Erdogan’s war on culture hits home for Turkey’s artists

By THE ECONOMIST

Turkey’s President often complains that the one area of national life on which his conservative, Islamist-rooted government has not made a permanent mark is culture and the arts. Earlier this year, standing inside the Hagia Sophia — a Byzantine basilica converted into a mosque by the Ottomans and then into a museum by modern Turkey’s secular founders — Recep Tayyip Erdogan made his case for an art that evoked his country’s religious and imperial lineage as well as its modern ambitions.

For many years, the President said, the arts in Turkey had been hostage “to a mentality that was more Western than the West, at odds with the nation’s values and unaware of the rich heritage left behind by our ancestors”. The secular establishment, which Erdogan has helped to depose during the past decade, would no longer monopolise Turkish culture, he promised, or look down on artists who supported his government. The sentiment fitted the occasion — the launch of a festival in Istanbul dedicated to Ottoman and Islamic arts and crafts.

The work on display ranged from calligraphy to ceramics and miniature painting, some of it inventive and some dreadfully kitsch, and practically all of it stripped of political content. The show’s motto, seemingly aimed at the government’s religious and nationalist constituency, was: “You too have your art.”

A few years can feel like a lifetime in Istanbul. Only a decade ago, the city was fast becoming the hip new darling of the art world. Sales were booming, galleries mushrooming and foreign collectors and artists pouring in. Several private contemporary-art museums opened.

Erdogan’s administration, having won over many Turkish liberals by promising democratic reforms and opening accession talks with the EU, seemed pleased. Artists began to confront social and historical taboos, including the plight of the country’s religious and ethnic minorities, with renewed confidence.
The first Istanbul art biennale, in 1987, had reputedly attracted 10,000 visitors. By 2013 attendance reached more than 330,000. The gradual erosion of democracy in the early years of Erdogan's rule, including the arrests of hundreds of army officers and other secularists on bogus charges, did not dampen the mood. Gallery owners such as Haldun Dostoglu, a veteran of the local scene, could hardly believe their eyes. “Tate Modern was knocking on my door. Istanbul was becoming a magnet for Europe.”

Things began to unravel in the summer of 2013. Demonstrations against breakneck urban development, which snowballed into mass anti-government protests, were met with force; Erdogan accused foreign powers of plotting his overthrow. More chaos ensued, including a corruption scandal and a string of terror attacks. A coup attempt in 2016 resulted in more than 250 deaths and was followed by tens of thousands of arrests, mass purges and a surge in nationalist rhetoric. Istanbul's image was badly tarnished. The number of foreign visitors to the biennale plummeted, says Dostoglu.

Money began to dry up. According to one study, about 12,000 millionaires, including several big collectors, have recently left Turkey. A currency crisis in which the Turkish lira lost about 40 per cent of its value against the dollar since the start of this year is bound to force others to tighten their belts. Sales have dropped and some of the biggest galleries have closed.

Promising artists have decamped, too. Many no longer see a future for themselves in Turkey; scores have moved abroad, especially to Berlin, now home to a thriving Turkish art scene. And, like other public figures and intellectuals, those who have stayed must contend with the caprices and risks of authoritarianism.

Critical artists, especially those who took part in the protests of 2013, have come under increasing fire from the President and his ministers. Ali Kazma, a video artist interested in the relationship between labour, culture and the human body, represented Turkey at the Venice Biennale in 2013. “In the eyes of the state,” he says, “Western-oriented, progressive and freethinking people have all become suspect.”

Some have been imprisoned. Zehra Dogan, a Kurdish painter, was sentenced to nearly three years last year for her depiction of a town destroyed in clashes between Turkish troops and Kurdish insurgents. The painting, in which Dogan reimagined army vehicles as scorpions, was judged to be terrorist propaganda.

Osman Kavala, a popular entrepreneur and arts patron arrested after a smear campaign in the pro-government media, has spent 10 months behind bars.

https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/erdogans-war-on-culture-hits-home-for-turkeys-artists/news-story/0a604aeecfca0c7a4635e083939da4cdb
Artefacts also have been impounded. An Istanbul municipality removed a statue of the word “Kostantiniyye”, a reference to the city’s former name, after protests by a handful of Islamists.

The arrests, plus a state of emergency declared after the attempted coup and lifted only mid-year, have had a chilling effect. Artists have become more cautious, as have galleries and collectors. As a result, much of the work emerging from Turkey today is decorative rather than provocative.

“You go to the big shows,” says Sena, an independent feminist artist, “and it’s as if there’s nothing happening in this country.” A gallery owner says he is anxious about displaying a piece featuring a nude woman at a coming fair. “Five years ago, I would never get nervous about criticising Erdogan, the army or the police,” says Hasan Ozgur Top, a young artist. “Now I have to think twice, or three times, about the price I might have to pay.”

Yet there are still reasons for optimism. Artists who made a name for themselves during the boom of the early 2000s, such as Kazma, Taner Ceylan and Banu Cennetoglu, have shone on the international stage. Some of the wealthiest Istanbul families continue to make it their mission to support Turkish art. The number of younger collectors is growing, and domestic attendance at festivals remains high. And the waves of censorship and nationalist propaganda have had a less devastating impact on contemporary art than on Turkish journalism and popular culture. Some subversive, politically charged work is still being created.

“The art world is a much freer space compared to other areas of expression,” reckons Beral Madra, a well-known critic and curator. One reason is that the visual arts in Turkey have always depended less on state support than on the private sector. Another is that, being more diffuse and lower profile, they are intrinsically harder to police than newspapers, television and cinema. Taming the art scene will be tougher than Erdogan thinks.