah Kalem paintings in Topkapi Museum Library, a single example from the Freer Gallery in Washington, and interesting examples from the Siyah Kalem school which I selected from the Palace albums. This made all of Siyah Kalem’s paintings, with the exception of a few in private collections which at the time we were unable to include, available to researchers. This step brought art historians face to face with a number of questions concerning their essence, function, social context, world view, form-language, and place in art history. I could not treat all these aspects within the framework of the monography and postponed them for inclusion in a future work. In 1984 ADEVA published a further study addressing a wider readership in which I treated these questions in greater depth.

My studies of Siyah Kalem date back to the early 1950s. In 1953 Istanbul University organised several exhibitions about the reign of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Turkish conquest of Istanbul. I was working with Sabahattin Eyüboğlu in Topkapi Museum Library selecting pictures for these exhibitions from the little-known murakkaas (albums) known as the Fatih Albums. As we were looking through them we came across the Siyah Kalem pictures. It was an experience I shall never forget. We took part in the exhibitions with the photographs of some pictures from these albums, and in 1954 published a book about them in Turkish and French entitled “A Glance at the Fatih Albums”. The book devoted most attention to the Siyah Kalem paintings, and although we had not yet resolved our approach to them, we did not content ourselves merely with description of the pictures. We put forward some bold hypotheses to the effect that here we had encountered a unique style whose antecedents were largely unclear, and a powerful concept of form previously unknown to art historians. One of our hypotheses was that the Siyah Kalem pictures represented a previously unknown steppe art, and were the earliest works proving the existence of pictorial art among nomad peoples. Although this
was no more than a theory at the time, it guided our future work. Today, after a long period of study, this theory regarding the place of Siyah Kalem in art history has been corroborated by subsequent findings.

In this book I have been constrained to adopt an approach to the pictures of Siyah Kalem which diverges from accepted methods of art history study. In my earlier work I had viewed them as the product of naturalistic art, and considered an expressionism originating in naturalistic art to be their most characteristic feature. Today I have abandoned this opinion. Siyah Kalem had no acquaintance with naturalistic art. Instead, his art originated in an animistic world view, whereby every natural object has a spirit and everything is under the control of mystic forces. An objective world view dismissing these forces appears only with the acceptance of scientific thought in the Modern Age, whereas the world of Siyah Kalem is ruled by magic. His is a world created by an outlook typical of the mythological age prior to scientific thought. Siyah Kalem undertakes to act as a vehicle of communication between people and spirits. He is not just an artist but also a witch doctor. The concept of pre-scientific thought has been the key throughout this book, enabling us to view the art of Siyah Kalem not as an abstract museum object, but as far as possible within a social context. In this way I have been able to gain a more specific understanding of the function and purpose of this art.

I hope that this study will motivate art historians to take up the investigation of Siyah Kalem where I have left off, and generate fresh viewpoints.

This book is intended to acquaint readers with the art of Siyah Kalem himself, rather than his school, so I felt obliged to make some minor amendments to both the text of my last book "Wind der Steppe" and to the selection of paintings. Instead of reproducing just 27 of Siyah Kalem's own pictures, I have here included all of them in facsimile, while reducing the number of those by other artists of the Siyah Kalem school to just three.

The title "Wind of the Steppe" is a quotation from the foreword written by E.Haenisch to the German translation of "The Secret History of the Mongols".

I hope that "Wind of the Steppe" will set a precedent for new Turkish art history publications. Preparation of the book for publication has been a laborious task and I thank my esteemed friend Ferit Edgü for undertaking it.

Istanbul, February 1985

Note:
B.W.: Black and white illustrations set in the text.
C. P.: Colour plates, facsimile reproductions.
STUDY OF SIYAH KALEM'S ART

Life and Works of the Artist

Nothing is known about the life of Ustad Mehmet Siyah Kalem. He is not mentioned in any historical document, and we have no idea what his real name might have been. Some of his paintings bear the inscription: "Kâri Ustad Mehmet Siyah Kalem" (the work of Master Mehmet Siyah Kalem), although it was not customary for Eastern artists to describe themselves as ustâd (master). Moreover, this does not appear to be the signature of the artist himself, who we could expect to write his name in a specific corner of each picture. Instead it has been written randomly here and there, in some cases not even the same way up as the picture, as if added later as a mark of identification. Moreover, the artist himself would hardly preface his name with the expression "the work of". The words siyah kalem mean pencil or charcoal drawing, a specific art technique, whereas these pictures are coloured. Perhaps this term was used because of the extraordinary expressive power of this particular style of drawing. Clearly what we have here are the works of an anonymous artist subsequently given a cognomen, as was customary in the middle ages.

His pictures are the only evidence that the artist ever existed at all. And those that we have are only a few stray survivors of what was once a complete set. The pictures were originally drawn on scrolls, and only later separated and pasted into albums, as I explained in my Siyah Kalem Monography published in 1977. When the survivors are arranged in order, it becomes clear that there are considerable gaps in the series and that what we have is only a fraction of the original number. This makes it impossible to reconstruct the scrolls with the remaining fragments, and the art historian studying the work of Siyah Kalem is forced to work with a random assortment of pictures torn out of context.

Wall Paintings in Manichaean Rock Temples in Turkestan

Mani (216-276), the founder of Manichaicism, was renowned as an artist throughout ancient Persia. Pictorial art is thought to have played a major role in the spread of Manichaicism across Asia. Mani's disciples followed his example by painting pictures and using them as a medium for Manichaean doctrines. Cave monasteries excavated in Turkestan at the turn of the century by A. Stein, A. Le Coq and E. Waldschmidt confirmed this. Rows of friezes one above the other around the walls depicted scenes from the life of
Buddha (Avadana) and from his prenatal life (Jakata), as well as scenes from the lives of others who had found enlightenment. Inspired by intense faith, these paintings exert a profound impression on the observer. In Central Asian culture, pictures were as potent as the spoken word. At religious ceremonies stories were related in front of these pictures, words and illustrations complementing one another. In this respect the Turfan finds (frescoes, wooden panels and manuscripts) demonstrate that religious pictures were as important as religious writings.

Scroll Pictures Illustrating Oral Texts

Central Asian temple painting led to the emergence of a new art form, scroll paintings on paper or silk, in the 7th century in Tun-Huang, a region where Central Asian and Chinese cultures mingled. Among the northern nomad clans living in the lands stretching from China to Persia, epic, dramatic and religious narratives were illustrated by scroll paintings. The pictures helped the audience to envisage the story and to follow its thread more easily. The Siyah Kalem scrolls must have been made for this purpose. Attempts to recreate the original order of the paintings suggest that the scrolls were displayed both side by side and one above the other, as were the friezes of the cave temples. In some of the Siyah Kalem paintings, there are discontinuities between the figures. In some cases one figure is left isolated, in others they are incompatible with one another (typical examples are C.P.31 and that published in the Metropolitan Museum Magazine, August 1978). I believe that such pictures were drawn as examples. Considering that paper and silk are not hardwearing materials, artists may well have used such examples when restoring the scrolls.

Picture Scrolls and the Palace Albums

The Siyah Kalem paintings depict a diverse cast of characters comparable to those of puppet or shadow plays. We see characters of many races and peoples: a Turk, a Mongol, an Indian, a black African; of different creeds: a Shamanist, a wandering dervish, Buddhist and Nestorian priests; rich and poor, magnificently garbed aristocrats, nomads whose hard life has left its mark on their faces...Yet Siyah Kalem does not restrict himself to these; he includes imaginary creatures in his repertoire: fearsome jinns and giants; demons wrestling, playing musical instruments, dancing, and sacrificing horses to an unknown God. Since the stories which these pictures illustrated were not written down, they have not survived to the present day. We only see the protagonists who took part in them, distinguishable by their facial expressions, gestures and costumes. The Siyah Kalem scrolls should be thought of as part of the scenery for a type of theatrical performance.
illustrating the narrator’s story. Once alienated from their cultural and geographical context, they became dumb, mere museum objects deprived of any social function. The pictures were brought to Istanbul as spoils of war following Sultan Selim’s Persian campaign in 1514, and kept in the palace. There is no way of knowing how they were received, so we can only speculate. Islam disapproves of religious representation, so that in the past book illustrations in the form of miniatures were the only outlet for figurative art. Therefore these scrolls were divided up into individual pictures and pasted into albums (H. 2152, 2153, 2154, 2160) so as not to cause offence. These albums contain other pictures besides those of Siyah Kalem: single miniatures torn from manuscripts, meşk (calligraphic exercises), specimen inscriptions, diverse coloured and black and white sketches, and patterns. In the course of compiling these albums, which were known as Murakkaa, no recognisable order has been followed. It is as if the object was to protect the contents rather than compile an album to be looked at (C.P.1).

The Palace Albums and Western Researchers

During the Ottoman period, Topkapı Palace Library was not open to the public, and only a handful of foreign scholars were granted special permission to enter for limited periods. This did not suffice for thorough examination of the manuscripts and murakkaa albums, although a few Siyah Kalem pictures were reproduced in foreign books at this time. Since the pictures were sharply distinct from known cultural categories, such as Far Eastern-Buddhist and Persian-Islamic, they were seen as the astonishing, unique works of a great artist.

In 1910, a major exhibition entitled "The Masterpieces of Islamic Art" was held in Munich, and here the western world encountered one of these albums (the Baysungur Album, H.2152) for the first time. Another of the palace albums (H.2154) was displayed at the exhibition of Persian art which opened in London in 1931. Neither of these albums contains paintings by Siyah Kalem himself, but among them are sketches and drawings in Siyah Kalem style. The outstanding artistic merit of these drawings aroused excitement among art historians, who recognised them as a previously unknown genre. Although they bore no resemblance to any known type of Persian art, they were labelled as belonging to this category, and art historians began to suggest that the current narrow conception of Persian art should be amended. Sir Thomas W.Arnold, an authority in this field, declared after seeing these pictures that the history of Persian art would have to be rewritten. At the time, no one considered the possibility that the pictures represented the first glimpse into an as yet undiscovered area of art history.

The interest aroused in the albums by these exhibitions motivated a wave of fresh research into their contents.

In 1923, Topkapı Palace was opened to the public as a museum, and restrictions on access to the Palace Library by scholars were lifted.
The Homeland of Siyah Kalem's Art

Studies published in Ars Orientalis by three scholars in 1954, and "A Glance at the Fatih Album" by S. Eyüboğlu and myself which was published around the same time, marked a turning point in research into Siyah Kalem. This book covered the contents of four albums (H. 2152, 2153, 2154, 2160). It was devoted principally to the Siyah Kalem paintings, almost all of which were reproduced in black and white. Thereafter considerable research was conducted into the albums. A study by R. Ettinghausen published in Ars Orientalis was a breakthrough in tackling the questions of where and when the pictures originated. There is a distinct Chinese influence in Siyah Kalem's style, yet at the same time it is foreign to the aesthetic norms of Far Eastern art. The Siyah Kalem paintings display a harsh, aggressive realism which is incompatible with the refined approach of Chinese artists. We find no pictures in Far Eastern art which might have inspired these or represent a similar tradition. From this Ettinghausen inferred that the Siyah Kalem paintings must have been produced in a region far from the centres of refined court art, yet within the scope of Chinese influence. He concluded that this region was not Persia, but may have been Transoxania. Even today we still cannot establish their place of origin with any certainty. However, as research progresses, clues have emerged which corroborate Ettinghausen's theory that this place must be somewhere in Turkestan. First of all comes the evidence based on costume. The robes of the women and the turbans of the men resemble the traditional dress of this region. Turkestan is a place where many different cultures have coexisted. As well as Muslims, there were Brahmins, Buddhists, Shamanists and Christians. The ethnic composition of the population, too, was mixed. All these features are clearly reflected in the Siyah Kalem pictures. The nomad steppe clans played a leading role in Turkestan's history, particularly the Kara Kitat, who migrated here in the 12th century. The pagan customs and traditions, myths and legends which they introduced took root here and survived for a long time. In this respect the subjects represented in the Siyah Kalem paintings carry significant documentary value.

Dating the Siyah Kalem Paintings

Ettinghausen dates the Siyah Kalem paintings to the early 15th century, on the evidence of the Siyah Kalem in the Freer Gallery (No. 37, 25), depicting two demons playing musical instruments and drinking (C.P. 54).

The demon who is drinking holds a blue and white porcelain jug. According to sinologists, the decorative motif on this jug is one which occurs on porcelain of the early 15th century but thereafter ceased to be used. This observation is the evidence for Ettinghausen's dating, which was subsequently accepted by other scholars. Today, however, doubt has been
thrown on this deduction, since the style of the Freer Gallery picture puts it not with the group of original Siyah Kalem paintings (C.P.2-50), but with those which in my monography I refer to as the Siyah Kalem School, distinguishable by their subdued, decorative style. A very similar picture to that in the Freer Gallery (C.P.46) is among the Siyah Kalem paintings in Topkapi Palace; clearly one is the copy of the other. Comparison reveals some discrepancies, however. The demons in the Topkapi picture are not bound to one another by rings and rods attached to their feet, as in the Freer Gallery picture. There is a third figure in the Topkapi picture and no decorative motif on the jug held by the demon who is drinking. Obviously they are not the work of the same artist. One has treated his subject realistically and the other with a decorative approach. So the Topkapi picture is an original Siyah Kalem, whereas that in the Freer Gallery belongs to an artist of the Siyah Kalem school. In that event, Ettinghausen’s dating cannot necessarily be applied to all the Siyah Kalem paintings, although there is another feature of the original Siyah Kalems lending weight to this conclusion: the rocks, steppe plants, gnarled tree trunks and roots clamped in the earth. These natural elements are of Far Eastern origin, and feature frequently as decorative motifs in early 15th century Persian miniatures. But we have no idea when these motifs were introduced to Turkestan, which might be either earlier or later than their appearance in Persian art. The fact that they occur frequently in Timurid Persia cannot be taken as definite evidence that all the Siyah Kalem paintings date from the early 15th century. Having tentatively dated Siyah Kalem to this period, without drawing any distinction between the originals and those of the Siyah Kalem school, we must be ready to amend our conclusion in the light of new evidence.

The Place of the Siyah Kalem Paintings in Art History

Although the Siyah Kalem paintings have been the subject of numerous articles and papers since 1954, the debate has not gone beyond the questions posed by Ettinghausen. It has taken time for art history to turn its attention to these works, not so much due to any lack of interest among art historians, as to generally prevailing attitudes. Modern art history is a discipline of recent origin, and for a long time art history studies were confined almost entirely to European art. Since the time of J.Burckhardt in particular, most research has concentrated on art of the New Age 7, and arts which cannot be evaluated according to the criteria of New Age western art have either escaped attention altogether or been relegated to study by specialists in a few obscure disciplines. This has meant that the arts of non-European cultures have not been fully appreciated. In his book entitled "Islamische Kleinkunst" (Islamic Handcrafts) Ernst Kühnel defined all the Islamic arts, from book illustration to weaving, without exception as ‘minor arts’ 8. It is true that medieval creative artists, both eastern and western, did
not emerge as individuals as they did in the Renaissance, but were part of an artistic tradition, making it difficult to draw a sharp line between artists and craftsmen. Nonetheless, there were artists of the period, Siyah Kalem being one, who did not merely maintain a convention-bound tradition, but imparted new impetus to it. Kühnel fails to make this distinction.

Ethnologists rather than art historians concerned themselves with the art of foreign cultures. Vast areas of art were left in the hands of curators who sought to expand their Far Eastern, Indian and African art collections with an indiscriminate array of artefacts, art objects and cultural objects. Gradually, however, art historians began to turn their attention to these fields. The awakening of interest in non-European arts is due in large part to 20th century modern art.

Great masters have always played a formative role in the development of visual sensitivity. Artists of every period have looked at the world with a fresh vision, seeking values relevant to themselves in the art of earlier periods. Renaissance artists rediscovered the world of ancient Greece. Mannerism and Baroque reawakened responsiveness to medieval art. Unknown lands appealed to the Romantics, leading to the fashion for collecting the art objects of exotic cultures. As far back as 1892 North African tiles and carpets were influencing Delacroix, and Matisse admired them greatly in 1906. Doris Wild, in her book "Moderne Malerei" (Contemporary Art) published in 1956, tells us that Manet first saw the watercolours of Hokusai in 1856, that the 16-year-old Monet began to collect them the same year, and that Degas was similarly fascinated by them. In a later letter by Van Gogh to his brother Theo, he wrote: "I rest my entire art on the foundation of Japanese art". Gauguin was influenced by Japanese prints, and in the Early Cubist period Picasso and Braque were influenced by African carvings. Once "creativity" had been acknowledged as the most sublime human value by modern artists in the 1920s, the pioneers of abstract art put an end to naturalistic representation, thus breaking with a tradition which went back to Giotto. Only at this point did art historians begin to feel an interest in art worlds outside naturalistic art, opening the way to a "universal art history".

The First Siyah Kalem Monography

Art history, therefore, ignored the Siyah Kalem paintings until the new concept of art became generally accepted. It took 25 years for the first Siyah Kalem monography to be written following their discovery by the art world. This monography aimed to introduce Siyah Kalem and all his works to researchers. The small number of Siyah Kalem paintings dispersed among foreign collections could not, unfortunately, be included in the monography. Two pictures in the Schulz collection (now in the Claude Anet and Vignet collections in Paris) came to light at an auction sale held a few years ago at the Hotel Drouot in Paris. Another Siyah Kalem in the Halil
Ethem collection in Istanbul which had never been reproduced, disappeared without trace following the owner's death. The Siyah Kalem painting in the Metropolitan Museum was not known when the monography was published \(^\text{10}\), and further Siyah Kalem paintings may yet be discovered.

Under these circumstances, I was obliged to confine myself to those in Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul and to the single example in the Freer Gallery which had been the basis for dating when preparing my book. The publication of the monography therefore provided all the principal material relating to the Siyah Kalem research. At the same time it brought the art historian face to face with a host of unanswered questions.
Symbols or Reflections?

The art historian studying the paintings of Siyah Kalem will not merely examine their date, place of origin, social context and function, but also the artistic vision which created them. The word picture is primarily associated today with representations of nature, whereas this conventional meaning is in fact an attribute of New Age Western Art alone. None of the great stylistic periods of history recognised such a meaning.

Prehistoric cave paintings conveyed the mysterious forces which governed human life. The Egyptians and Greeks believed that depictions embodied a sacred power. They did not look on their cult pictures as pale reflections of God, but actually saw the godhead in them. In the Eastern Christian world, belief in the hidden presence within the icon of the person depicted was so strong that at the Second Council which convened at Nicaea in 787 a
resolution was reached to the effect that "pictures of saints may perform miracles and cure the sick". The custom of seeing a picture as a living entity continued with Islam. No distinction could be made between the depiction and the thing depicted, with the result that in Koranic language "creation" means the same as "depiction", and one of the names of God is Musavvir, or "he who depicts". In Islam, however, God cannot be seen, but is only manifested in the form of words. Therefore, Islam did not follow the Christian tradition of cult pictures, but banned figurative art on the grounds that pictures were equivalent to idols.

The power inherent in pictures is conspicuous in the art of Siyah Kalem. Looking at his pictures we find a different world opening before our eyes; not an imaginary world meant for looking at, but a world which confronts us with a pervasive truth. Whether the artist depicts a human being, an animal, or a demon, what he creates surpasses the confines of a reflective, illusory art. No parallel is to be found in naturalistic art.

Commitment to the Earth

There is no indication of where the figures are treading in the Siyah Kalem paintings, yet the dilated muscles in their arms and legs, and the way in which the legs are splayed to get a firm grip on the ground convey a sense of gravity at the existence of the unseen ground beneath which imparts a convincing weight to the figures (B.W.1, C.P.28). This powerful sense of weight in the paintings is an expression of commitment to the earth. Such commitment belongs to a time when mankind felt powerless against the forces of nature and turned to worship of the mother goddess with offerings and sacrifices. The eastern world worshipped the "earth mother" for thousands of years, under such names as Ishtar, Astarte and Cybele. The Greeks continued this belief, worshipping Gaya, Demeter and later Aphrodite. When Saint Paul tried to explain the existence of an invisible cognitive God to the Ephesians, they were so angered at his refusal to recognise the goddess of fertility that for three days in succession crowds gathered in the theatre shouting, "Artemis of the Ephesians is great!", in denial of Paul's teachings.

Man's devotion to the soil diminished with the monotheistic concept of a cognitive God, but was not lost entirely. Echoes of the earth mother (Magna Mater) survived in the Jewish Mother Eve and the Christian Virgin Mary. Certainly the mother of Christ and the earth mother of the pagan religions have nothing in common, but for a long time memories of the mother goddess survived in the cult of the Virgin Mary, which was rooted in popular beliefs.

Weight and Movement

The weight apparent in the paintings of Siyah Kalem is not the motionless, frozen weight of Near Eastern art. Two opposing forces merge in the Siyah Kalem figures. To the force of gravity is added the resisting force of the living body. The muscles of the people and giants
stealing horses, and lifting rocks or other heavy weights are a source of power in Siyah Kalem's art. This exuberant strength is concentrated in hands and feet (B.W.1, C.P.23,28). The artist illustrates their postures and movements from disparate angles. Even when the figures are seated, playing musical instruments or talking, they are tense, ready to spring into action at any moment (C.P. 22,25,35,46). When they become absorbed in wrestling or dancing we are confronted with an outburst of energy which is almost frenzied. The demons dancing in C.P.44/45 are a striking example. At either side of the picture are two figures keeping time with castanets and cymbals, while the two figures dancing in the centre whirl furiously. One is springing into the air, the other leaping to the ground. We see one in side view, the other frontally. The movement of the dancers is repeated in the scarfs flying above them. Everything in this picture is in motion, even the musicians crouched on the ground are moving their fingers, toes and the muscles of their abdomen in time to the breathtaking rhythm.

World of the Senses - World of Experience

'World of the senses' is a concept which arose in post-Renaissance western civilisation, and it was foreign to Siyah Kalem. His world was a world of experience consisting of "objects connected by faith, hope and fear"13. Here everything is under the power of mysterious forces, so that Siyah Kalem is not content to depict the outer appearance of objects, but as in all medieval art seeks the essence, the "invisible" in the "visible". This invisible essence was the "substance" of medieval philosophy and the "idea" of Platonism. The concept of "essence" has been adopted by modern art and philosophy. When we speak of intuition we imply a grasping of the essence, an ability to see the essence (Wesensschau) 14. A picture of nature is contingent on a predetermined viewpoint, and gives only a single aspect of the subject, a part of the whole. A three-dimensional object actually has a multitude of aspects, and this multiplicity is fundamental to the essence of the object; it cannot be abstracted from it. Siyah Kalem does not take perceived appearance as his starting point, but mentally fragments what he perceives in the attempt to reach the essence, and then proceeds to reconstruct the object. We could describe it as a form of constructivism diametrically opposed to the organic formation of naturalistic art. To use a term belonging to modern art, what we have here is a kind of conceptual painting 15, which alienates the seen object, seeks the essence, and renders the invisible "visible" and the inconceivable "conceivable"16.

By means of contrasting light and shade, Siyah Kalem imparts relief to the figures drawn in such sharp contour on white paper. In order to demonstrate the three-dimensionality of volume, to indicate the indivisible wholeness of the essence, he employs a configuration which enables the diverse appearances of the objects to be grasped at a single glance. For example, in groups of two figures, if one is shown in full face, the other is shown in profile or rear view (C.P.4,24,30,35,43,44/45,48). This device enables him to
show the figures from different angles in the same picture.

This endeavour leads Siyah Kalem to abandon the single viewpoint in most of his pictures. The turning of the horse's head as it grazes in C.P.9 is shown from three viewpoints. We see the forehead and eye frontally, the nose and mouth in side view, and the jaw from a three-quarter angle between the two (B.W.3). When Siyah Kalem wants to show animals walking, he depicts one of the feet from below, and another from above (C.P.3,9). He employs the same device for dancing figures, so that we see the feet and body movements from diverse angles (C.P.30, B.W.2). Thus movement is not shown in momentary suspension as in naturalistic pictures, but as a sequence in time.

Medieval western art used an ubiquitous range of conventions for depicting everything from folds of cloth to falling, walking and dancing. There are two interesting parallels between these and the motion devices used by Siyah Kalem (B.W.6,7,8,9).

Distortions of Form

Siyah Kalem occasionally resorts to exaggerated distortions of form in order to depict figures from disparate angles. The figure blowing on the fire in the "Nomad Camp" is a good illustration of this device (C.P.2). The artist views the man on spread knees in front of the fire from an angle slightly above him, so that the feet should be concealed beneath the body.
To preserve the integrity of form to some extent, Siyah Kalem twists the man’s left leg upwards to reveal the sole of his foot. In the lower section of the same picture, the distortion of the limbs of the horses grazing is even more complex (B.W.4). The animals are aligned in opposite directions, one facing us and the other turned away. But the artist is not content with this juxtaposition. He wants to show all their limbs from different angles, so we are confronted with unusual contortions. The body, rump, legs, head and abnormally long neck are intertwined in contrary directions, creating an abstract conglomerate motif such as those of Scythian art (B.W.5).

All these examples demonstrate that Siyah Kalem did not regard a predetermined viewpoint as a binding principle. What we see as a distortion of form was not so for him. As I have already explained, he dismantles the form as he wishes in his mind and then reconstructs them at his own discretion on the paper. While observation of nature certainly played a considerable role in Siyah Kalem’s paintings, which is what gives them their documentary value, they are not drawings from nature. We cannot speak of an expressionism deriving from naturalistic art in his work. In the monography I defined Siyah Kalem’s art as expressionist, but I no longer hold this view. What is meant here by observation of nature is not the objective perception of nature, but the experience of one who lives surrounded by natural forces. In Siyah Kalem’s world there is no duality of subject and object. His creatures should not be viewed as even remote semblances of natural prototypes. They are figments of the artist’s imagination, unique entities with their own lives. Although Siyah Kalem’s figures have been drawn on a plane, since they are
shown from various angles, they are almost sculptural, springing from the surface of the picture as if they were tangible. Unlike Leonardo da Vinci or Dürer, Siyah Kalem does not depict his world of objects emancipated from mysterious forces, motivated only by aesthetic considerations. He should
rather be likened to the witch doctors of primitive societies. Here the power of the artist to depict is synonymous with sorcery. The picture is a medium for summoning spirits and Siyah Kalem's creatures appear one by one in his pictures in response to these summons.
Mask - Face

The human beings in Siyah Kalem's paintings are in a state of extreme tension, as if waiting apprehensively for an unknown but imminent threat. They stare glassily, their faces often frozen in a shocked expression of mingled fear and anger. These faces resemble masks, conveying not personal feelings, but the shared emotions of suspicion, terror, anxiety and other fundamental experiences common to the human condition (B.W. 11, C.P.6,12,16). The faces of Siyah Kalem's demons display no individuality whatsoever, so that they might be envisaged as people dressed up as demons with masks over their faces for the purpose of healing people or animals, and protecting them from evil (C.P.38,43,44/45).

At times the paintings approach caricature in order to illustrate ethnic or class distinctions (B.W.10, C.P.24). The facial expressions and gestures of hands and feet are exaggerated to the point of being grotesque. In C.P.17 for instance, Siyah Kalem treats the relationship of a powerful man with those around him in a satirical vein. A young man of the common class, without beard or moustache, is respectfully handing a potted plant to a tall powerful aristocrat (could it be a clan chief?). Both are seated on the ground. The young man is crouched in readiness to serve, with one leg resting on the ground, and the other foot firmly on the ground. The dignitary sits comfortably with legs spread apart, his hands folded on his knees and his back resting against a figure standing behind him. From the gilded decoration
on the headdress of the standing figure and the staff he holds we can infer that he is a high-ranking official.

Yet although these paintings are reminiscent of caricature, they should not be interpreted as such. They are not intended to make us laugh. The element of humour is negligible in comparison to their characterising features. They might be compared to the character studies of Leonardo da Vinci, which also incorporate a humorous element, but were executed to illustrate different characters, not as caricatures.

Siyah Kalem is a figurative artist. He draws his figures in harsh outline, directly onto the empty paper, without preparing the surface in any way. He never portrays them against a background scene, but merely adds abstract pictorial elements reminiscent of the steppe, such as a bush, a tree trunk, or a rock, wherever he feels obliged to indicate the setting. The figures create their own spatial settings as they rotate about their own axes, gesturing in different directions with hands, arms, feet and legs. By plucking the figures from their natural environs and drawing them on plain paper, Siyah Kalem relocates them in a cognitive space in which imagination knows no bounds.

The Power and Reality of Magic

Siyah Kalem's art is realistic, but this realism is not what we understand by this term today. We have seen that his creatures are not imitations of nature but the product of cognitive activity. This cognition was that of the mythological age, when the distinction between picture and depicted was vague; when dream and reality were easily confused. Therefore pictures possessed a magical power of suggestion over whoever looked at them.

Alienated from their environment and function, the Siyah Kalem pictures found their way to Turkey at a time when portrayal was forbidden. The Ottoman court must have sensed a threat inherent in the pagan world of Siyah Kalem which prompted them to cut up the picture scrolls and hide them away in albums. This is confirmed by the fact that this style found no adherents in the Islamic world, and by the survival of so few of the pictures. In Siyah Kalem's paintings we encounter a mystical art not yet exposed to the aesthetic values of naturalistic art. The scrolls might have been divided up and fragmented, yet their indivisible integrity lives on in every piece, sustaining the animation of each. The source of inspiration for this art was the life of the steppe people who battled against the forces of nature.