

## **GÜLSÜN ERBİL A LANDMARK IN MYSTICAL ART (based on the book Gülsün Erbil-Mystical Circles by A.A.Bal and contribution by S. Sen and A. Uçar)**

### **STANCE OF GÜLSÜN ERBİL'S ART**

Gülsün Erbil's art is a sociological reflection or document; at times a richly intraverted diary, and at times an onerous expedition to depths to be discovered. Those who wish to set out on this journey must take on at the least the same responsibility as the artist, as it is very difficult to communicate with a works of art.

These days the numerous works of Gülsün Erbil executed with very different techniques are being brought out to the sunlight to surprise the observers with not just the numbers but the seriousness of the display. This modesty as well as the resilience of the artist will be a lesson not to be unlearned by students, artists, historians and the critics alike. After an avid investigation, one realises how significant her contribution has been to the development of the current Turkish Painting. No doubt, each work makes up the signature of the artist. A lasting signature is not the lot of all artists. Gülsün Erbil's signature is so strongly rooted, so familiar and strong that wherever seen, it is recognisable as hers.

Here the painter Gülsün Erbil has aimed to bring art to living and living to visual poetry, as commented by Heidegger, for the revelation and realisation of the essence of being and truth.

This sense of responsibility had obligated her not only to overcome the plastic contentions and/or adventures on the abstract canvas where she had toiled with monkish fastidiousness, but all other difficulties confronting her. Given her very personal talents besides this awareness, she had succeeded with ease. There is in her an inexhaustible child like love; pure energy; faith and the excitement of sharing which are impossible not to discover even during a few moments' chat with her in passing. On the other hand, her pictures, ceramics, batiks, sculptures and performances are not modest like her, but to the contrary, very proud cross-word puzzles to be solved, texts awaiting to be correctly translated.

There is a spirit and love that warmly embraces the unlooker. They are actually our fancies that we cannot remove from the mind. Her creative adventures or realisations arise primarily from her spirit at peace with her surrounds and her inborn artistic identity.

Gülsün Erbil, making art a lifestyle for herself has worked continually without her palette ever drying up. In her twenty years in Europe and America, she has watched all aspects of art and has made her own presence felt. It has been generally commented that she has formulated a philosophy and provoked thinking by undertaking all works with a deep comprehension of the subject, thus, orienting art in this respect.

### **MYSTICAL ART -**

Of the six principal elements that ensure artistic creation, one is mysticism, the others being the poetic, lyric, epic, dramatic and pastoral elements. In the formation of the mystical culture, and hence, of the mystical art, the poetic element is in the foreground and stimulates the lyrical element specific to the individual. The poetic element has made possible the wide scale formation of mystical art works in primitive art, in language, music, dance and staged arts and all other forms of art.

**Mystical art** tries to unify the human soul which has been pulled to pieces by arrival on the earth, as believed in the Anatolian Mysticism, Tasawwuf, the source of inspiration to the great American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, the originator of the movement of Transcendentalism in the American literature. The basic philosophy of 'oneness of being' argues that all beings in the universe are one with the Divine Creator, a unity to be reattained by lifelong seeking through deep introspection.

The contributory sources of thought and philosophy which the current mystical understandings and culture have flourished from can be given as Orpheism, Isis, Mitra, Roman Gnosticism, Persian Manichaeism, Taoism, Buddhism, Brahmanism, the Islamic- Persian Sufistic philosophy and the Anatolian Tasawuf philosophy. Tasawuf is best represented by the thinking and output of Hallaj al Mansour, Mevlana Jalal ad-Din Rumi, Yunus Emre and Hadji Bektash-Wali, each of whom have been the subject of numerous serious scholarly works in the West.

In her art, Gülsün Erbil moves, as the mystic, between intuition and the dialectic; then, between mysticism and art, the mythological and the current, legend and reality, the primitive and the contemporary or the naive and the modern, without stopping, like a pendulum which is also the description of the process of reasoning in the Anatolian mystic or the Sufi mind. We will attempt here to lay open Gülsün Erbil's understanding of art and her trail in it by researching the points this pendulum swings over between the past and the future.

To begin with, it is necessary to open the concept of mysticism and find out how it has made its true place in the art of Gülsün Erbil whose creative thinking has been influenced by Tasawuf philosophy of Mevlana, especially his much quoted call for 'love, peace and equality'.

## **A BACKGROUND OF SUFI MYSTICISM**

Mevlana Jalal-ud-Din al Rumi (b. 1208), a peer of Sufistic (sophistic) philosophy, who has been subject of global scholarship and with equally wide following, tells in his celebrated work Masnavi, in words to the effect:

I died from the mineral and became a plant;  
Died from the plant and entered the beast;  
Died from the animal and became a man;  
Why should I fear death and reduction;  
Let me take another step and die from manhood,  
Beat wings and mingle with angels;  
Must pass angels to see beyond  
Because save his aspect all will disappear.  
Let me then disappear!  
Let me sing like an instrument  
Saying we are the returners to Him.

Given the advances in the tenability of the theory of the origin of the species' on this earth, as well as those in astronomy and particle physics with the substantiated predictions on the limitation of the sun's life and thereby of life on earth, the ultimate destruction of the order of the Milkyway by collision with a neighbouring galaxy etc, these words are no less prophetic than those of Democritus, that 'there are only atoms and the chaos': and reflect man's efforts, given the legacy of his intelligence, to explain the significance of all that is perceivable. Mysticism describes the practice and the philosophy of journey to the inner world' or 'growing inwards'. The individual gains pure, beautiful and noble values by the aid of logic and scholarly (scientific) reasoning. It is actually a concentration of perceptions and feelings on the belles about the universe. The word 'mysticism' is derived from 'myein' in the classical Greek language, meaning closing the lips and the eyes'.

Although mysticism derives its philosophy from religion, it is preferred to be seen as the "inner religion'. As against exoterism, the external religion which is for all, esoterism is for those who feel or have an inner call; and, unlike exoterism, it cannot be imposed on the individual and definitely requires a talent or tendency.

All mystic doctrines search for the truth concealed at the basis of all that is visible. The aim is to understand the absolute rules behind the visible confusion of the world in order to attain freedom from anxiety or the ultimate peace of mind.

In a historical perspective the concept of psychocosmology, tasavuf (the Anatolian Islamic Sufism), the antique traditions of alchemy , rebirth and the Nirvana are recognised as attempts of man to gain his natural self. In a world with multiple realities, the truth outs by the excavation in the inner self of the individual.

Tasavuf is an individual's path and demands individual effort in the process of going inward to reverse the alienation of the individual from the truth and of going to childhood and attaining an angelic identity. This however is not a process of disunification but of unification'.

The 'mystic' individual aims to investigate the unknown, approach the infinity or the Supernatural Being by attaining perfection. Unlike the ascetic who consumes only to survive, the mystic attains a 'transition' to the other consciousness. Religion is at the foundation of all these concepts, like the Kabbalah and Judaism, and the Sufism and Islam.

In the Sufi faith the human is a micro cosmos. The mind assists in the surfacing of hidden powers endowed to humans and determines the basic alms of our existence but cannot solve its problems by itself. The ego fed by day to day living can easily suppress the inner voice and impede the development of a universal self. Hence, the Sufis join a quest to find the real self or the 'mature human'. Hence the well known words of the Anatolian Sufi poet Yunus Emre "There is one me inner than me".

The intellect and the self, reason and intuition, land What is not I' are conflicted. In this state of awareness the mystic artist knows intuitively that the state of consciousness reached is not what we think it is. There are thoughts that arouse an awareness of the presence of a deeper, spiritual and secure place to be, but reaching there is blocked by familiar 'curtains or barriers.

Sufi knowledge is reached by advanced insight. Lifelong accumulated insight makes a deeper and richer knowledge available which can awaken the mind with the speed of lightning and helps develop the individuals depth of vision. The confusion and doubts disappear with the confidence of this universal power. Those who attain this enlightenment can push aside verbal expressions or the thoughts about feeling or inspiration. The main subject here is the soul, the main aim is to achieve the catharsis, i.e., the cleansing of the soul. The living being converts to a spiritual, unrestricted existence and only those who have achieved this conversion can recognise another. This is briefly referred to as the eye of the heart of those who have become one with God". Those who have the heart and the spiritual knowledge can reach God with thought. In Ghazal's explanation, "The heart is like a shining mirror. Troubles cover that mirror like smoke and one cannot see ones self. A curtain drops between one and the Universal truth, that is the Creators image".

For the appreciation of the visual symbols of Sufi thinking in art, one has to be informed of the literature behind the representations and the significance of the symbols both verbal and formal.

There are cosmological symbols of significance in Sufi literature and art. The mountain Qaf represents the widening of the sky, and the highest point in the universe', and is an allusion to the renewal of the 'universe'. The universe' of Tasawwuf is a continually shrinking and expanding, strongly active system, with successive waves of generation/creation and destruction/absorption of being/forms', at any moment or heart beat. Those given life rise in a vertical axis toward the point of creation.

Counts or numbers are another means to understand the cosmic processes of nature and their character is laid open by geometry. One is the point, 2 is the line, 3 is the triangle, the first complete shape which symbolises the descending, horizontal and upward movements/functions of the mind, the male element, over the self, the female element. Hence, the mind and the self are the constituents of the duality that make up the unity in 1, which also represents the constant character of the 'universe'.

Some Sufi sects have believed that numbers are the constituent principles of existence and the root of all sciences. They are what the soul or the mind has lifted above the self. It has been stated by Ikhvan-e Safa (the Brotherhood of Serenity) that numbers (counts) are spiritual images sprung from the self rising to oneness. The universe starts with one, descends with the multiplicity of creation and ends with man.

Mandala, meaning 'circle in Sanskrit, is the reference to the circular designs with a geometric shape in the center which represent the entirety of the universe in Hinduism and Buddhism. Individuals meditate by fixing attention on these.

The minaret and the dome represent the erect and transcendent third dimension of the two dimensional material existence of man, and the intense desire of the self to go back to its source.

Darkness and light are archetypal symbols of Tasawuf. They are direct expressions of spiritual experiences. Darkness stands for the final disappearance , 'Fena', while light is immortality or continuity in the Creator, Beka'.

## **MYSTICISM and GÜLSÜN ERBİL'S ART -**

Gülsün Erbil' works executed after 1978 reflect her knowledge and practice of Sufism and sema (the performance of meditation by rotating) in following the teachings of Mevlana. In 1983 she attended the Master of Arts degree course on Ceramics at Goldsmiths' College, University of London and presented in 1984 a thesis on Mysticim. Here starting with Plato she discussed the understandings of the eastern and western people of this philosophical concept. In her view "mysticism forms the catalytic ferment of all religions which started with settled agriculture" that "dogmas have originated from mystical experiences". Citing Mevlana and Hallaj al Mansour, she believes the Anatolian Tasawuf to have much richer sources, and that it has developed from Shamanism, the pre-Islamic faith of the Turks, through the links of the Sufi dervishes.

The principles behind the artistic urge of Gülsün Erbil to use abstract forms can explain the unseverable links between her art and mysticism. As a Sufi she delves into the abstract principles behind the events or the soul behind the iconography of forms in the universe. Here one must point out the discrimination made by Mevlana between the 'form' and the "meaning'. He believed that in the external world all beings have a shape as well as a meaning or essence which must be penetrated. Nothing can be understood if one dwells on the form only. An abstract artist like Gülsün Erbil attempting to express the unseen reality cannot be expected to use apparent images of the overt world.

The Artist says that it is important for the artist to analyse mysticism to depths, probably a mental program she was born with. She believes that cleansing oneself in creativity is a toil rewarded with receiving invaluable messages, and that 'muses' do exist. She is not without humour. "Why shouldn't painters have muses like the musicians and the poets ?"

When asked, she proposes Art, God, Love and Making Peace as the main measures to ensure the happiness in the future of mankind. "Creative activity is not a superficial event and in the making of the deeper human it can even be a religious act. Creative experience is educative and enables societies to advance, by the attainment of a broader spread of peace." "The endocrinologist Dr. Aye Parman had touched my vocation by the words Just as I strive many a night in the laboratory to discover a bit of the truth, you are entering the world of that canvas to do exactly the same, to complement the collective quest of the human mind"

To think that art is a case created through feelings, and to overlook the existence of the contributing mental process is sheer ignorance. With curiosity, continuous learning and experience at her disposal, the artist assembles small parts to present a bigger and entire case. Today the Artist says that in her existence on three continents from late 1970 s onwards she has worked like a primitive African carving masks or like Hermes conveying the word from the mystical world of God and truth to the fellows in the tangible world.

Throughout her career the Artist has found herself questioning the dualisms' of nature like life-death, male-female and conflicting cultural values on good-bad, war-peace, labour-rest, all brought to attention in the detail of her personalised symbolism. In the progress of her mystic experiences, however, she has also become aware of the concealed 'unity' beneath these apparent opposites and has felt the need to organise her compositions to convey the basis of

harmony and the 'continuity' or 'infinity' of creation. Hence, whatever the prevailing conflict, associated with her existence in the modern external world, which had to be reflected to her work, she has always attempted to show this and the mystical concepts of 'unity and continuity' in a contemporary context. The simplicity and the transparency of the transferral of this material from the subconscious to the conscious, i.e. her works, stands as a comment on the nonfunctional armory of 'valuables' carried on the shoulders of the contemporary man of the 'external world'.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF ARTISTIC PROWESS AND STYLE**

### **ART EDUCATION**

Gülsün Erbil's introduction to 'art' started at the relatively young age of five by her mother who had been, in her own highschool years, a very successful student of Celal Uzmen, an Academician and a very successful water colourist. Gülsün (meaning 'thou art the rose') benefited from an enterprising, creative family background. She learned handworks of all sorts including sewing and embroidery. All of these underly the sustained momentum of her active, naturally courageous and enterprising lifestyle and her remarkable productivity. After education at the American Academy for Girls in Usküdar, Istanbul, Gülsün headed for the State Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, now the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Mimar Sinan University. Later Gülsün Erbil wanted to thank her mother with a collection of works named 'School Pictures'.

Gülsün Erbil, a serious scholar and keen observer had, as a second year student, the encouragement of her friends to make her first attempt for exhibiting her works in the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theatre Fine Arts Gallery, a cultural landmark in the city of Bursa. Later, in her last academic year, having entered a competition organised by the State Broadcasting Authority (TRT), her composition 'Market Place' was awarded the first prize. This and her graduation from the Academy with the award for the First Place indicate what underlied her decision to pursue art for life.

The late '60s and the early '70s, with developments in the arts, social values and politics in parallelism with Europe, were hectic years and have found strong expressions in the works of the keenly participating Artist. It is in 1973 that she delved into Mevlana's philosophy and from 1977 onwards she has found a style to reflect her own introspective realisations to her works.

Starting in her student years, she visited all museums of Europe with an aesthetically discriminative mind, and an educated academic approach which evinces her avidity for learning in order to produce more. Also, the many books she read have plotted the course of the many a colourful search she would undertake in her inner being. As she has read, she has recognized, compared and expressed herself. Her output can thus be compared to the mature fruits of a tree hard at work with much self denial. From Giotto to impressionism, and from post-modernism to the digital art, she has continually sought and questioned herself. In order to assimilate these works better and to make subjective interpretations, she makes a point of seeing them in their respective settings of display in different countries. This is no doubt a need for intuitive and guileless exchange between the artist and a work of art which, in her case, has helped her develop a language unique to herself, as well as sharpening her vision and design. "Indeed art is an action that facilitates the communication of humans amongst themselves. Hence the necessity of a 'common' element in the work of art. (Lhote, 2000) It is by living, learning and working that the Artist herself has acquired her own criteria of 'simplicity' of expression in art. She has seen that

classicism is Greek, romanticism is Christian and symbolism is Eastern, but emphasizes that her art unavoidably carries the elements of all. She believes she has clarified her vision and has "found her self" after intensive productive work between 1970 and 1977 with a very careful 'interpretative' analysis of the art in the West and the East, **which now distinguishes her style from other world artists.**

She says that "Academism in the West selects the limits of good taste with the discovery of new horizons. Therefore the Byzantine Art retreated and the period of the perspective' started with Giotto. In the modern age, with Mondrian and ten years earlier with the likes of the Russians Tatlin, Malevich and Popova the perspective came to an end. Likewise, the arrival of photography triggered impressionism. In our day the struggle to leave figurative art behind is going on in the West. In Turkey all of these art currents were presented to us by a new, revolutionary academism."

She had seen herself as a European before stepping on Europe because, in her opinion, "Leonardo, Michael Angelo and Dürer, as having been our artistic sources, were our artists as well". She thus opposed those who argued that **modern art** developed from the Renaissance, which Turks had not lived through, and therefore could not claim modernism without this essential experience.

#### MODERNISM-

Starting to see the museums of the world early in her career assisted her greatly in finding the weaknesses of her own painting. To her what was amiss in Turkish painting was modernism. She found modernism to be inherent to herself, which otherwise is difficult to acquire late in the day. What had been from 1968 onwards an argument at the Academy on whether to be national or universal' was pulled by Gülsün Erbil in 1978 to another stratum by adding concept to abstract art.

Is it a coincidence that someone with a classical education should be able to assimilate modernism to the extent to produce works doing this well in the competition ?". One of the true attributes of the (artistic) encounter is the degree of concentration' which might also be called passion'. What I have referred to is not the magnitude of the feeling, but the quality of the devotion, which need not involve being immensely moved, because it can be experienced in small scale, as in looking briefly at a tree from the window. These brief encounters could bear great significance for that sensitive person I deem to have great power for passion". (Ray, 2003)

#### ABSTRACT ART -

Gülsün Erbil says that "During the years after the second world war, the conflicts of life with disintegration of human relationships and emergence of classes in the community, 'metropolisation' and the large scale pollution of the natural environment forced the artists to resort to abstracted compositions and especially abstract exhibitionism." Gülsün Erbil, like Kandinsky, for example, has opted for the former style, which is not a coincidence since the developmental conditions in Turkey post the 1950's have not been any different.

She goes on to explain that "Islamic art has developed as an abstracted art because of the prohibition of the figurative expression. The West has reached the abstract' centuries after the Islam. Many times the geometric presentations of the Islamic art have been underrated as merely

'decorative, and the subtle values beneath this artistic simplicity have been ignored. The most important of these is the objectivity of beauty, Muslim artists have hidden their identity at will not only in the visual arts but also in music. Putting names on works had been regarded as a sin by some. This has an ironical reflection in the West. Although there are famous names in abstract art, it has developed in currents that have never been the property of individuals."

Abstract art uses shapes and colors in an original context outside those of representative art, and is not a modernistic consequence but goes back as far as the prohibition of the expression of the human form in Jewish and Islamic art. There are abstract design principles at the roots of the Islamic art of calligraphy.

To Gülsün Erbil, art is a transcendent search for reality. As a Sufi she knows that attainment of wisdom is commensurate with the depth of thought and abstraction. As an artist she has found out that a creative work flourishes in the soul and reaches a universally aesthetic significance with the widening of the cosmological imagination of the artist. She is, therefore, adamant to carry the abstraction of her concept of existence as far as she can. Probably this is what makes her stand out from most modern abstract artists.

"She has created a style by abstracting the 'external world' from details to simple lines, and redesigning the objects therein according to a geometric system, establishing a unity of expression while overcoming the subjection to time and perspective". Thus, the art critic Talat Halman finds in these works the achievement of 'synaesthesia', meaning the evoking of more than one perception. Gülsün Erbil has thus been able to display a modern style of depicting the passage from the world of objects to that of inner reality by the dynamicity of lines and colour. Her numerous works each conveying abstracted references to different 'meanings' in 'the world of many symbols' do verify this opinion.

#### SIMPLICITY VS MINIMALISM

Through the period between 1970 and 1983 there has been an exhaustive exploitation of colour in her works. But later, with the awareness of progressing to the 'inner world', which she describes as 'growing up inwards', quite minimalistic use of white and black-and-white contrasts are presented.

She stresses the importance of 'simplicity' more than any other element of artistic expression." Simplicity has become essential for me. From time to time I find many of my favourites like Kandinsky extremely loaded. I prefer the simplicity of the contemporary Japanese artist Arakawa, for example. Hence my approach to the ceramics as in the Chinese and Japanese works. However, by 'simplicity' I don't mean the 'minimalism' of popular art. 'Simplicity' for me is an acquired method of using symbols as a language. If I can see the future at all, then today's art has to be conceptual. I think we are in a phase which is almost as important as the Renaissance. Symbols have a universality and must be brought to life with conceptual interpretations. The artistic language used has to be created by exchanges through the works of the artists. I knew that this had been achieved between my heroes Kandinsky, Klee, Miro, Mondrian and the symbolists. In Turkey we had understood Mondrian better than the Americans have today. He was one of the true revolutionaries who made the abstract art assume two dimensionality. I learned later, however, in the museums that Malevitch had taken the step some ten years earlier".

"I like the simplicity of the Turkish miniature, the difference from the Iranian miniature being the abstention of the Turk from decorative detailing which is an 'understanding' brought over from Asia and not an inability." Gülsün Erbil likes the simplicity in the works of Mondrian to that of the abstract works of Seljuk Turks who settled in Anatolia between the 9th and the 14th centuries and have been hosts to Mevlana. In many of her compositions presented in 'series', she has tried to convey the mental visions of Mevlana through the impressions of the art of the Seljuks in her own mind. This is a process she has been reformulating through the years. "Using your traditional sources improves your art. But then, every work of art is the child of its time, as put by Kandinsky"

It is remarkable that the Artist has been able to maintain her approach to include the minimal content in conceptual art in three-dimensional soft sculptures and Installations" In this she has become an exceptional exponent of minimalistic thinking. The units of stain or colour have been enlarged to a single plain with minimised narrative elements, and the visual characteristics of the composition spread over the entire area of the picture have been stressed. She has given more importance to the immediately noticeable leanness, organisation and entirety of the work rather than allowing for a speculative relationship between parts.

#### TECHNICAL PROWESS-

The Artist has always aimed at technical perfection whatever the materials she has used. She has learned in Europe and in America, through observation as well as practice, that when technical perfection was combined with the conceptual attitude, art gained further significance.

The enthusiasm and the desire of Gülsün Erbil to create exhibit themselves in her performance at the Goldsmiths' College , London, where she had enrolled again in 1993 to study textile techniques. Knowing since childhood of sewing and embroidery, her handling, lovingly, of the textiles put before her, together with her artistic portfolio has obviated the necessity of sitting an examination. These London years gave her the opportunities to create beautiful original works, try new techniques and reach new dimensions. Catching a new style of self expression with textiles paved the way for an individual exhibition by invitation in Germany, in 1995.

In Gülsün Erbil's works, despite occasional variations, all is under strict control; a strong compositional knowhow next to the abstract thinking process is well displayed. Inclusion of these diverse factors within the whole of the work involves a responsibility born by the artist. Not surprisingly, Gülsün Erbil directly accepts this responsibility by using the diverse methods made possible by the current technological advances.

The geometricity observed in the Islamic art appears in her works before us in an abstract expression, color and movement. The discriminatory eye can detect the background of these courageous compositions. Just as observed in the essence of the fluid figures in the masterpiece 'Dance' by Henri Matisse, the fluidity of the continuous spiral forms are symbolic of the energy she has created.

#### **ATTITUDES and CONTRIBUTION TO PARTICIPATION IN ART**

Gülsün Erbil has been an uncompromising opponent of the woman-man inequality with a life-long struggle against it. The fight of Artemisia Gentileschi against the refusal of her acceptance to the Fine Arts Academy, the efforts of Camille Claude to get out of the shadow of Rodin, the

determination of Frida Kahlo to fight male supremacy in the art world as well as the limitations imposed by her physical condition, are other examples to determined feminist stance in the art world.

Gülsün Erbil believes that for the real woman who questions life and the world, the 'imposed' role of Eve for thousands of years is no longer tenable. She will, no matter what the cost of facing the difficulties and unfair accusations or interpretations of her acts, find the equality she deserves. As explained by Mevlana "woman is a creator, not a creature"

Although Gülsün Erbil's concept of life or existence is not on the lines of the established materialistic dialectic, the content of her works do take into hand the conflicting issues of life on earth, such as existence, duality/conflict and reaction/movement, which also make up her lifestyle, and indeed, as that of all living beings. "Being one of the '68 generation" as she admits, and living in the hub of the modern world, these have surfaced in her works, but have been addressed in characteristic approaches by the Sufi theosophy of her adherence.

Her friend the artist Mehmet Alagöz who works in Germany has said that "The artist while producing on the one hand makes 'art politics' on the other". According to him, only those like Gülsün Erbil who are prepared to wear themselves out can do this. In fact, Gülsün Erbil has made art politics in countless projects in museums, biennials, galleries. If a country does not have art politics, it is difficult to find the true place of artists like Gülsün Erbil in the country's art.

Between 1985 and 1987 she completed the largest mosaic mural ever exhibited in London. The one hundred-square meter masterpiece exceeded the wall it was hung upon, reflecting a giant ego to create. Here the visual and the poetic language of the plastic art unravels as it is viewed, while the frequently used turquoise masses almost cast a spell on the onlooker. The mural was a call for equality between races commissioned by the Haringay Municipal Council after the explosive uprisels in the Broadwater Farm Estate, an area with a 'bad file' which raised, together with this mural, for the frist time a (coloured) member of parliament.

Gülsün Erbil moved to New York in 1994 after ten vears of living in London. Her arrival was met with interest in the art circles. By opening an art gallery in Harlem and making a precedent to others she had helped change the bad image of the area. The newspapers of the time had printed that given the new image, Bill Clinton, the ex-president of the U.S.A. had decided to open an office in Harlem. It is yet another irony in the life of the artist that a Turkish Mevlevi woman has had a hand in the transformation of yet another area with 'a bad file'. The gallery named Gallery X, from the name of Malcolm X, the civil rights defender of the Americans with African origins, was opened coincidentally on the 33rd anniversary of the politician's assasination. Americans soon became aware of her ability as a starter of tradition and had proclaimed that she had created the 'X-mania'. This X concept soon became an epidemic. Forexample, one can cite the X-Box program controlled by Bill Gates, the shooting of many films with names starting with X, the X album of Kylie Minogue amongst others, all of which had started with the advent of Gallery X. It was widely commented that the Gallery X in Harlem had become a school. There were very able and leading artists from many countries who knew the contemporary art world extremely well". She had indeed given the chance to walk to recognition to many artist in the Gallery X which she started with her own means in 1988, in New York.

Six months of every year spent in America were spent, virtually daily, if not in the Museum of Modern Art, then studying artistic works in the city, reading and exchanges with the veterans of the art community. Her first show in New York, drew a sizable attention. Her 7th exhibition was staged in 'Cast Iron' Gallery; but opening the Gallery X by her own personal means gave her the grounds to organise exhibitions with, in total, thirty Turkish artists and one hundred and thirty international artists. Her mission had been to be personally in the studio in order to serve art and to eradicate the made-up names sheltering in the art sector

In her years abroad she has felt the necessity to assist young artists to build a bridge between the world art and contemporary art in order to develop themselves; and has taken up responsibility for intimating with art and the love of art those ethnic communities bereaved of this basic right. Hence, the names "mother of art" and "art mama" pinned on her in the U.K, and the U.S.A. In her professional life of forty years, she has left to London the largest mosaic panel in the town, the Gallery X and its artistic cult to New York, the Modern Art Museum Association as well as the Istanbul Biennial to this city.

After many years, having returned to Turkey with that longing for homeland, she started the annual October Parade exhibition and other new ongoing artistic productions. More importantly, she immediately founded the Istanbul Modern Art Museum Association and started to prepare the project for an International Modern Art Museum with its centre in the Büyükdada, which eventually would spread to the other islands around.

**CONCEPTUAL ART -AND GÜLSÜN ERBİL'S CONTRIBUTION TO WORLD ART** Gülsün Erbil has balanced her conceptual abstract art on three elements, namely geometric forms, textural applications and minimalism. The many colours of her early works had transformed, especially in her London years, to grey tones with assertions in black-and- white; but in the recent years all have been executed in the pure basic colours of nature. The artist had made, through abstractions of the early figurative works, a transition to calligraphy and later had find her own style of expressing the 'mystical circulations'. This process also represents the long journey she had undertaken from thinking in terms of 'national art' to that of 'world art'

Gülsün Erbil, however, has a distinct stance in Turkish painting, apart from being an active member of this generation in art, in having been the first to load 'mysticism' as a concept directly into the abstracted artistic language of painting. The chronology of her output proves that she was years ahead of others, like for example Erol Akyavas, who also produced works identified with spirals. Talat Sait Halman, the critic, who has been able to study her works closely, has stated that "Gülsün Erbil has been producing abstracted works of art based on Mevlana's philosophy since the 1970's and in that can be proven to be one of the leaders of the Turkish abstract Sufi art' The artist herself, on the other hand, has admitted that she had chosen the word 'mysticism' intently to describe the basis of her art, and to quote her: "Had I said Tasavuf it would well have become that, but in believing to be a part of the world art, I have elected 'Mysticism' instead". This is reminiscent of Duchamp rightfully saying "there was Dada but I named it first"

The live' mystical twisting symbols of hers presented fearlessly in different materials not only reflect her gains through the years but also present unsparingly her inner subjective treasures

Gülsün Erbil draws attention to the constants of life and time by summarising in her works the familiar projections from our lives. On this platform where dualities are questioned, she reveals the facts of existence and makes a gift of the pleasant plastic dialog she has had with the Creator on the 'why's of this existence

Here one looks at Gülsün Erbil's art, which is an expression of the historical experience of the psyche of a large sector of humanity, through the Artist's choice of symbols which in turn correlate with the times she lives in. She has enriched the theme of the 'mystical circles\*', i.e., the transformation of the human soul, in her life first and then, with all the formal languages available to plastic art, in her works. She has transformed the Sufi philosophy in her mind to a multi-dimensional visual concept. These mystical spirals have been expressed in terms of a situation in life, in the crowning petals of the rose, the eddies in water, the foetus in utero or the galaxies in space, most times supported by astral shapes like the triangle or the square as well as imagery associated with the Mevlevi practices, In order to remind the onlooker of the essence and unity of the design of existence in universe despite the visible dualities.

Gülsün Erbil the artist has reflected the transparency of her determined, egalitarian and courageous nature as well as her exemplary motherhood and feminine practicality and modesty in giving messages with mystical symbols on the true purpose and value of life on earth through meticulously planned works poured out with great versatility in a rich array of materials. The 'mystical circles', symbol of her Sufi thinking, are shown on canvas and other fabrics, paper, board, or often recycled objects reshaped, stitched, stuck or even knitted together to make collages, sculptures and spatial organisations of any scale she calls installations, as well as in mosaics, and ceramics.

In the process of her artistic and mystic thinking Gülsün Erbil has thus created "a visual element of movement to fulfill the need for a conceptual symbol in her abstract expressions and to achieve a new visual representation of the Tasawuf of Mevlana.

Critics like Prof Talat S. Halman mention that Gülsün Erbil's works also attempt to emphasize ecstasy of the secretive transformation experienced in terms of the vortices and spirals presented. He describes her as a seer who gives clues of spiritual freedom as well as clues of the visible world we live in and finds in her compositions calls to join a visual adventure to Sufi wisdom. In these works he finds the Artist to use exceptional imagination in trying to show what is there for everyone beyond the self, and beyond the visible', which is what the turning dervish wishes to catch an inner glimpse of. In these works the element of passion is balanced and calmed by artistic discipline and succeeds in inducing, as intended, a music or illumination in the mind.

The American author and artist Vita Giorgi touches the "sacred symbols, mysterious lines and inspirational colours" and comments that these colours are a reflection of her own mystic nature spiralling with mature lines to join the vortex of her feelings. According to Giorgi the Artist conveys her characteristic symbols to all her installations, especially, with great skill, to 'umbrellas' representing self protection against all threats to peace and security.

The American art critic Frederick Ted Castle has said that next to her works emphasizing unity and wholeness in varied disciplines, Gülsün Erbil is a master of another art without any 'physical' significance, one of a mystical Sufi application. To him, Gülsün Erbil's works are extremely

abstract, displaying a splendour, colour, and foresight; not alike, but in depth the same and constructed on a basis impossible to discuss like prayers or poems bearing a secret definition, attempting to represent everything in one symbol. Ted Castle said in 1995 to the Artist "Sol LeWitt is an American, you are Mediterranean. He also brought a concept to abstract art but he is a materialist, whereas you are a spiritualist", pointing to the place of Gülsün Erbil in world art.