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Selman Selmanagić at the Crossroads of Different Cultures: from Childhood Years in Bosnia to Bauhaus Education and Travels

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



Fig.1. Srebrenica at the beginning of the 20th century, Photo: Collection of old postcards, Bosniak Institute, Sarajevo

Selmanagić's childhood was determined by the encounter of two cultural and civilizational circles, 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 20th century was marked by the process of significant reforms in the fields of administration, education, economics, finance, arts and culture. The influences from the West were increasingly felt through young intellectuals and artists who were educated in the European capitals.



Слика у Сарајеву. Слика Ј. Куба.

Fig.2. L.Kuba, Foreign Painters in Sarajevo, „Nada“ journal, Sarajevo, 15.8.1897, p.304. Photo: Mediacentar, Sarajevo

In the architecture of the time, the influence of the Vienna Secession was emerging gradually, 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, an exceptionally strong and synchronous link to architectural trends in the larger Central European cities, announcing the emergence of modern architecture in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Selman Selmanagić belonged to a traditional, devout, highly respected, wealthy, and well-educated family, open to the positive values of knowledge and the acquisition of new knowledge. His father Alija (1878-1956), a Deputy in the Assembly of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1932-1936), completed civil law studies in Istanbul in 1902 where he met his future wife and Selman's mother, Hayriye, who was of Turkish origin on her father's side. Selman'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 son Selman was born in Constantinople. Constantinople/Carigrad/Istanbul as his birthplace is mentioned in one of Selmanagić's early documents from his service in the State Railways of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, the Sarajevo Directorate of 1923¹, where he worked before departing for Bauhaus. He mastered carpentry in Sarajevo and Ljubljana before enrolling at Bauhaus. From 1919 to 1923, Selmanagić attended the State School of Crafts in Sarajevo, where he specialized in furniture making and carpentry. In 1927, he acquired the title of a master of furniture making and carpentry at the Higher School of Crafts in Ljubljana.

Датум издавања: краљевине Срба, Хрвата и Словенаца, Дирекција Сарајево.

Билежбе о личним приликама службеника.
Билежбе о личним подацима службеника.

Име и презиме: *Selmanagić Selman*

У месту: <i>Carigrad</i>	Ожењен/издажен/не? <i>не</i>	Дете/у	
Рођен: <i>Carigrad</i>	Дат. Причала	Дат. рођења	Дат. смрти
Земља: <i>1904</i>	Име и презиме	Име-пштења	рођеног узрока
Дат:	Ж и в е		
Место: <i>Srebrenica</i>			дан
Припадник: <i>Carigrad</i>			
Земља: <i>Srbija</i>			
Потпу: <i>Selman</i>			

Школско образовање Навести тачно школско разред, врсту образовања у школи, давао особито знање и вештину, научне савете	Познатије језика			
	У говору и писму		у тобору	
<i>28. VI 1922. osovodan za stolarskiy poslovanika</i>	словенск. језик	језик	словенск. језик	језик

Fig.3. Notes on employee's personal information: Selman Selmanagić, State Railways of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, 1932. Photo: Historical Archive, Sarajevo.

¹ This document was issued on January 8, 1923. Source: Historijski arhiv Sarajevo/ Historical Archive Sarajevo, Ž-330; Box Nr. 469, Personal Dossier (Sel).

This stratification of Selman's cultural identity, formed in the encounter of different traditions, resulted in his eagerness to get acquainted with new and different cultures. His father spoke Turkish, Farsi and French languages and was well-educated in Islamic philosophy, which could partly explain Selman's interest in the humanistic and social sciences in Bauhaus, which was reflected in his interest in the lectures held by Klee and Kandinsky, as well as in the lectures held by the philosophers Rudolf Carnap and Otto Neurath, the psychologist Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, and the art historian Karel Teige during his Bauhaus years in Dessau (1929-1932). Owing to Selmanagić's broad range of interests, especially in Dürckheim's lectures on the psychology of form and his teaching on 'perceived space', Selmanagić's functionalism eventually evolved into something more than a mere, one-sided, utilitarian programme: instead, it became a method that indicated the key function of the synesthetic elements of experience in both perception and design. His contact with Paul Klee's lectures, during the second semester in which he was enrolled under strict conditions ("unter scharfer Probe"), seems rather interesting for his formative years at Bauhaus since it reflects a rare and specific synthesis of his worldview, formed in Islamic tradition, with analytical aspects of European modern painting.

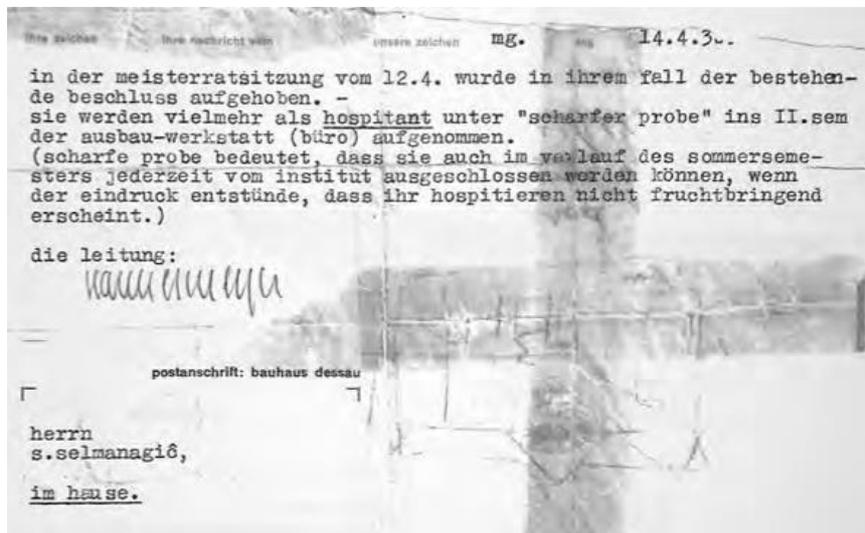


Fig.4. Confirmation of conditional enrolment in the 2nd semester, Photo: Selmanagić Archive, Berlin

According to Selmanagić's testimonies, he was very impressed with Kandinsky's lectures on 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 Selmanagić, Paul Klee once pointed out that Bauhaus wanted to make the invisible – the study of life processes (Lebensvorgänge) – visible and it seemed central to Bauhaus's pedagogy.³ On one occasion, Klee praised Selmanagić's way of visual thinking to his colleagues in the class.⁴ What surprised Selmanagić was the fact that he was

² For more detailed instructions on Paul Klee's Course see: Hans M. Wingler, *The Bauhaus: Weimar-Dessau-Berlin-Chicago*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. and London, England, 1976, pp. 524-5.

³ *Der Architekt Selman Selmanagić: Wie komme ich dazu, das Telefon festzuhalten...!*, "16 Sonntag", kulturpolitische Wochenzeitung, 21. 4. 1985, p. 7.

⁴ Hirdina, Heinz, "Selman Selmanagić über das Bauhaus, Erinnerungen von Bauhäuslern an das Bauhaus", Aufzeichnung eines Gesprächs, 1979, In: *Form und Zweck*, Fachzeitschrift für industrielle Formgestaltung 3/79, DDR-Berlin, p. 67. 

among the few students in the class who did not graduate from an Art Academy. Non-figurative, analytical and conceptual way of representation, characteristic of Islamic abstract painting and arabesque, familiar to Selmanagić's sensibility and childhood environment, was close to the understanding of Paul Klee that "art does not reflect what is seen, rather it makes the hidden visible." As Klee wrote in 1928 in "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 analyse (...) 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 Selmanagić's arrival to Dessau, in 1927, Klee made a drawing of a small rug (kilim) from the Beber region he visited during his former, famous trip to Tunisia. It is well known that Oriental rugs played an important role for modern, abstract painting and their influence was especially remarkable during the Munich exhibition of Islamic arts in 1910 when artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Franz Marc, and Henry Matisse were fascinated with rugs hung as paintings on the walls. An interest in non-European, pre-Modern praxis and techniques was in the core of the Bauhaus program that was searching for a synthesis of primordial language of forms with new and challenging technological opportunities. 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, re-opening the question of the European-centred notion and perception of "primitivism" in art and culture.⁶

Even the first memories from the Carpentry Workshop in Dessau, at the beginning of 1929, were strongly marked by this inherent duality between East and West. As an example, Selmanagić mentions the exercise of designing a cabinet and the question that Professor Arndt asked them at a workshop during the second semester: "What is to be placed into this cabinet?". The explanation ensued 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, Selmanagić 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, Selmanagić's stay at Bauhaus also defined his worldview and his political orientation, which implied 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 as early as 1929 when he joined the Communist Party during his early student years, and up to his involvement in illegal Communist cells in Berlin during World War II and building up the new state of GDR (from 1949) in which he played an important role. His remarkable openness for dialogue with various cultures and traditions (especially manifest during his dynamic stay in the Middle

⁵ Paul Klee, «Exact Experiments in the Realm of Art», *bauhaus journal* Vol.2., No.2/3, 1928. Quoted in: Hans M.Wingler, p. 148.

⁶ This will be, among other interesting issues, in the focus of the forthcoming, international exhibition project *Migrant Bauhaus*, Kuratorisches Konzept, Marion von Osten, Berlin / Grant Watson, London, Febr. 2017, pp. 27-40 (*Vernacular Modernism*).

⁷ Sonja Wüsten, *Selman Selmanagić*, Festgabe zum 80. Geburtstag, Kunsthochschule Berlin, 1985, p. 8.

East during the 1930s) reflected the spirit of internationalism and openness that characterized Bauhaus as a whole.

An immatriculation list of Bauhaus students of the Dessau and Berlin period shows how cosmopolitan and variegated the composition of the student body was. In the later years, names of Slavic and Jewish derivations became more frequent, but there were also some of Anglo-American, Scandinavian, Italian and even Japanese origins.⁸ In his records on Bauhaus, Selmanagić explained that he had been enrolled in a Preliminary Course (Vorkurs) on October 29, 1929 with 55 students from all over the world.⁹



Fig.5. Selmanagic in Dessau, 1930. Photo: Selmanagić Archive, Berlin.



Fig.6. Selmanagić's ID card in Bauhaus Dessau (1929-32). Foto: Selmanagić Archive, Berlin

As passionately and impulsively as he had (almost accidentally) decided to enrol at Bauhaus, Selmanagić left for the Middle East after his graduation and stayed there for several years, guided by the wish to get acquainted with different cultures. It was in full agreement with his curious and somewhat adventurous mindset, always longing for new insights and experiences. He briefly stayed at the studio of a former student of Poelzig's, Seyfi (Nassih) Arkan in Istanbul (until March 1934). Even though these were the very dynamic years of Atatürk's young republic and the time of reforms in Turkey's social, political, and cultural life, marked by a new openness for Western values, Selmanagić did not consider his time there especially fruitful, so he decided to leave for Afghanistan. As he could not find an equally courageous co-traveller, as he wrote in a letter to his good friend

⁸ Hans M.Wingler, pp. 622-625.

⁹ Hirdina, Heinz, p.67.

Hajo Rose in 1935, Selmanagić became fascinated by Palestine: the accelerated tempo of its development, as well as its “different peoples, races, and religions.”¹⁰ He was especially fascinated by a strong contradiction between, on one side, strong forces of modernity and progress, and, on the other, a 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, kunst) deshalb habe ich mich entschlossen hierher zurückzukommen, und eine zeitlang da zu bleiben.”¹¹

While working at the studio of Richard Kauffmann, and later in his independent practice, Selmanagić could witness a very interesting process of opening up and creating a specific synthesis of the local architectural tradition and the international style, which arrived with the immigration of a large number of modernist architects from the West. 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.

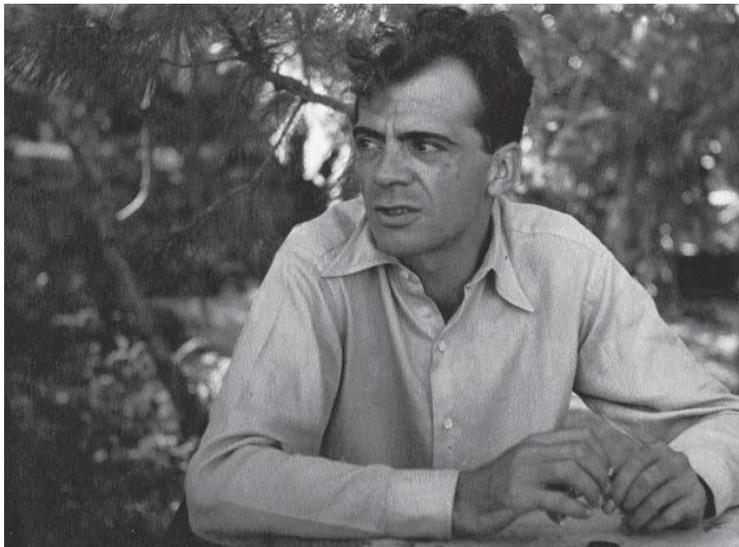


Fig.7. Selmanagić in Tel Aviv, 1935. Photo: Selmanagić Archive, Berlin

Selmanagić’s experience of living among different cultures helped him in various situations later in life and demonstrated his extraordinary abilities to establish social contacts and interactions. Selmanagić’s stay in Palestine following his graduation from Bauhaus coincided with the British protectorate over the country, which started in 1917 and lasted until 1948. While living and working in Palestine during this challenging period, Selmanagić stayed at the Jerusalem studio of the prominent architect and urban planner Richard Kauffmann (from August 12, 1934 until April 15, 1935)¹². He then worked as a freelance architect and at the

¹⁰ Quoted from the letter of Selman Selmanagić addressed to H. Rose (Jerusalem, October 1, 1935). Source: Bauhaus Archiv, Berlin, Selman Selmanagić – Mapped 2/Fotocopy. Original in: Katja Rose 11/83 Bauhaus Archiv, Berlin.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Source: Certificate issued to S. Selmanagić by Richard Kauffmann (Jerusalem, April 20, 1935). Archive of the Selmanagić family in Berlin (as well as Bauhaus Archiv Berlin, Mapped 1 – Persönliche Unterlagen, Zeugnis).

very end of his Palestine years he worked on several projects for the Islamic community in Jerusalem. Although Kauffmann praised Selmanagić's assistance in his atelier and stressed his "artistic gift in architecture" and "personal reliability"¹³, the official immigration policy favoured the employment of Jewish intellectuals.



Fig. 8. Certificate issued by R.Kauffmann, 20.4.1935, Foto: Selmanagić Archive, Berlin

In a letter to his Bauhaus friend Hajo Rose, Selmanagić described in details and with his characteristic sense of humour, 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 ^[sic] 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. (...)"¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Letter to H.Rose, 1.10.1935



Fig.9. Selmanagić on a construction site in Jerusalem (first on the left). Photo: Selmanagić Archive, Berlin

A number of German architects of Jewish origin, which had been trained at Bauhaus, arrived to Palestine in those years. Consequently, the echoes of Bauhaus' tradition could be felt outside Europe, in this distant part of the world. This resulted in an interesting synthesis of Bauhaus, the architecture of an international style, and elements from the local building tradition, defined, among other things, by the climate and the geographic position. It is from these experiences that Selmanagić, while a freelance architect in Palestine, gathered his experience and knowledge and gained the abilities of adapting the positive experiences of modernist architecture to the local geo-climatic specificities, as well as the cultural and traditional needs and customs of specific communities.

As a charismatic professor at Kunsthochschule Weißensee, Selmanagić encouraged his students to analyse and to deal with architectural projects connected with the respective cultures of their native countries and consider possibilities of their contemporary redefining. For instance, one of his fourth-year students from Peru proposed a project for the reconstruction of the old Inca town of Machu Picchu in the framework of the cultural historiography and monument protection but also as a source of economic and touristic development.¹⁵

¹⁵ Sonja Wüsten, p. 34.



Fig. 10. Selmanagić with his students, Kunsthochschule Weißensee, Photo: Selmanagić Archive, Berlin

In every phase of his educational process, Selmanagić kept alive the words and postulates of his professors. As Josef Albers used to say, explaining the methods and aims of the workshop training as practiced in the Bauhaus preliminary course: “the best education is one’s own experience”.¹⁶ Selmanagić integrated his life experiences formed in the encounter of different cultures into the core of his programme. 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.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Josef Albers, «Practical Form Instruction», *bauhaus* vol.2. No.2/3, Dessau, 1928. Quoted from: Hans M.Wingler, p. 142.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.142.



Fig.11. Selmanagić at his home, Berlin 1986. Photo: Selmanagić Archive, Berlin

Growing, learning and working among different cultures, together with the Bauhaus pedagogical model of experimenting and «playing (which) develops courage»¹⁸, enabled Selmanagić 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, Selmanagić participated in the promotion of GDR fair pavilions worldwide, from the first project in 1948 in Prague and Stockholm up to the 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"¹⁹ in which Selmanagić manifested his talent in understanding differences in respective cultural and social contexts.



Fig. 12. Selmanagić with Chinese delegation, Leipzig Fair, 1952. Photo: Selmanagić Archive, Berlin

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

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Andreas Butter, *Neues Leben, Neues Bauen. Die Moderne in der Architektur der SBZ/DDR 1945 bis 1951*, Verlag Hans Schiller, Berlin, 2006, pp. 366-367.

Palestine and Berlin, shaped Selman Selmanagić's worldview and experience with different cultures and traditions. As a Bosniak/Bosnian Muslim he was the citizen of Europe, he had Slavic and Turkish origins, he was enchanted with rich and inspiring traditions of the Middle East and North Africa, but at the same time he was fascinated by the spirit of progress and modernity, striving to find contemporary answers for the challenges of the time he was living in.