

# JEAN (JAN) LAMBERT-RUCKI'S ARTISTIC VISION OF THE OTTOMAN WOMEN'S WORLD OF SELÂNIK<sup>1)</sup>

THE CITY – THESSALONIKI OR SELÂNIK?

**O**n the 8th of November, 1912, the feast of Saint Demetrius, the city of Selânik سلانیک, regarded as the second most important city of the Ottoman Empire (together with Smyrna/İzmir), was surrendered to the Greek army by Tahsin Paşa, commander of the Turkish garrison. Several hours later, the rival Bulgarian army entered the suburbs of Selânik from another direction and, according to anecdotal evidence, Tahsin Paşa could only inform the Bulgarian official envoys that: "I only had one Selânik, which I have already surrendered."

Greeks and Bulgarians, allied nations during the First Balkan War (1912–1913), were fighting together for new possessions, detaching them piece by piece from the living body of the Ottoman Empire. Selânik, the magnificent prize grabbed by the Greeks was to be returned; the Bulgarians, in turn, were allowed to occupy the port of Kavala on the Aegean Sea with its hinterland (Western Thrace). In later times, this served as a bone of contention between the two nations; at present it is in Greece. The Bulgarian troops were granted guest status in Selânik by the Greeks and a hospital for treating their wounded soldiers.

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<sup>1)</sup> The author extends his warmest thanks to the Comité Jean Lambert-Rucki in Paris and to the Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków for their help in gathering source materials for this article.

Selânîk, known as *Thessaloniki* in Greek, is an ancient sea port with a rich history. It was founded around 315 BC by the Macedonian king Kassander. After the Roman conquest in 168 AD, it became the capital of all the Greek provinces of the Roman Empire, and after the division of the latter, the second city of the Byzantine Empire after Constantinople.

Ottoman rule in the city began in 1430. Towards the end of its Ottoman history of four-hundred-and-eighty-two years, the city had become an important administrative centre<sup>2)</sup> and economic hub: demographically, economically and technically developed. Tramways ran through its streets lit by electricity, international shipping companies, banks and consulates served a wide variety of commercial ventures and activities. Its population of a hundred-and-thirty-five thousand souls, consisted mainly of Sephardic (Spanish) Jews (65%),<sup>3)</sup> with the addition of a comparatively high proportion of Turks and other Ottoman Muslims, who kept the most important administrative and political position in the city to themselves. There were also small minorities of Greeks, Bulgarians and Romani. The chaotic Oriental urban fabric of the city, mainly composed of wooden houses in typical Balkan style, had been strengthened in dribs and drabs by new developments and constructions in the European fashion so as to create a new contemporary image for the city (Figs. 1–4).

Mustafa Kemal (1881–1938), later known as Atatürk (Father of the Turks), the venerated founder of the modern Turkish national identity and state, was born in Selânîk. In 1908, Selânîk became the cradle of ‘the Young Turks’ (*JönTürkler*, *Genç Türkler*), a movement aimed at the modernization of the Turkish state. The Turkish press, together with Turkish culture and politics, flourished in Selânîk, which was regarded as an indivisible part of the Turkish-Ottoman homeland.

That orientation dramatically changed with the formal annexation of the city by the Greek monarchy in 1913 under the Treaty of Bucharest, ending the Second Balkan War.<sup>4)</sup> A gradual but steady process of Hellenization was initiated, not always devoid of violence and cruelty.<sup>5)</sup> The old Greek name of Thessaloniki was officially restored to the city, which by then had become the second biggest urban centre in Greece after the capital city of Athens.

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<sup>2)</sup> Birken (1976).

<sup>3)</sup> Bozkurt (1994).

<sup>4)</sup> Hall (2000).

<sup>5)</sup> McCarthy (1995).



Following the outbreak of World War I in 1914, large Entente expeditionary forces established a base at Thessaloniki in 1915 to support Serbian operations against pro-German Bulgaria. Barracks, quarters, storage facilities and field hospitals filled the city; an allied French and British military force of around a hundred thousand became a common sight there. Numerous travelers, including families of the military, took the opportunity of visiting that overcrowded but still very exotic and attractive-looking city, whose living conditions were, however, not so salubrious. As one of those tourists wrote in a postcard dated 1st of August, 1917: “Je suis toujours avec mon camarade P(...) la vie nous paraît plus agréable, heureusement car l’Orient n’est pas rose. Je vous quitte pour allerprendre l’air environ 4 heures” (*I am always with my comrade P. and so life seems much nicer to us. Fortunately, because the Orient is not rosy, I must leave you to grasp some air for about 4 hours*) (Figs. 5–8).

Seventeen days after the postcard’s author had gone “to grasp some air”, on Saturday, the 18th of August, 1917, at roughly 3 p.m., at a small house of Greek refugees in the Mevlane district, a great fire accidentally started, which the intense winds carried to the neighbouring houses, and further on, towards the centre of the city. The fire only died down in the evening of the next day, having devoured most of the Jewish and Turkish living quarters and the centre of the city, including important public houses, causing a material disaster and human catastrophe. Tens of thousands of inhabitants had become homeless.<sup>6)</sup>

The Greek government, with the help of the Allied forces, immediately organized all possible means to secure temporary living settlements and food supplies for the fire victims but refused to allow the reconstruction of the city as it had been before. It was decided to create a new city instead, according to a comprehensive urban plan. The new design, prepared under the direction of French archaeologist and architect Ernest-Michel Hébrard (1875–1933), was ready in June 1918. Construction work started quickly. The second most important Ottoman city of Selânik, with a rich multi-faceted cultural identity, had passed away but preserved its highly privileged position in Turkish history and nostalgic memory.

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<sup>6)</sup> The great fire of Thessaloniki can be compared to another great fire, that of Chicago in 1871. Enormous material losses and human casualties created the momentum for constructing completely new cities in place of those burnt down. In neither of the two cases can documented evidence (nor even a serious allegation) of premeditated criminal action be found.

## THE ARTIST

A very peculiar personality arrived in Selânik during World War I, Jean Lambert-Rucki, a Polish artist living in Paris.

Lambert Rucki<sup>7)</sup> was born in Krakow on September 17, 1888. The historic Polish city of Krakow had previously been the capital of the largest state in Europe – the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the 19th century, the city was known by its German name of 'Krakau', a name that had been imposed by the Austrian occupiers, and was proclaimed the regional capital of the newly formed, semi-autonomous province of Galicia (*Galizien* in German, *Galicja* in Polish), formally part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Despite its lack of full independence, the city was a flourishing and flamboyant centre of Polish culture, attracting many visitors, students and migrants from all parts of historic Poland and including those parts occupied by Prussia and Russia. The Rucki family, as evidenced by Lambert's enrolment form, filled and signed at 'the Academy of Fine Arts' (Akademia Sztuk Pięknych) in Kraków in 1908, originated from the community of Frysztat. The family occupied an apartment that was not far from the city centre, just behind the main railway station.

Lambert's adoption of the artistic way of life was no accident. He was raised in a family that was, most probably, deeply rooted in Polish cultural tradition and which also displayed strong ties with Oriental (Islamic) art and material culture, as was customary at that time in his social milieu.<sup>8)</sup> His artistic talents had shone forth from his earliest years. At the age of 11, the young boy had lost his father and, willing to support his family materially, drew people's portraits to earn some money (Fig. 9).

His studies at the Academy did not last long; he decided to leave for France in 1911, deeply moved and attracted by the paintings of the Impressionists, mainly those of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), who, by that time, had been deceased for several years. He left with 20 francs in his pocket and settled in Montparnasse, Paris.

In this new environment, he quickly made friends with the most prominent contemporary artists such as: Fernand Léger (1881–1955), Joseph Csaky

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<sup>7)</sup> The name of the artist appears in several different forms, which changed in different periods: Lambert Rucki, Jean Lambert, Jean Lambert-Rucki, Jean-Lambert Rucki; see Bartnicka-Górska and Szczepińska-Tramer (2005).

<sup>8)</sup> Mańkowski (1935), Mańkowski (1959), Biedrońska-Słotowa (1992), Epsztejn (2005), Grzybowska (2006).



(1888–1971), Gustave Miklos (1888–1967), Léopold Survage (1879–1968), Chaim Soutine (1893–1943), Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918), Max Jacob (1876–1944) and others. Here he met Moïse Kisling (1891–1953), his college colleague who had left for Paris a year earlier; and shared a room and workshop with Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920) for a time. Later on, he participated in the artistic group *Section d'Or* and then in the U.A.M. (*Union des artistes modernes*).<sup>9)</sup>

At the outbreak of World War I, Rucki joined the *Légion Étrangère* (the Foreign Legion) and was sent to Dardanelles in the Turkish war theatre. Rucki was wounded in battle and after rehabilitation, the military directed him to continue his duty as an artist in the newly organized 'Antiquities Service of Greece'. His main occupation at that time was copying the Byzantine frescoes of the Hagia Sophia church in Thessaloniki, which probably aroused a deep interest in sacral art within him. Upon his return to France, Rucki devoted a great deal of ingenuity to restoring churches and creating objects of art with religious motifs. Georges Rouault (1871–1958) and he were 'the great renovators of sacred art'. Rucki closely cooperated with the coppersmith Jean Dunand (1877–1942) and the jeweller Georges Fouquet (1862–1957).<sup>10)</sup>

But, in the meantime, Rucki was still in Thessaloniki, where he was yet to reside for several years. He must have witnessed, at first, the still living Oriental culture in the city, and then, the Great Fire, which devastated old Selânik in 1917 (Figs. 10–11).

We are not aware of many details of his sojourn in the city.<sup>11)</sup> We can only imagine him wandering around the meandering, narrow streets of the traditional residential quarters, taking hasty sketches of the Ottoman lifestyle and creating his own artistic works in his free time. Next to nothing was known about the latter until recently.

<sup>9)</sup> Dufet (1977), De Vos *e.a.* (1988).

<sup>10)</sup> Dufet (1977), De Vos *e.a.* (1988).

<sup>11)</sup> This lack of exact data led to a misunderstanding. Incorrect information was found in Rucki's biography stating that he spent the war years in Africa. This most probably happened when someone, reading about Rucki travelling to the Orient, interpreted it as 'Africa' and these stereotyped and unverified facts were passed further on; see Bartnicka-Górska and Szczepińska-Tramer (2005).

## THE WORK

Lambert-Rucki is mainly famous for his paintings and sculptures, which he created until the end of life, when he quietly passed away in his workshop in Montparnasse, Paris, on July 27, 1967. He was also a distinguished artist producing graphic works, always much appreciated by a wide circle of art collectors,<sup>12)</sup> but those from the years he spent in Thessaloniki are very rare and uncommon. Comité Jean Lambert-Rucki in Paris, devoted to the cataloguing of his artistic heritage, has in its collection three hand drawings from Thessaloniki, showing very typical Balkan motifs. No other works of the kind are known to exist in any public or private catalogued collections, either in France or abroad (Figs. 12–14).

Therefore, the series of lithographic prints entitled *Selanik – celles dont le visage est couvert* (Selanik – those with a covered face) is a remarkable piece of art. There were 50 such complete sets printed originally at that time. One set is preserved in a private collection in Poland. The whereabouts of the other ones is not known. Many, if not all those remaining, may have perished in Rucki's workshop in the Great Fire of Thessaloniki.<sup>13)</sup>

A cardboard file with ribbon bindings on all three open sides, with three flaps, protects the contents. Inside, there are 23 loose black-and-white lithographs of ca. A-4 size (26 x 20/22 cm), on thick paper. One further lithograph was pasted on the file cover and served as a cover page.

The set of prints reveals a miscellany of motives and approaches. There are sensual scenes from closed interiors, strongly influenced by the contemporary European view of the Orient as the abode of lust.<sup>14)</sup>

There are also women in everyday scenes, moving around the streets and occupied with their normal activities. Apart from such popular exoticism, the author apparently wished to leave a testimony of his times and of the places that not so many of his contemporaries were able to visit.<sup>15)</sup>

<sup>12)</sup> Bersier (1947).

<sup>13)</sup> See <http://www.artinfo.pl/aukcje/jean-lambert-rucki/scenki-wschodnie-5-sztuk> [accessed on 03 09 2017] this webpage informs us about an auction sale in Warsaw, at which, a few years ago, 5 lithographs by Jean Lambert-Rucki, untitled by the sellers, were put on offer, originating from the same series.

<sup>14)</sup> Jullian (1977), Thornton (1985).

<sup>15)</sup> Mossakowski (1980), Irwin (2006).



Women's life in the Orient, and in particular the mysterious habits of the harems, which were probably the most heard of and least understood in Europe, attracted the attention and imagination of artists, writers and poets. The years that spanned the mid-19th to mid-20th century witnessed the brightest age of travel, exposing an increasing number of Europeans to foreign and unfamiliar cultures.<sup>16)</sup> In all the paintings from those times, reality and imagination are closely mixed together.<sup>17)</sup>

Some lithographs reflect the taste of contemporary representations from Western applied art, mainly illustrations in periodicals, showing ladies as attractive and sometimes mysterious creatures. Some might even be considered slightly surrealistic (Figs. 15.1–15.24).

The artist did not quite believe in photographic representation; he intended to convey to his audience, not only the surface outline of things, but also the inner feeling; to put them in the position of immediate observers, present in the places they look on. Even if it is hard to imagine that any veritable identification of portrayed locations could be possible – particularly since the original places and buildings of the city vanished in the Great Fire in 1917 and the available graphic documentation is presumably too scanty and inadequate for any comparison – we, as spectators, can perceive and witness the depicted events and experience our full participation in them. A sort of a dream – in a milieu that looks somewhat archaic and untimely.

The old city of Selânik had disappeared from the face of the earth, and the artistic record of its existence had almost disappeared. Was this by coincidence? Or had the artist himself, for some reason that we shall never know, forseen this? (Figs. 16–19).

Two years after the Great Fire, Rucki painted a new picture in the Modernist style, in well-organized and bright colours, entitled *Composition aux visages* (*Composition with faces*). Everything in the composition leads us to believe that this was no accident. Sharp geometric forms replaced the softly susceptible, brittle lines of out-dated Art Nouveau; lively colours added new life to the simple structures of Mediterranean-type houses; water jars received new dynamic expression and women's faces were exposed. 'Celles dont le visage est couvert' are now looking insolently around, full of self-awareness and pride; Selânik has irretrievably been replaced by Thessaloniki, while the city's Ottoman past is only vaguely reminded by a few surviving historical monuments.

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<sup>16)</sup> Milet (2008).

<sup>17)</sup> Lucie-Smith (1972), Thornton (1985).





Fig. 1. Selânik – panorama from the sea, end of 19th c.

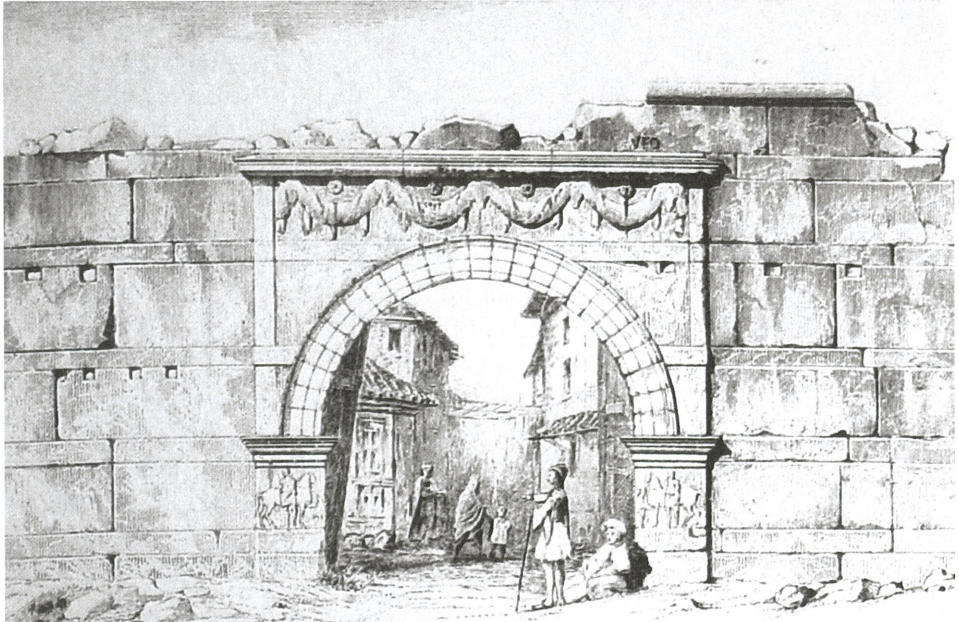


Fig. 2. Selânik – Golden Gate, drawing by Honoré Daumet (1826–1911)





Souvenir de Salonique

La grande Rue des Campagnes et Vue Générale de la Ville

Fig. 3. Selânik – street leaving to the East, end of 19th c.

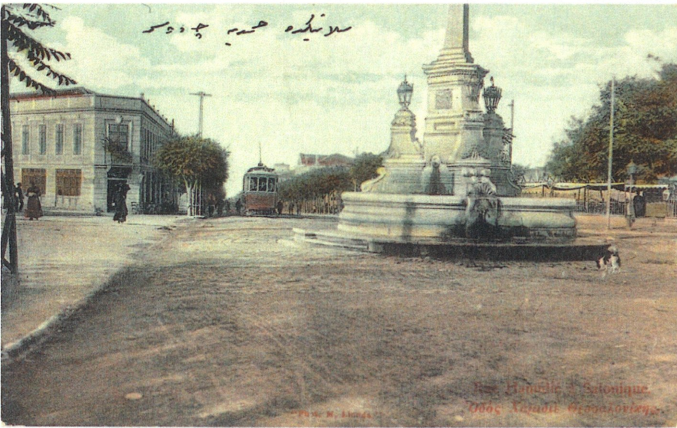


Fig. 4. Selânik – Hamidiye Caddesi (Street), early 20th c.



سورک بارکائی  
Souvenir de Salonique

Villa Allatini – Lieu d'internement de l'ex-sultan

Fig. 5. Selânik – sultan Abdülhamid II's internment place, 1908





Fig. 6. Thessaloniki – panorama from the sea, 1916



Fig. 7. Thessaloniki – a mosque with a fountain, 1916



Fig. 8. Thessaloniki – Bezesten (market place), after the Great Fire



C. K. AKADEMIA SZTUK PIĘKNYCH W KRAKOWIE.

Nazwisko, imię: Lambert Rucki.

Wiele ma lat, rok urodzenia, miejsce urodzenia, religia: 17. września, w Thworkowie 1888.  
religia: 17. września, religia, Rzym.  
Katołickiej.

Przynależność do kraju i gminy: do Trzyczanki

Adres rodziców i poczta: ul. Lubomirskiego k. 5. I. p.

Jakimi dokumentami wykazuje się, gdzie przedtem kształcił się: ukończył szkołę przemysł.  
Towia w Thworkowie.

Jakie przedstawia prace:

Do którego Profesora szkoły chce być zapisany:

Profesor Meckoffar.

Gdzie obrat mieszkanie:

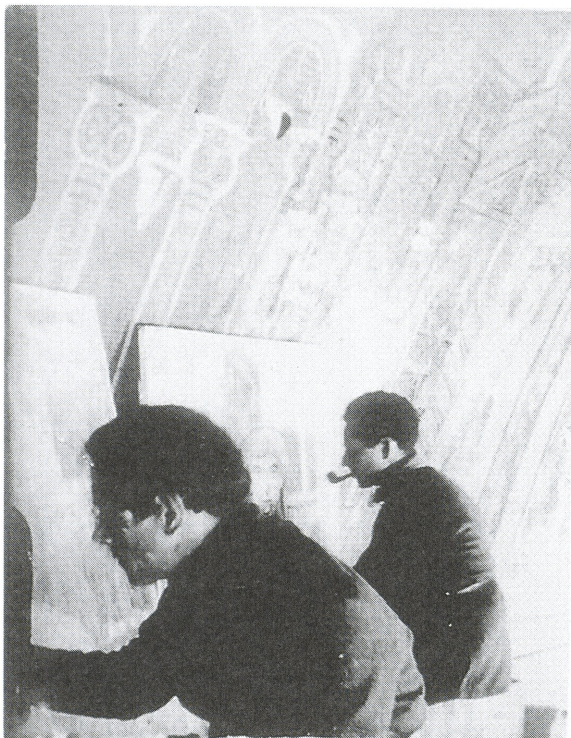
Kraków, dnia 21. V. 1908. r.

Podpis ucznia:

Lambert Rucki.

Fig. 9. Lambert Rucki's certificate of enrolment at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow, 1908





◀ Fig. 10. Thessaloniki – Rucki (left) with his colleague, copying frescos

▼ Fig. 11. Thessaloniki – Rucki (in the centre) with his colleagues, in the painting restoration workshop





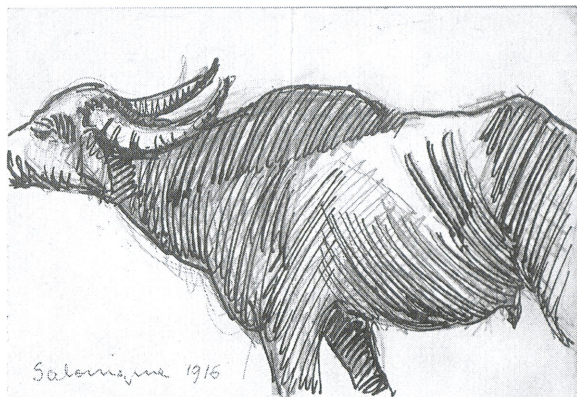


Fig. 12. Thessaloniki – buffalo, pencil drawing by Rucki, 1916



Fig. 13. Thessaloniki – back street with two ladies, pencil drawing by Rucki, 1916



Fig. 14. Thessaloniki – back street with a donkey, pencil drawing by Rucki, 1916





Fig. 15.1. Front cover of the Rucki's album with lithographs: Selanik – celles dont le visage est couvert, 1917



Fig. 15.2. Selanik..., view of the city



Fig. 15.3. Selanik..., a woman walking by the mosque

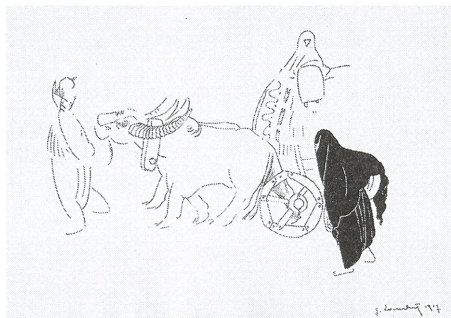
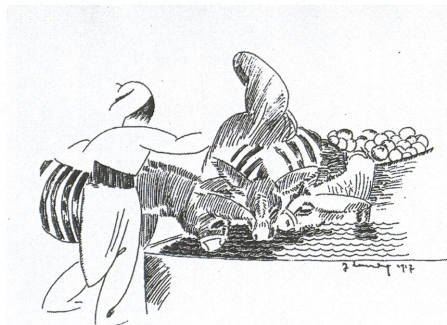


Fig. 15.4. Selanik..., two women and a man leading a cart with two buffalos



▲ Fig. 15.5. Selanik..., watering the donkeys  
 ▶ Fig. 15.6. Selanik..., three ladies sitting and gossiping at a street corner.





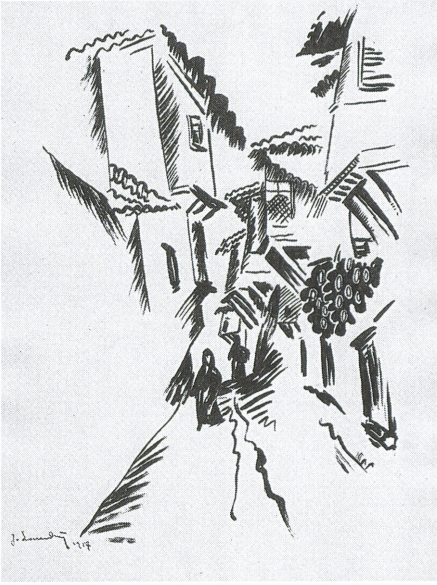


Fig. 15.7. Selanik..., passers by in a street



Fig. 15.8. Selanik..., two ladies carrying jars, helped by a boy on a donkey



Fig. 15.9. Selanik..., three ladies shopping, helped by a servant



Fig. 15.10. Selanik..., carpet sellers with clients





Fig. 15.11. Selanik..., ladies selecting fruit



Fig. 15.12. Selanik..., a lady with a servant carrying a tray of sweets



Fig. 15.13. Selanik..., two ladies on a donkey, lead by a servant

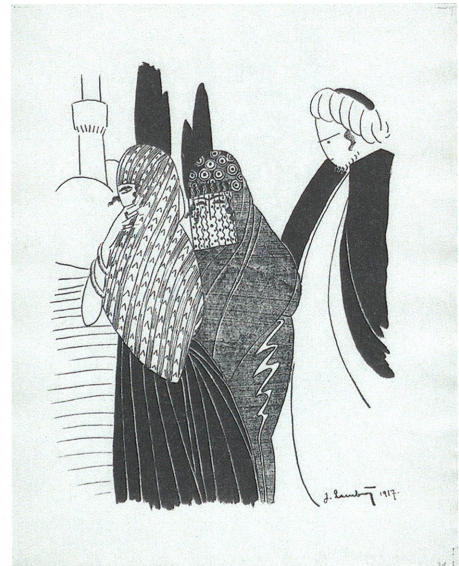


Fig. 15.14. Selanik..., a wealthy man with two wives





Fig. 15.15. Selnik..., a woman with a boy and a little child



Fig. 15.16. Selnik..., a sketch of two ladies



Fig. 15.17. Selnik..., two ladies fighting with the wind



Fig. 15.18. Selnik..., two ladies knocking at the bath door



Fig. 15.19. Selanik..., a lady shutting the bath door



Fig. 15.20. Selanik..., two ladies undress for the bath



Fig. 15.21. Selanik..., two ladies in the bath



Fig. 15.22. Selanik..., two ladies take rest with water pipe, accompanied by a pet dog





Fig. 15.23. Selanik..., a lady at a fountain (?)



Fig. 15.24. Selanik..., a lady with flowers



Fig. 16. Thessaloniki – Composition aux visages by Rucki, 1919 – a new image of the city



Fig. 17. Thessaloniki  
– Atatürk's family  
house, present state



Fig. 18. Thessaloniki  
– Citadel: Byzantine  
Heptapyrgion,  
Ottoman Yedi Kule,  
present state



Fig. 19. Thessaloniki  
– Bey Hamamı  
(bath), present state



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