

Selman Selmanagi? at the Crossroads of Different Cultures

Selman Selmanagi?'s childhood years in Bosnia, on the eve of the First World War, as well as his education in Sarajevo, Ljubljana and at Bauhaus Dessau between the two world wars, together with his work in Palestine and Berlin, shaped his worldview and experience with different cultures and traditions. Throughout his career, he perpetually strove to find contemporary answers for the challenges of the time he was living in.

Selman Selmanagi? was born in Srebrenica in 1905. This small mountain town in Eastern Bosnia, situated along important trade routes, was since Roman times well known for its silver mines (from which its ancient Latin name *Argentaria* originated). In the Austro-Hungarian years—during Selmanagi?'s early childhood and youth—thick forests and healing waters around the town attracted many visitors to Srebrenica. This magical scenery determined his permanent attachment to nature, also stimulated by seasonal work on his family's large estate.

Selmanagi?'s childhood was determined by the encounter of two cultural and civilizational milieus, namely the East and the West (i.e. the shift from the Ottoman rule to the era of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Bosnia and Herzegovina). The beginning of the twentieth century was marked by the process of significant reforms in the fields of administration, education, economics, finance, arts and culture. The West's influences were increasingly felt through the young intellectuals and artists who were sent to be educated in the capitals of Europe.

In the architecture of the time, the influence of the Vienna Secession was gradually emerging, replacing the earlier orientation towards neo-historical architectural styles. The leading names of architecture were the architects of the Land government, educated in Vienna, who established a direct and, by then, exceptionally strong and synchronous link to architectural trends in the larger cities of Central Europe, announcing the emergence of modern architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Selman Selmanagi? belonged to a traditional, devout, highly respected, wealthy, and well-educated family, open to the positive values of knowledge in general and new knowledge in particular. His father Alija (1878–1956), a Deputy in the Assembly of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1932–1936), completed his civil law studies in Istanbul in 1902. There he met his future wife Hayriye, who was of Turkish origin on her father's side. Selmanagi?'s grandfather, Omer Vehbi Pasha, was a high-ranking officer of the late Ottoman Empire, and maybe due to this fact and according to his wish, Hayriya's first

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son was born in Constantinople. Constantinople/Carigrad/Istanbul as Selmanagi?'s birthplace is mentioned in one of the early documents from his service in the State Railways of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, the Sarajevo Directorate of 1923.¹ From 1919 to 1923 he attended the State School of Crafts in Sarajevo, where he specialized in furniture making and carpentry, and in 1927 he acquired the title of a master of furniture making and carpentry at the Higher School of Crafts in Ljubljana.

After finishing his studies in Ljubljana, Selmanagi? returned to Srebrenica where he worked on his family's estate while simultaneously working as a carpenter for various local schools, repairing furniture. His decision to move to Germany was initially motivated by a desire to perfect his primary training as a carpenter, although at the time he knew no German and his family chose not to underwrite his adventure. While this decision in itself betrays Selmanagi?'s adventurous spirit, the story of how he arrived at the Bauhaus was even more spontaneous. While on a train journey in Germany he had a chance encounter with a fellow-traveller, an Austrian who told him about the school. He at once decided to enroll there and study at the very source of European modern architecture, visual arts, and design. He arrived at the Bauhaus in 1929, after the school had moved to in Dessau.



Selmanagi?'s ID card in Bauhaus Dessau (1929-32).
Photo: Privatarchiv Selman Selmanagi?.

Shortly before Selmanagi?'s arrival in Dessau, the Bauhaus had in 1927 opened a Department of Architecture headed by Hannes Meyer who, became the school's director in 1928. Meyer's two-year-term of office involved a radical revision of the school's programmatic and methodological concepts. Under Meyer, the new motto of the Bauhaus became "the needs of the people instead of the need for luxury." Selmanagi? began the Bauhaus Preliminary Course (Vorkurs) in October 1929, studying under Josef Albers, who focused on achieving the best possible product with the minimum expenditure in terms of material, energy and time. Selmanagi? often recalled a moment from Albers' Preliminary Course that illustrated his working method well. Selmanagi? kept a German dictionary on his desk, which he pressed with a plank so that it opened like a fan, making it quicker and easier to use. When Albers noticed this practical "invention," he praised it as a perfect example of studying the nature of material and the way it could be used. (It is worth noting that until his third year of study his family remained unaware of what he was doing and he was forced to manage his living and education expenses entirely on his own. Then in 1931, his father, who wanted to see concrete proof of his son's educational progress before deciding to lend support to his continued studies, asked him to redesign the family house in Zvornik, Bosnia. This project earned him the appellation "le Corbusier of the Balkans" from his architecture professor Ludwig Hilberseimer.)

The stratification evident in Selmanagi?'s cultural identity and professional career path was intrinsically formed in the encounter of different traditions, resulted in his eagerness to become acquainted with new and different cultures. His father was well-educated in Islamic philosophy and spoke Turkish, Farsi and French, which

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partially explains Selmanagi?'s interest in the humanities and social sciences while he attended the Bauhaus, where, during his years at the Bauhaus (1929–1932), he avidly attended lectures by Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, as well as the philosophers Rudolf Carnap and Otto Neurath, the psychologist Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, and art historian Karel Teige. Due to Selmanagi?'s broad range of interests, his functionalism eventually evolved into something more than a utilitarian program—one informed especially by Dürckheim's lectures on the psychology of form and his teaching on "perceived space"—becoming instead, a method based on the function of the synesthetic elements of experience, in both perception and design. His contact with the lectures of Paul Klee during his second semester—during which he was enrolled under strict conditions ("unter scharfer Probe")—was crucial for his formative years since Klee's work, with its rare and specific synthesis of Islamic tradition and analytical aspects of European modern painting, reflected Selmanagi?'s own worldview.

According to Selmanagi?'s own testimony, he was very impressed with Kandinsky's lecture, "Abstract Elements of Form and Analytical Drawing" as well as with Klee's course in Free Painting. Klee was concerned with the origins of form and made it clear that behind and above the rational factor on which he had to base his demonstrations there stood the element of intuition and that this element is both the primary and the final criterion in all creative activity.² According to Selmanagi?', Klee once pointed out that Bauhaus wanted to make the invisible—the study of life processes (Lebensvorgänge)—visible; a project that appeared to him as central to the Bauhaus pedagogy.³ On one occasion, Klee praised Selmanagi?'s way of visual thinking to his colleagues in the class.⁴ What surprised Selmanagi? was the fact that he was among the few students in the class who did not graduate from an Art Academy. A Non-figurative, analytical and conceptual mode of representation—characteristic of Islamic abstract painting and the arabesque—were both familiar to Selmanagi?'s sensibility and childhood environment, close to Klee's understanding that "art does not reflect what is seen, rather it makes the hidden visible." As he wrote in 1928 in the *Bauhaus* journal:

"One learns to look behind the façade, to grasp the roots of things. One learns to recognize the hidden currents, the prehistory of the visible. One learns to dig below the surface, to uncover, to find causes, to analyze ... One learns the special kind of progress that leads to a critical penetration into the past, in the direction of that which has existed before, on which future things will grow ... One learns about the things that form a connection along the way between the cause and reality."⁵

Two-years before Selmanagi?'s arrival in Dessau, Klee made a drawing of a small rug (kilim) from the Berber region of Tunisia he had visited during the now-famous trip he took to North Africa in 1914. It is well known that Oriental rugs played an important role for modern, abstract painting and their influence was especially notable during the Munich exhibition of Islamic arts in 1910. Artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and Henry Matisse became

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fascinated with the rugs hung as paintings on the walls. An interest in non-European, pre-Modern praxes and techniques was at the core of the Bauhaus program; a search for a primordial language of forms synthesized with industrial technology. Bauhaus masters' and students' interest in the pre-modern materials, praxis, and craft techniques from North Africa, as well as North and South Americas, offered a possibility for multifaceted, intercultural translations within the framework of Bauhaus modernity in tacit contestation of the Eurocentric notion of "primitivism" in art and culture.⁶

Even Selmanagi?'s first memories of the carpentry workshop in Dessau were strongly marked by this inherent duality between East and West. As an example, he mentions the exercise of designing a cabinet and the question that Professor Alfred Arndt asked them at a workshop during the second semester: "What is to be placed into this cabinet?" His subsequent explanation was that in each phase of the designing process one should start from the idea of the whole, the actual needs of the user, and the function of the object rather than the elements of design. Up until then, Selmanagi? believed that the beauty of a cabinet strongly relied on "Arabic ornaments and rosettes."⁷

Beside the increasing readiness to explore fresh principles of design, which focused on users' needs, Selmanagi?'s stay at Bauhaus also defined his worldview and his political orientation, presupposing a specific view on architecture as a phenomenon that must be understood, reflected upon, and conceptually defined "beyond the four walls." The spirit of anti-fascism was a determining feature of his position from 1929 onwards, when he joined the Communist Party, to his involvement in illegal Communist cells in Berlin during World War II, and continuing on to his significant role in building up the new East German state from 1949. His remarkable openness for dialogue with various cultures and traditions (especially manifest during a dynamic stay in the Middle East during the 1930s) reflected Selmanagi?'s spirit of internationalism and openness, an attitude that characterized the Bauhaus as a whole.

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Selman Selmanagi? in Dessau, 1930. Photo: Privataarchiv Selman Selmanagi?.

An exmatriculation list of Bauhaus students from the Dessau and Berlin period underscores how cosmopolitan and variegated the student body was. In its later years, names of Slavic and Jewish derivations become more frequent, but there were also students of Anglo-American, Scandinavian, Italian and Japanese origin.⁸ In his notes on the Bauhaus, Selmanagi? reported that upon initially enrolling in the Bauhaus Preliminary Course, his 55 fellow students were from all over the world.⁹

As passionately and impulsively as he had (almost accidentally) decided to enroll at Bauhaus, after graduating Selmanagi?, guided by the wish to get acquainted with different cultures, left for the Middle East, staying for several years. The decision was in full agreement with his curious and somewhat adventurous mindset, always longing for new insights and experiences. He first stayed briefly at the studio of a former student of Poelzig's, Seyfi (Nassih) Arkan in Istanbul (until March 1934). Although these were very dynamic years in the history of Atatürk's young republic, and a time of substantial reform in Turkey's social, political and cultural life—marked by a new openness to Western values—Selmanagi? did not consider his time there especially fruitful, so he decided to leave for Afghanistan. He could not find an equally courageous traveling companion, as he recalled in a letter to his good Bauhaus friend Hajo Rose in 1935. In the meantime, Selmanagi? had become fascinated with Palestine—the accelerated tempo of its development and its “different peoples, races, and religions.”¹⁰ He was especially fascinated by a strong contradiction between, on the one hand, the strong forces of modernity and progress and, on the other, the country's firm reliance on tradition and established forms of life, arts and crafts:

“es gibt hier, wie nirgends anders den gegensatz von modernstem und primitivstem leben wie vor 2000 jahren. (wohnen, handwerk,

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kunst) deshalb habe ich mich entschlossen hierher zurückzukommen, und eine zeitlang da zu bleiben.”

(there is here, like nowhere else, a contrast between the most modern and the most primitive life from 2000 years ago. (living, crafts, art) that's why i decided to come back here and stay for a while.)¹¹

While working at the studio of Richard Kauffmann, and later in his independent practice, Selmanagi? would witness how local architects opened up and created a specific synthesis of the local architectural tradition and the international style—which arrived with the immigration of a large number of Zionist modernist architects from the West (including a number of Bauhaus-trained architects: consequently, the echoes of the Bauhaus tradition could be felt outside Europe)—who incorporated a modernist design ethos with elements drawn from the local building tradition, defined, among other things, by the climate and the geographic position. From these experiences while a freelance architect in Palestine, Selmanagi? gathered much experience and knowledge, gaining the ability to adapt the positive experiences of modernist architecture to local geoclimatic specificities, as well as the cultural and traditional needs and customs of specific communities.



Selmanagi? on a construction site in Jerusalem (first on the left). Photo: Privataarchiv Selman Selmanagi?.

At the same time, mindful of his own experience of growing up between two different cultures (a la turca and a la franga), he internalized and developed the best of what he had inherited from the cosmopolitan and the internationalist spirit, which likewise belonged to the pedagogical legacy of Bauhaus. This experience of living among different cultures also helped him in various situations later in life and demonstrated his extraordinary ability to initiate and maintain social contacts and interactions. His stay in Palestine coincided with the British Mandate period (1917–1948). For a period while living and working in Palestine during this challenging period, Selmanagi? stayed at the Jerusalem studio of the prominent architect and urban planner Richard Kauffmann (from 12 August 1934 until 15 April 1935).¹² He then worked as a freelance architect,

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at the very end of his Palestine years working on several projects for the Islamic community in Jerusalem. Although Kauffmann praised Selmanagi?'s assistance in his atelier, stressing his "artistic gift in architecture" and "personal reliability,"¹³ the official immigration policy favored the employment of Jewish intellectuals.

In a letter to his Bauhaus friend Hajo Rose, Selmanagi? described in details and with his characteristic sense of humor, the circumstances of living and working in Palestine, saying that "he was already in all races and religions (from Moses to the Communist International/Comintern)":

"ich war schon in allen rassen und religionen. (von moses bis komintern) um bei juden arbeiten zu koennen hier muss man juedisch sein, bei arabern mohamedanisch [sic]. infolgedessen habe ich je nach der arbeitsstelle 'die farbe gewechselt', und man hat mir immer geglaubt. ich habe dabei gesehen dass es nur auf die aeussere form ankommt wenn ich ein rotes fez trage haelt man mich fuer einen mohamedaner [sic]. wenn ich es nicht trage, aber aus dem koran vorlese, glaubt mir niemand, sondern man sagt, das koenne ich ja auch gelernt haben. und wenn ich am sonnabend nicht arbeite glaubt man ich sei juedisch. die ganze sache ist verlogen. du kennst meine anschauung...."

("i've been in all races and religions. (from moses to comintern) in order to be able to work for Jews you have to be Jewish, for Arabs you have to be mohamedan (sic). as a result, depending on the job, i 'changed the color' and people always believed me. i saw that it only depends on the appearance when i wear a red fez, they think i'm a mohammedan (sic). if i don't wear it, but read from the koran, nobody believes me, but they say i could have learned that. and if i don't work on saturday, they think i'm jewish. the whole thing is lying. you know my opinion")¹⁴

As a man and architect, he always tried anew to meet the challenges of a dynamic historical epoch. More specifically, in his projects in Palestine he sought to make concrete his belief in modernity and the ideas of the Bauhaus. This flexibility in reacting to changing political conditions is further evidenced by his biography. At the beginning of 1939, Selmanagi? left Palestine and, after a brief stay in Yugoslavia at the request of his communist Bauhaus group (including Albert Buske and Luise Seitz), he returned to Germany to take part in the resistance against National Socialism.¹⁵ With private building activity having come to a standstill after the war's commencement, he worked in the building department and as a film architect at the UFA in Potsdam-Babelsberg until its conclusion. It was not until 1950 that he returned to his architectural career, augmented by his appointment as a professor at the Kunsthochschule in Berlin-Weißensee.



As a charismatic professor, Selmanagi? encouraged his Weißensee students to analyze and deal with architectural projects connected with their respective culture/country of origin and to consider what possibilities lay in a contemporary redefinition of regional

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Selmanagi? with
his students,
Kunsthochschule
Weißensee, Photo:
Privatarchiv
Selman Selmanagi?.

sensibilities. For instance, one of his fourth-year students from Peru proposed a project involving reconstructing the old Inca town of Machu Picchu in the framework of cultural historiography and monument protection, but also as a revenue source from economic and touristic activity.¹⁶

In every phase of his educational process, Selmanagi? kept alive the words and postulates of his professors. Explaining the methods and aims of the workshop training practiced in the Bauhaus preliminary course Josef Albers used to say: "the best education is one's own experience."¹⁷ Selmanagi? integrated his life experiences formed in his encounters with different cultures into the core of his educational program. Each experience could be very useful in this process. Albers once explained to his students:

"We know that this learning process through experimentation takes more time, entails detours and wrong directions. But at the beginning things do not always go right. Walking begins with crawling and speaking with baby talk. And mistakes that are recognized promote progress."¹⁸

Growing, learning and working among different cultures, together with the Bauhaus pedagogical model of experimenting and "playing (which) develops courage,"¹⁹ enabled Selmanagi? to eventually develop a strong personal character and a bold and brave attitude towards the world and challenges of the everyday life. As a designer and an exhibition architect, Selmanagi? participated in the promotion of the GDR through fair pavilions worldwide, from his first projects in Prague and Stockholm shortly after the war up to fairs in Cairo, Thessaloniki, Utrecht, Vienna, Peking and Shanghai during the 1950s. The fair architecture and interior decoration of pavilions had an extremely important propaganda role: fairs were a "showcase to the world," a picture of the "new society"²⁰ in which Selmanagi? manifested his talent in understanding differences in respective cultural and social contexts.

His childhood years in Bosnia, on the eve of the First World War, as well as his education in Sarajevo, Ljubljana and Dessau between the two world wars, together with his work in Palestine and Berlin, shaped Selman Selmanagi?'s worldview and experience with different cultures and traditions. As a Bosniak/Bosnian Muslim he was a citizen of Europe; he possessed Slavic and Turkish origins; he was enchanted with rich and inspiring traditions of the Middle East and North Africa, but at the same time was fascinated by the spirit of progress and modernity. Most of all, he perpetually strove to find contemporary answers for the challenges of the time he was living in.

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- 1 This document was issued on 8 January 1923. Source: Historijski arhiv Sarajevo/ Historical Archive Sarajevo, Ž-330; Box Nr. 469, Personal Dossier (Sel).
- 2 For more detailed instructions on Paul Klee's course, see: Hans M. Wingler: *The Bauhaus: Weimar-Dessau-Berlin-Chicago*, The MIT Press,

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- 3 Cambridge and London 1976, pp. 524-5.
 4 *Der Architekt Selman Selmanagic: Wie komme ich dazu, das Telefon festzuhalten...!*, Sonntag, kulturpolitische Wochenzeitung, 21 April 1985, p. 7.
 5 Heinz Hirdina: "Selman Selmanagi? über das Bauhaus, Erinnerungen von Bauhäuslern an das Bauhaus," Aufzeichnung eines Gesprächs, in: *Form und Zweck, Fachzeitschrift für industrielle Formgestaltung*, No. 3, DDR-Berlin 1979, p. 67.
 6 Paul Klee: "Exact Experiments in the Realm of Art," *bauhaus journal*, Vol. 2, No. 2/3, 1928. Quoted in: Wingler: *The Bauhaus*, p. 148.
 7 This will be, among other interesting issues, in the focus of the international exhibition project *Migrant Bauhaus: curatorial concept* by Marion von Osten and Grant Watson, *Vernacular Modernism*, February 2017, pp. 27-40.
 8 Sonja Wu?sten: "Selman Selmanagic?," *Festgabe zum 80. Geburtstag*, Kunsthochschule Berlin 1985, p. 8.
 9 Wingler, *The Bauhaus*, pp. 622-25.
 10 Hirdina: "Selman Selmanagi? über das Bauhaus," p. 67.
 11 Letter from Selman Selmanagi? to H. Rose (Jerusalem, 1 October 1935). Source: Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, Selman Selmanagi? - Mappe 2/Fotocopy. Original in: Katja Rose 11/83 Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin.
 12 Ibid.
 13 Source: Certificate issued to S. Selmanagi? by Richard Kauffmann (Jerusalem, 20 April 1935). Archive of the Selmanagi? family in Berlin (as well as Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, Mappe 1 - Persönliche Unterlagen, Zeugnisse).
 14 Ibid.
 15 Letter to H. Rose, 1 October 1935.
 16 See Sonja Wüsten and Simone Hain: Gegen die Diktatur des Auges. Selman Selmanagi? zum 100. Geburtstag, in: *Form und Zweck*, No. 21, 2005, p. 78-99.
 17 Wüsten: *Selman Selmanagic?*, p. 34.
 18 Josef Albers: "Practical Form Instruction," *bauhaus*, Vol. 2, No. 2/3, Dessau 1928. Quoted in Wingler: *The Bauhaus*, p. 142.
 19 Ibid. p.142.
 20 Ibid.
 21 Andreas Butter: *Neues Leben, Neues Bauen. Die Moderne in der Architektur der SBZ/DDR 1945 bis 1951*, Verlag Hans Schiller, Berlin 2006, pp. 366-67.

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