

Reconstruction of Vallaurý's Staircase at the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi: A Preservation Approach and the Recovery of Memory

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Fig. 1

Original view of the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi (today the Museum of the Ancient Orient) with its main entrance staircase designed by Alexandre Vallaurý (Source: Istanbul Archaeological Museums Archive).

Abstract

This article examines the removal of the original staircase of the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi – the first fine arts school in Türkiye and the inaugural building of today's Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University – located in the historic peninsula of Istanbul within the First Courtyard of Topkapı Palace – during its reorganisation as the Museum of the Ancient Orient (1963-1974) under a contemporary museology approach. It also discusses the reconstruction of this staircase in 1999-2000, a process strictly guided by archival documents and historical photographs. Through restitution and restoration, the building regained its original entrance façade and silhouette. The intervention is evaluated against international preservation charters (Venice, Burra, Nara, Riga) and the concept of lieu de mémoire. The study demonstrates that reconstruction, when supported by systematic documentary evidence, can serve as a legitimate means of recovering cultural memory without erasing the building's layered history. The reconstructed staircase now functions as a powerful symbol of lost heritage reclaimed, transmitting Vallaurý's architectural vision to future generations.

Keywords

Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi; Osman Hamdi Bey; Alexandre Vallaurý; Restoration; Cultural memory.

Introduction¹

The Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi, Türkiye's first school of fine arts, was officially established on 1 January 1882 following the appointment of Osman Hamdi Bey – Director of the Imperial Museum (Müze-i Hümayun) – by Sultan Abdülhamid II. Its official name at foundation was Mekteb-i Sanayi-i Nefise-i Şahane (fig. 1). After the Republic, it was renamed the Academy of Fine Arts (1928) and today continues as Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University (Cezar, 1971).

The school building is situated in the Eminönü district of Istanbul's historic peninsula, within the First Courtyard of Topkapı Palace, on Osman Hamdi Bey Slope. It stands directly opposite the main building of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums and adjacent to the Tiled Pavilion (Çinili Köşk), forming part of a larger cultural

¹ We extend our gratitude to Deryanaz Billur for her critical contributions and support. This article is dedicated to all those who dedicate their lives to the preservation of cultural heritage and its passage to future generations.



and museological complex of outstanding archaeological and architectural significance (fig. 2). This spatial context is essential to understanding the building's original dialogue with its monumental neighbours and the significance of its subsequent transformation.

The foundation of this institution represented a turning point in Ottoman cultural history. The school departed from traditional guild-based training models to educate architects, painters, and sculptors within an academic framework modelled on the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. The significance of this institution can be summarised in five key dimensions: it symbolised the Ottoman Empire's official embrace of Western artistic education; it achieved the objective of training indigenous artists and architects, reducing dependence on foreign practitioners; the building itself, designed by Alexandre Vallaury, embodied an eclectic synthesis of Western and Ottoman architectural traditions; through its annual exhibitions, the school contributed to the transformation of social attitudes towards the visual arts within Ottoman society; and it served as a foundational institution for the Republic's cultural reforms, including the establishment of the *İnas Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi* (School of Fine Arts for Girls) in 1914, thereby contributing to the advancement of women's education (Cezar, 1971; Eriş Kızgın, 2022). The school relocated several times after vacating the Vallaury building. In 1914, the *İnas* (Girls') *Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi* was established. In 1916, the school moved to the *Lisan Mektebi* building in *Cağaloğlu*. In 1917, the directorship of the Archaeological Museums was formally separated from that of the *Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi*. The school subsequently moved to *Şehzadebaşı* (1919), to the *Gedikler Kahyası Salih Efendi Mansion* on *Divanyolu* (1920, now the Health Museum), and once again to the *Lisan Mektebi* building (1921). In the Republican period, it was renamed the Academy of Fine Arts in 1928. Designed by the Levantine architect Alexandre Vallaury, the building's main entrance staircase – a defining feature that conferred vertical emphasis and monumental presence upon the structure – was removed in the 1960s. It is significant that the museum function, which the building had served since 1917, could have been accommodated while preserving the staircase; its demolition was not a functional necessity but a design choice reflecting the architectural preferences of the period. In 1999-2000, through the collaborative efforts of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Türkiye, the General Directorate of Monuments and Museums, the Istanbul Archaeological Museums, the Istanbul Directorate of Surveying and Monuments, and the contractor, the original marble staircase and entrance door were restituted and reconstructed based on extensive archival evidence. This process was strictly based on archival evidence to ensure the restoration of the building's historical silhouette and its original relationship with the site. Today the building serves as the Museum of the Ancient Orient, part of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums. This article analyses the transformation of the building, the motivations behind the 1963-1974 interventions, the decision to reconstruct the staircase, and the significance of this reconstruction for architectural preservation and cultural memory.

Methodology

This study is based on archival research, analysis of historical documents and photographs, and a critical review of preservation decisions. Primary sources include: the archives of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums²; the archives of the Istanbul Directorate of Surveying and Monuments³; the archives of the Istanbul No. 1 Regional Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property⁴; decisions of the Istanbul No. 1 Regional Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property (1999); and published memoirs by the authors, who were

² ISTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUMS ARCHIVE, THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE OF REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE, *Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi* Collection, photographic archive, various documents and project records (1998-2000), «Restitution and restoration projects for the entrance façade and staircase».

³ ISTANBUL DIRECTORATE OF SURVEYING AND MONUMENTS ARCHIVE, THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE OF REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE, *Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi* Restitution Projects, surveys, restitution and restoration projects, photographic documentation (1998-2000), «Entrance façade survey and restitution drawings».

⁴ COUNCIL FOR THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL AND NATURAL PROPERTY ARCHIVE, Istanbul No. 1 Regional Council Decisions, 1999-2000, Decision Nos. 10803 and 11025, «Approval of the restitution and restoration project for the entrance staircase».



directly involved in the 1999-2000 restoration project (Pasinli as Director of the Istanbul Archaeological Museums (Pasinli, 2017), Billur as conservation architect (Billur 2020). The methodological approach involves a chronological reconstruction of interventions, cross-referencing of documentary evidence, and evaluation against international preservation charters and the Turkish legislative framework (Republic of Türkiye, Superior Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property, 1999). The authors' direct involvement in the 1999-2000 restoration project informs the analysis but does not bias the factual reporting of events, which is based on verifiable archival documents and official decisions.

Fig. 2
Site plan of the historic peninsula of Istanbul showing the location of the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi (today the Museum of the Ancient Orient) within the First Courtyard of Topkapı Palace (indicated by the red circle). (Source: Müller-Wiener 1977, SALT Research).

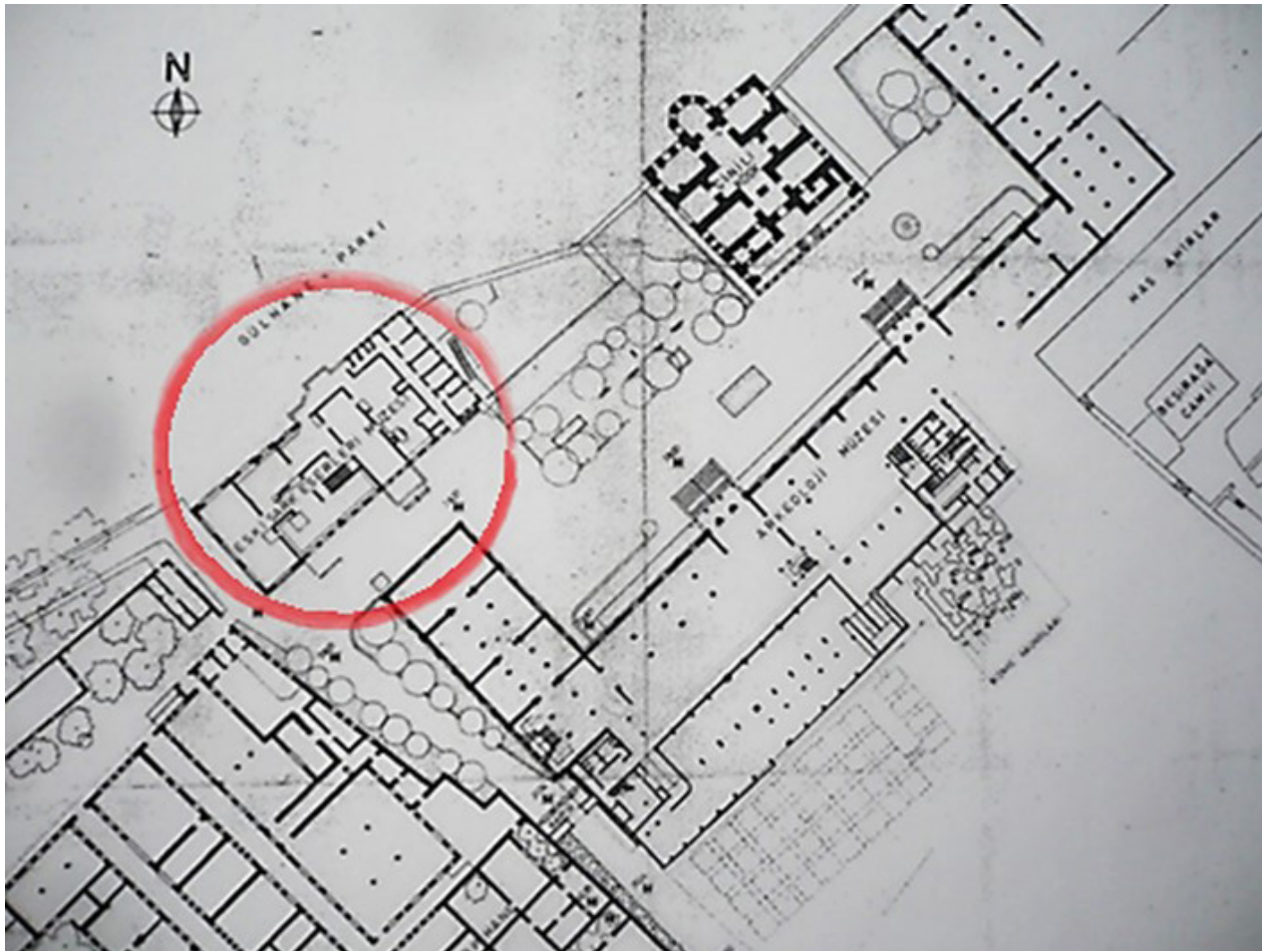


Fig. 3
Site plan showing the location
of the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi /
Museum of the Ancient Orient
within the First Courtyard of
Topkapı Palace (Source: Istanbul
Directorate of Surveying and
Monuments Archive, 1998).

Historical Background: Osman Hamdi Bey and Alexandre Vallaury

In 1882, Osman Hamdi Bey entrusted the construction of a new museum building to Alexandre Vallaury, who was already the architect of the Archaeological Museum. Vallaury was a significant figure in late Ottoman architecture; he was among the few architects worldwide in the late 19th century to design a purpose-built museum building, placing him within a select international group of museum architects of the era (Cezar, 1971). Vallaury was asked to build the school opposite the museum's main entrance gate, next to the Tiled Pavilion (Çinili Köşk). Modelled on the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Vallaury designed a small school comprising five classrooms and one studio. After completion, the school officially began instruction on 2 March 1883. According to the 1882 regulation, the curriculum was to include painting, sculpture, architecture, engraving, and related artistic disciplines. Vallaury also served as the first instructor of architecture until 10 August 1908. The building was expanded in 1892 and 1911 and remained in use until 1916 (Cezar, 1971). A document preserved in the Ottoman Ministry of Education (Maarif Nezareti) Archive confirms that the first Academy building was constructed by Vallaury (Cezar, 1971). Osman Hamdi Bey served as director of the school until his death in 1910. The architectural significance of this building and institution emerges through several key dimensions. The school represented the institutionalisation of West-



ernisation within the Ottoman context: founded by Osman Hamdi Bey, it embodied the conviction among Ottoman intellectuals that art and architecture could serve as instruments of state modernisation, marking a definitive departure from traditional guild-based training systems. The international academic staff – including Levantine and European architects such as Alexandre Vallaury among the first instructors – brought European educational models directly to Istanbul, establishing a pedagogical continuity with the École des Beaux-Arts. The building's eclectic and Neoclassical design positioned the structure as a centre that determined the architectural language of the Empire's new institutions. The indigenous architects who graduated from the school would go on to produce works in the late Ottoman period and subsequently lay the foundations for the modern public buildings of the early Republican era.

Architectural Features of the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi

The original building sits opposite the Archaeological Museums, between Osman Hamdi Bey Slope and the Tiled Pavilion, on Byzantine foundations. It is one of the most elegant Neo-Classical structures of its period (Pasinli, 2017). The rear façade overlooks Gülhane Park. The building is a single-storey masonry structure. Access to the entrance is provided by a high staircase. The staircase was an integral com-

Fig. 4
Original building of the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi (today the Museum of the Ancient Orient). View from Osman Hamdi Slope, Eminönü, Gülhane, Istanbul (Source: Istanbul Archaeological Museums Archive).



Fig. 5
The Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi
building with the extensions
added in 1892 and 1911 (Source:
Istanbul Archaeological
Museums Archive).

ponent of the architectural composition, conferring vertical emphasis and establishing a ceremonial approach to the building. As the defining element of the main façade, it was essential to the building's monumental presence and its dialogue with the surrounding archaeological context. The façade features tall pilasters with composite capitals connected by a broad entablature. Flat-arched windows divide the façade into equal units. Above the windows, lintels resting on small consoles are surmounted by high-relief human head medallions within rectangular frames. At the cornice level, a saw-tooth moulding and a series of cartouches arranged along the parapet complete the architectural articulation (Batur, 1994). In Ottoman architecture, the Neo-Classical style aimed for sober monumentality as a reaction to the excessive ornamentation of Baroque and Rococo (Ödekan, 1994).

Changes to the Building: The Lost Staircase (1963-1974)

The building was converted into the Museum of the Ancient Orient in 1917, housing a unique and rich collection of artifacts from Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and pre-Islamic Arabia. These objects, brought to the capital Istanbul from excavations conducted within the territories of the Ottoman Empire between the late 19th century and the First World War, were preserved in this museum (Pasinli, 2017). Between 1963 and 1974, the building was reorganised for contemporary museology. It should be noted that these interventions reflected the dominant muse-



Fig. 6
Demolition of the original staircase and entrance during the 1963-1974 conversion of the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi into the Museum of the Ancient Orient (Source: Istanbul Archaeological Museums Archive, Istanbul Directorate of Surveying and Monuments Archive, Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property Archive, 1998).

um design philosophy of the period, which prioritised flexible exhibition spaces and unobstructed visitor circulation over the preservation of original architectural features. In this context, the high entrance staircase was removed, access was provided at ground level, and a wide reinforced concrete canopy was built above the entrance. Masonry walls were thinned, and niches were created for display cases (Pasinli, 2017). The project architect for this phase was N. Eldem. The demolition process is documented in figure 6.

As Pasinli notes:

During the work at the Ancient Orient Museum, the original marble staircase of the building, a first-degree protected historic monument from 1883, was completely demolished. In its place, a concrete canopy with a lead covering – considered by later critics to be incongruous with the original design – was built, the façade was altered, and modern windows were inserted. Inside, walls were removed, new windows and roof light wells were opened, and the plan layout was disrupted, transforming the building into a modern space with no connection to its original state (Pasinli, 2017, p. 361).

Pasinli further questions how the museum director and archaeologist of the time could have approved or accepted such damage, expressing surprise that no one at the time showed sensitivity toward this destruction, and that the architect in charge was able to freely implement his own design preferences (Pasinli, 2017).

Fig. 7

Reinforced concrete canopy built in place of the original staircase (current page); entrance façade of the Museum of the Ancient Orient during the 1963-1974 period (opposite page) (Source: Istanbul Directorate of Surveying and Monuments Archive; Billur, 2020; SALT Research, Gülhane Collection).



The demolition of the staircase, viewed retrospectively, raises a fundamental question: why was such a significant architectural element removed without documented justification?

The answer lies not in functional necessity – the building had operated as a museum since 1917 with the staircase intact – but in the prevailing architectural culture of the period. The 1960s intervention reflected a modernist museology that prioritised unobstructed visitor circulation and flexible exhibition spaces over the preservation of historical fabric. Modern museum architecture of the period was shaped not only by institutional requirements but also by the architect's individual design preferences.

The demolition was, in essence, an act of its time – a period when international conservation doctrine had not yet matured. The subsequent reconstruction, by contrast, was an act of a different time – a period when archival rigour, documentary evidence, and the recovery of cultural memory had become central to conservation practice. This fundamental asymmetry – demolition without justification versus reconstruction with documentary rigour – lies at the heart of the case. Crucially, the demolition had been absolute: no physical fragments of the original staircase remained on the façade. This was not a case where reassembly of existing parts was possible.

The staircase had been completely obliterated. The only way to restore the building's defining architectural feature was to reconstruct it in its entirety, using documented evidence and contemporary materials.

The resulting interventions are shown in figures 7 and 8. Figure 7 displays the reinforced concrete canopy that replaced the staircase, alongside the altered entrance façade. Figure 8 illustrates four major modifications from the same period: roof light wells, the Osman Hamdi Slope façade, the reinforced concrete projection on the Gülhane Park façade, and the exhibition halls.



Reconstruction of the Staircase (1999-2000)

Given the historical, artistic, and cultural significance of the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi, it was determined during the 2000s works that it was not feasible to revert the interior of the building – altered during the 1963-1974 reconfiguration – to its original state. However, it was possible to restore the exterior façade to its original appearance. This required the reconstruction of the marble staircase and the restoration of the corresponding façade.

Archival research was conducted at the Istanbul Archaeological Museums, and old photographs and documents were identified⁵. These materials provided precise information on the staircase's form, dimensions, proportions, and detailing. They were submitted to the Istanbul Directorate of Surveying and Monuments, which prepared the entrance façade surveys, restitution and restoration projects, and a cost estimate. A letter from the General Directorate of Garanti Bank, the museum's sponsor, dated 1 March 1999 (No. 948/251), indicated that the bank would contribute to the project for 1999-2000 (Pasinli 2017; İstanbul Archaeological Museums 2001). The surveys, restitution, and restoration projects for the entrance and staircase were submitted to the Regional Council with a letter from the Istanbul Directorate of Surveying and Monuments dated 19 August 1999 (No. 690/1015).

The decision of the Istanbul No. 1 Regional Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property dated 7 May 1999 (No. 10803) stated:

[...] The Museum of the Ancient Orient, located in Cankurtaran District, Eminönü District, Osman Hamdi Bey Slope, Block 2, Plot 41, is registered as a protected cultural property. The reinforced concrete canopy on the entrance façade, which is incompatible with the building's original architecture, is to be removed. The restitution and restoration project for the entrance and staircase, prepared based on original photographs, is approved, and the staircase and entrance are to be reconstructed accordingly.

⁵ İSTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUMS ARCHIVE, THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE OF REPUBLIC OF TÜRKİYE, Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi Collection, photographic archive, various documents and project records (1998-2000), «Historical photographs of the original staircase».

With the Regional Council's decision of 19 August 1999 (No. 11025), the reconstruction was formally authorised, and the building was officially registered as a "protected cultural property" (Pasinli, 2017).

Following approval, the reinforced concrete canopy was removed. The staircase was reconstructed using marble – the same material as the original – and traditional techniques, based on the archival photographs and restitution drawings. The reconstruction included the original steps, landings, supporting piers, and the vault beneath the staircase. The entrance door was also restored to its original design. The project remains entirely faithful to Vallaur's original design, yet it is a new construction in terms of materiality and execution. It should be noted that the new marble, being of contemporary production, is naturally distinguishable upon close inspection from the nineteenth-century fabric: its surface, patina, and tooling marks are those of the present day, not of the 1880s. The staircase does not simulate age; it presents itself as a faithful reconstruction in contemporary material and with contemporary techniques, serving the objective of restoring the building's architectural silhouette and its legibility as Vallaur's designed artefact.

All façades, including the front and the rear façade facing Gülhane Park, as well as the retaining walls, were cleaned. However, the reinforced concrete projection on the rear façade could not be removed or modified. Plaster repairs were carried out, and mouldings, columns, capitals, bases, and sculptures were cleaned and restored. Interior works included flooring, walls, ceilings, roof light wells, electrical systems, and lighting. The contractor for the works was INSA (Pasinli, 2017).

The museum reopened on 8 September 2000. The reopening was widely covered in the press, with posters featuring the restored entrance with its staircase and invitations displaying original photographs of the façade (Pasinli, 2017).

The completed reconstruction is shown in fig. 10, and a post-restoration view from the museum archive is provided in figure 11.

The Disciplinary Debate: Objections and Institutional Responses

The reconstruction did not proceed without controversy. The architect of the 1963-1974 interventions, N. Eldem, submitted a formal letter of complaint to the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Türkiye, citing the Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works, Türkiye (Fikir ve Sanat Eserleri Kanunu). In his letter, he advanced two principal arguments: first, that the original building had been constructed "without any architectural qualities in the late 19th century," thereby implicitly defending the validity of his own modernist reconfiguration; and second, that his 1963-1974 project had transformed the structure into an optimal museum space that had "entered the literature" (Pasinli, 2017).

The Chamber of Architects supported Eldem's position, submitting a written request to the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Türkiye, demanding the immediate cessation of works. Pasinli responded by stating that the 1883 building, designed by Vallaur for Osman Hamdi Bey, was "one of the most elegant Neo-Classical structures of its time" (Pasinli, 2017), and questioned how the administrators, museum professionals, and academics of the 1960s could have condoned such destruction, tentatively attributing this to "the preservation understanding of the time" (Pasinli, 2017).

The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Türkiye, having approved the project through the statutory Regional Council mechanism, allowed the work to proceed to completion, affirming the validity of the project within the legal and procedural norms of Turkish conservation practice.



Assessment of the Preservation Approach

During the 1998-2000 works, no changes were made to the display and exhibition concept designed according to contemporary museology principles in the 1963-1974 period. The roof light wells, which provided natural lighting, and the reinforced concrete projection on the rear (Gülhane Park) façade, which served as a foyer extension, could not be removed. The plan scheme, including removed and thinned walls and modified floors, was not altered.

However, the reinforced concrete canopy that had replaced the demolished staircase was removed. The original staircase and entrance door of the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi, along with the supporting piers and vault beneath the staircase, were reconstructed based on archival documents and in accordance with the façade surveys, restitution, and restoration projects approved by the Regional Council. The Council's decision ensured the correction of the façade, the reconstruction of the marble staircase, and the registration of the building as a "protected cultural property". Additionally, modern lighting systems for display cases, humidity control, and ventilation systems were installed.

This differentiated approach – preserving the 1960s interior while restoring the 1883 exterior – represents a stratigraphic approach to conservation, acknowledging that the building's significance resides not in any single historical phase

Fig. 8

Interventions during the 1963-1974 conversion: (1) roof light wells, (2) Osman Hamdi Slope façade, (3) reinforced concrete projection on the Gülhane Park façade, (4) exhibition halls (Source: Istanbul Directorate of Surveying and Monuments Archive; Billur, 2020).

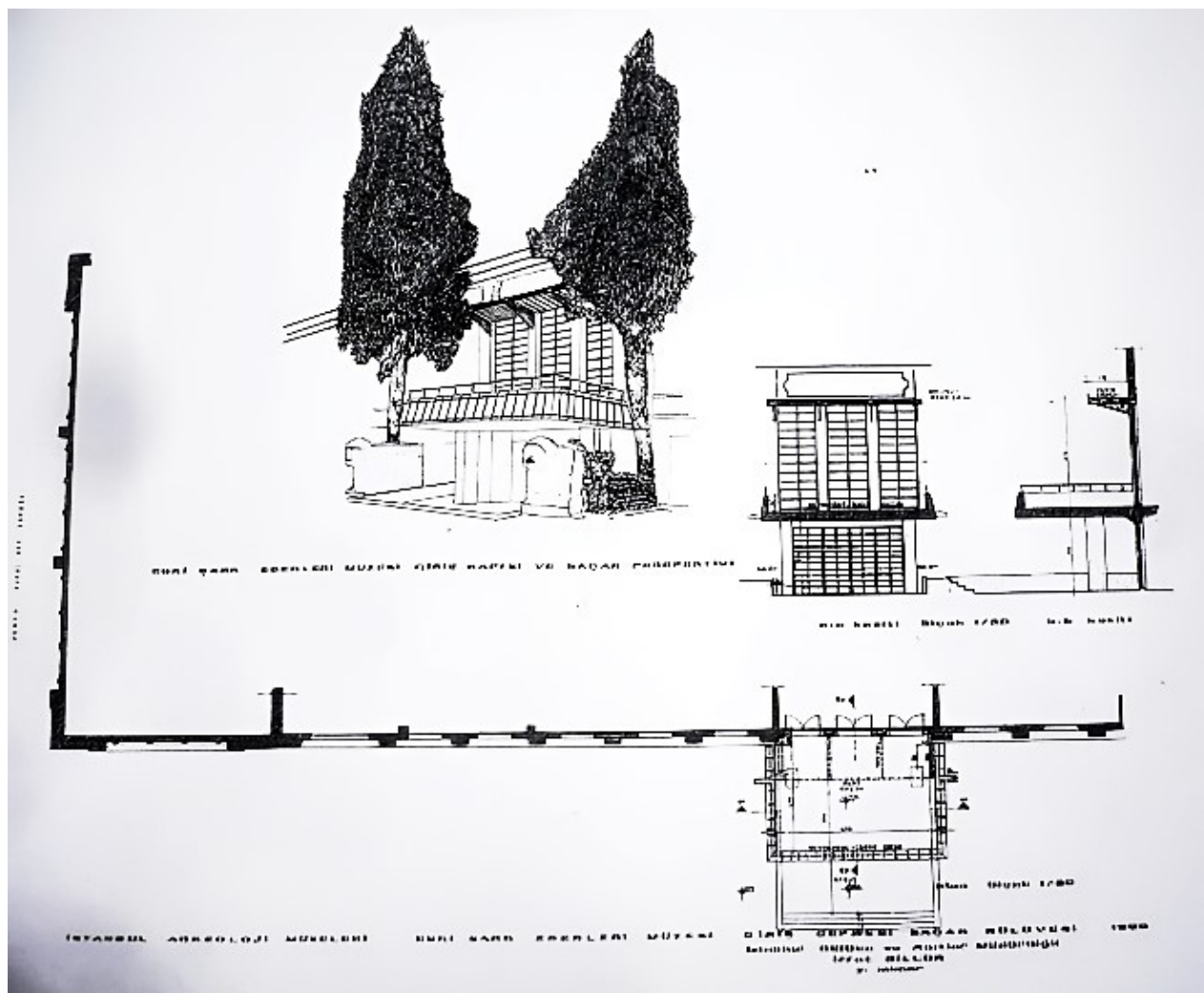


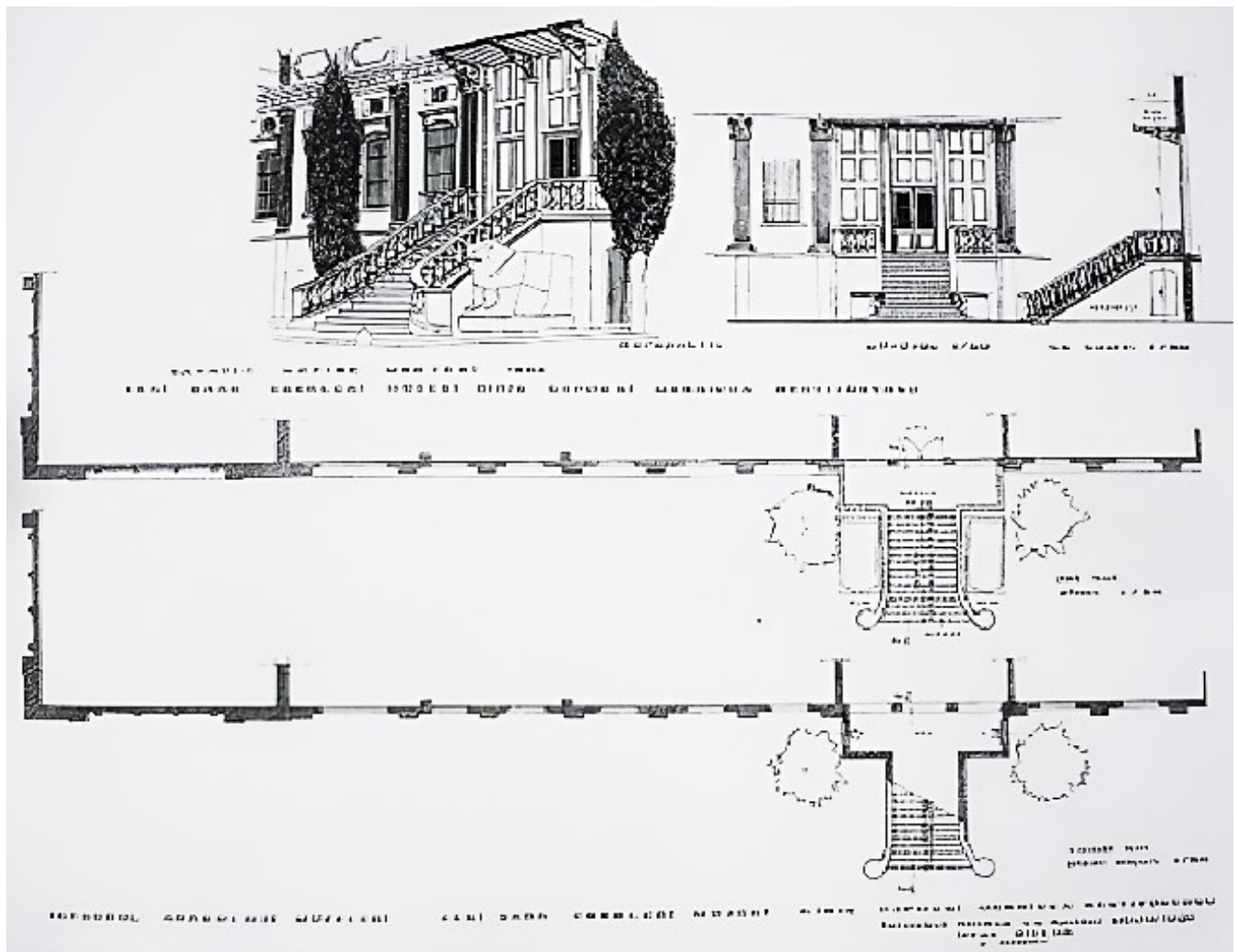
Fig. 9
Existing condition survey
(current page) and restitution
project (opposite page) for the
entrance façade and staircase
of the Museum of the Ancient
Orient (Source: Istanbul
Directorate of Surveying and
Monuments and Council for the
Conservation of Cultural and
Natural Property Archives, 1999).

but in the accumulated layers of its history. The reconstructed staircase does not erase the twentieth-century intervention; it adds a further layer that testifies to the evolving consciousness of heritage and the capacity of a later generation to recognise and rectify the losses inflicted by an earlier one.

Recent Works and Ongoing Preservation

Recent work on the building includes the preparation of new survey, restitution, and restoration projects by Seçkin Mimari Hizmetler. These projects have been submitted to the Regional Council, and the surveys have been approved. As of 2022, restoration and reorganisation works are ongoing (Turkish Museums, 2022).

It should be noted that the current project represents a holistic and comprehensive restoration approach, addressing the entire building. This differs from the 1999-2000 intervention, which was limited to the reconstruction of the entrance staircase and its immediate façade, as authorised by the Regional Council's decision of 19 August 1999 (No. 11025). The current restitution project, like its predecessor, remains faithful to Vallaury's original design, ensuring the continuity of the building's architectural authenticity while embracing a broader conservation scope.



Conclusion: Memory, Authenticity, and the Ethics of Reconstruction

Among the various approaches to intervention in historic structures, reconstruction is often considered a last resort and remains a subject of debate. Nevertheless, it holds national and universal importance as a preservation practice that can reintroduce lost or ruined historic structures that have a place in urban memory to society, ensuring the continuity of cultural transmission across generations and faithfully reflecting history.

For this reason, the reconstruction of Alexandre Vallauray's staircase at the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi constitutes a significant case study regarding the relationship between architectural preservation and cultural memory.

Memory Recovery as the Primary Objective

The reconstruction of Vallauray's staircase must be understood first and foremost as an act of memory recovery. In the 1960s, a first-degree historic monument was altered without documentation or conservation justification. The staircase was removed not because it was functionally obsolete – the building had operated as a museum since 1917 with the staircase intact – but because it did not fit the archi-

tectural preferences of the period. The demolition was an act of its time, undertaken before the maturation of international conservation doctrine.

The reconstruction, by contrast, was an act of a different time. It was predicated on systematic archival research, verifiable documentary evidence, and formal approval by the statutory Regional Council. Crucially, no physical fragments of the original staircase remained on the façade; the demolition had been absolute. The reconstruction was therefore not a choice between reassembling existing parts and new construction, but a necessity: the only way to restore the building's defining architectural feature was to rebuild the staircase in its entirety, using documented evidence and contemporary materials. The removal of the staircase during the building's conversion to a museum was akin to the amputation of a living organ; the desire to restore that lost element was, by the same logic, an act worthy of equal respect. The reconstruction was undertaken with meticulous care, using marble and contemporary techniques, based on archival photographs and restitution drawings. The objective was not to simulate age, but to restore the building's architectural silhouette and its legibility as Vallaury's designed artefact.

The Charters as Frames of Reference, and the Questions of Authenticity and Distinguishability

When viewed alongside international preservation charters, the project aligns with the evolution of conservation thinking from an absolute prohibition of reconstruction towards a more nuanced acceptance under exceptional circumstances. The Venice Charter (1964) does not, in principle, exclude intervention when based on documentary evidence and conducted with respect for the monument's historical testimony (ICOMOS, 1964). Article 1 defines the historic monument as encompassing not only the work of architecture itself but also the urban and cultural context in which it is situated – a context that the Vallaury staircase was an integral part of. Article 4 affirms that the conservation of monuments requires continuous maintenance, and Article 7 states that a monument is a witness to the history and events of which it is a document. The removal of the staircase in the 1960s was itself a historical event; its reconstruction restores the building's capacity to testify to its original design intentions. Article 9 stipulates that restoration must be based on sound and reliable documentation and must not involve conjecture – a requirement fully met by the extensive archival photographs and documents that guided the reconstruction. Article 12 recommends that, in completing missing parts, the additions should be distinguishable from the original fabric and should bear the mark of their own time – a principle reflected in the use of contemporary marble with its own surface characteristics and patina. Finally, Article 16 requires that all restoration work be documented and deposited in archives, a condition fulfilled through the preservation of the projects in the archives of the Istanbul Directorate of Surveying and Monuments, the Istanbul Archaeological Museums, and the Regional Council. The Burra Charter (1979, revised 1999, Article 20) permits reconstruction where a place is “incomplete through damage or alteration” and where there is sufficient evidence, while recommending that new fabric be identifiable (ICOMOS Australia, 1999). The Riga Charter (2000) provides the most directly applicable framework, specifying that reconstruction can be acceptable in exceptional circumstances where the object is of outstanding significance, the reconstruction is based on comprehensive documentation, and it does not falsify the historical context (ICCROM, 2000). The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) broadens the understanding of authenticity beyond material substance to include form, design, traditions, setting, and spirit (ICOMOS, 1994).

Fig. 10
Restituted and reconstructed
entrance staircase of the
Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi,
front view (Source: Turkish
Museums, 2022).



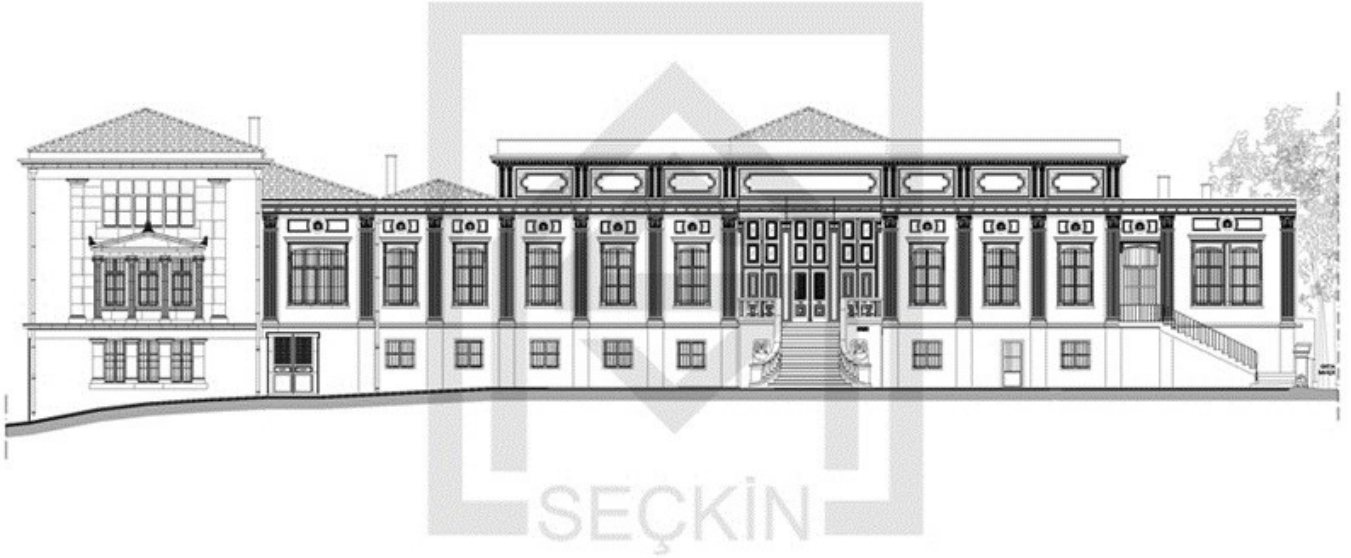


Fig. 11
Post restoration view of the
restituted staircase at the
Museum of the Ancient Orient
(Source: Istanbul Directorate
of Surveying and Monuments
Archive; Billur, 2020).

As Jokilehto has comprehensively documented in his history of architectural conservation, the evolution of conservation theory has progressively accommodated reconstruction as a legitimate response to specific cultural and evidentiary circumstances, provided that documentation and significance justify the intervention (Jokilehto, 2017).

The Sanayi-i Nefise staircase reconstruction satisfies these criteria. The building is of outstanding cultural significance as Türkiye's first fine arts academy. The reconstruction was based on comprehensive archival documentation. And far from falsifying the historical context, it restores it. The charters were consulted as frames of reference – not as prescriptive rules – and the project was carried out within the statutory framework of Turkish conservation practice, grounded in Principle Decision No. 660 (1999) (Republic of Türkiye, Superior Council for the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property, 1999).

Regarding the questions of authenticity and distinguishability, the reconstructed staircase is not ontologically authentic – it is not the original stone laid in 1883. However, authenticity in heritage conservation need not be defined exclusively by material age. Drawing on the Nara Document's broader conception (ICOMOS 1994), the staircase possesses a multi-layered authenticity: it is authentic in its form, faithfully reproducing the documented dimensions, proportions, and detailing of Vallaur's design; it is authentic in its relational capacity, restoring the



building's spatial dialogue with the Archaeological Museums and the Tiled Pavilion; and it is authentic in its function as a lieu de mémoire – a site where cultural memory crystallises and is transmitted (Nora, 1984-1992).

Concerning distinguishability, the Burra Charter recommends that new fabric be identifiable upon close inspection (ICOMOS Australia, 1999). The reconstructed staircase meets this not through deliberate markers, but through the inherent qualities of its material: the new marble, being of contemporary production, possesses surface characteristics, patina, and tooling marks that differ naturally from nineteenth-century fabric. The staircase does not simulate age; it presents itself as a faithful reconstruction in the material of its own time. It was built using archival evidence to restore the building's defining architectural feature, and its contemporaneity is legible in its fabric.

Concluding Reflections

The building's cultural significance is exceptional within the Turkish context. As the first fine arts school of the Ottoman Empire, it embodies the modernisation vision of the late Ottoman state. Its founder, Osman Hamdi Bey, and its architect, Alexandre Vallaury, are central figures in Turkish cultural history. The recovery of its original silhouette through the reconstruction of the staircase is inseparable from the recovery of this historical narrative.

Fig. 12
Front façade restitution
project of the Sanayi-i Nefise
Mektebi / Museum of the
Ancient Orient (Source: Seçkin
Mimari Hizmetler, 2013).

The reconstructed staircase, as conceptualised by Pierre Nora, functions as a *lieu de mémoire* – a site where memory is not merely recalled but actively experienced (Nora, 1984-1992). This understanding is further developed in contemporary heritage discourse, which frames heritage not as a fixed object but as a cultural process through which meanings are continuously negotiated and redefined (Smith, 2006). The act of ascending these steps constitutes an encounter with architectural memory that cannot be replicated through archival study alone.

Rather than offering a prescriptive template, this case study invites critical reflection on the cultural specificity of heritage decisions and the primacy of memory in certain contexts. The reconstruction of Vallauray's staircase is best understood as a context-dependent response to specific historical circumstances: an undocumented demolition, a complete loss of original fabric, and a subsequent shift in conservation consciousness.

The primary success of the 1999-2000 intervention lies in restoring the building's historical legibility and its original silhouette within the archaeologically significant landscape of the First Courtyard of Topkapı Palace. The reconstructed staircase ensures that Vallauray's architectural vision continues to be transmitted to future generations, preserving not only the physical fabric but also the cultural memory embodied in this important monument.

As the building continues to undergo preservation works in the 2020s, it carries with it multiple historical layers – the original 1883 design, the 1960s museum transformation, and the 2000 reconstruction – each contributing to its rich and complex biography. Once removed and now restored, the staircase stands as a powerful symbol of the capacity to reclaim lost heritage while acknowledging the full complexity of a building's history. Its steps ascend not only into the museum but into the accumulated memory of a culture, offering each visitor a journey into the past.

Final remark

The removal of the main entrance staircase designed by Alexandre Vallauray for the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi – a fine arts school built on Byzantine foundations in the historic heart of Istanbul – during its conversion into a museum, was considered by later preservationists as a significant loss. The effort to restore it, grounded in systematic archival research and authorised through statutory preservation mechanisms, is equally worthy of respect. The reconstructed staircase has thus enabled the building to recover its former appearance, ensuring that its original silhouette is passed down to future generations and that its memory endures.

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