Istanbul — city in a gem

Those who have only read Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul: Memories and the City* but never been actually there would probably usurp the author’s memory as their own, while those who have gone through the routine of a sightseer would mistake the dazzling scenes of the Grand Bazaar for the whole of Istanbul. Looking at the surface evidence –

bright-eyed sunny kids and noisome pestering men who roam the tourist district -- Istanbul’s hyperactive appearance can hardly be associated with the vaguest sense of melancholy. Where did the motif of Pamuk’s ‘city of melancholy’ come from?

Perhaps it has been a long while since the childhood of Pamuk, and Istanbul has long been aroused from the ruins of Ottoman. In the capital we met jewelry designer Sevan Bicakci, whose skillful craftsmanship more than compensates for his handicap in English skills, who manages to condense the splendor of Istanbul into a ring, bringing the city to the world stage, of which you will be proffered a glimpse today.

The infinite beauty of sunset,

Adorns the sky in crimson red,

Like a priceless gem,

Gleaming with mesmerizing lure.

A microscopic view of the city in a gem

With a grass root origin, Sevan too harbors a fairy-tale like fantasy about Istanbul. “As a child, I once wished that there was such a thing as ‘fairness.’ The beggars that I saw at the Grand Bazzar, I always felt they would end up with beautiful wives.” Knowing what is impossible but still holding it dear at heart, isn’t that the aesthetic elements of melancholy?

Since it is difficult to present Pamuk’s ancient city of melancholy in a macroscopic view, we might as well depart from a microscopic perspective. Sevan Bicakci's works can be dubbed the collective memory of Istanbul — if Istanbul collapses one day, these unearthed "precious pearl diamond rings" will be proofs of its erstwhile existence.

Sevan expressed fondness of jewels that can communicate with people. He was not referring to the sorceress’ type of power crystal psychic phenomena: “These works are not designed for display, but for people to think and to dream.” A woman's "dream" for jewelry is nothing more than "possession," while Sevan's works are the memories of a city. When he was gazing inside the microscopic world of a gem, one could imagine the love and imagery he was injecting in it. He said, “Man cannot sever himself from history and the circumstances around him!”

What price is memory?

The scenery inside a gem is dazzling. It is hard to visualize how such exquisite views are encased in a stone. The actual tricks are nothing more than hollowing the gem, painting pictures on its inner layers, and inserting three-dimensional models or collage patterns. There are no hidden secrets, only techniques.

As mentioned above, for such a miniature world that is etched out stroke by stroke, the greatest costs are time and effort. “The ratio between the cut away parts and the finished gem is about 8 to 1. Just like a painting at the auction, its value should not be determined by the canvass and paint.”

How is the price being set?

“Very casually! — depending on the time invested in each piece of work. It usually took three and a half months to complete one piece of work, and it once took 7 months in an extreme case. As long as it paid for tea money, it was a fair amount of wage. Naturally, there were the costs of materials. But occasionally, when I felt a particular attachment to a piece of work, it was not unusual to set it a bit higher.” Each ring is priced at $ 5,000 to $ 20,000, up to $ 140,000 at most. It is really quite arbitrary. There is no retail store. Seasoned collectors know where to find me.