

## The Shoe Shine Boxes of Turkey

### Victor Margolin

All photographs courtesy of the author.

One of the most distinctive vernacular objects in Turkey is the shoe shine box. Just like the moveable kiosks where vendors sell the pretzel-like coiled hot bread called *simit*, shoeshine boxes are prominent artifacts in the public spaces of most Turkish towns. Seasoned artisans of the high shine sit behind them in main squares and bus stations, ready to put a sheen on a pair of shoes that would rival Narcissus's mirror. The elaborate boxes, which are plated with thin veneers of hammered brass, lend dignity to the art of shining shoes in a way that a cobbled together wooden box could never do. I doubt that the shoe shine men make their own boxes and I imagine some small shops where craftsmen with expertise in hammering brass turn out custom shoe boxes rather like artisans who make special instruments for musicians.

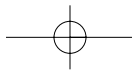
One can see two basic typologies; elaborate boxes with stepped sides that serve as bins for multiple bottles of polish—each topped with a shiny cap—and simpler flatter boxes, usually with fewer bottles. In some cases, the boxes display original paintings, like miniature murals on building walls, and in other instances collages of cut out magazine pictures are pasted on the box facades. In travels throughout western Turkey, I never saw two boxes that were exactly alike. The variety of these boxes, which fit no existing category of decorative art or even folk art, is a testament to the popular imagination and to the potential of finding aesthetic pleasure in the most unexpected places.



Taksim Square, Istanbul



Bus station, Ankara



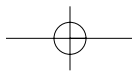
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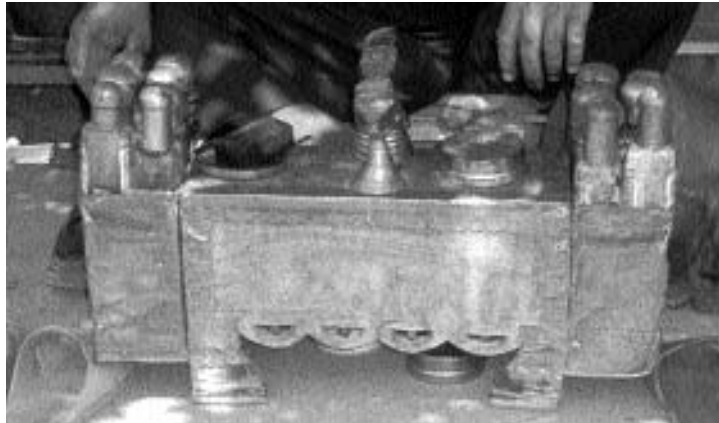
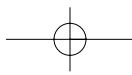


Istanbul



Urgup





Bus station, Ortaca



Taksim Square, Istanbul



Istanbul

