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Fausto Zonaro,  
*On the Galata Bridge, Istanbul*



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FAUSTO ZONARO

(Padua 1854 – 1929 Sanremo)

## *ON THE GALATA BRIDGE, ISTANBUL*

Signed lower right: "F. Zonaro"

Oil on canvas

70 x 65 cm (27 3/4 x 25 1/2 in.)

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### Provenance

Private collection, Spain (sale: Sotheby's, London, 16 November 2005, lot 215);

Private collection (purchased at the above sale);

Sale: Christie's, London, 21 May 2014, lot 61;

Private Collection, England.

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### Literature

(2011, October 31). Zonaro, Fausto. Benezit Dictionary of Artists. Retrieved 8 Sep. 2025, from <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/benezit/view/10.1093/benz/9780199773787.001.0001/acref-9780199773787-e-00202341>.

De Amicis, *Constantinople*, with an introduction by Umberto Eco, Trans. Stephen Parkin, Richmond, Surrey, Alma Books Ltd., 2013.

Zonaro, Fausto. *Twenty Years under the Reign of Abdulhamid, The Memoirs and Works of Fausto Zonaro*, Translated by Turan Alptekin and Lotto Romano, Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Publications, 2008.

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In this painting, we find ourselves on the Galata Bridge, seen through the eyes of the northern Italian Orientalist painter Fausto Zonaro (1854-1929). The Galata is a 490-metre bridge extending across the Golden Horn, where East meets West in a daily exchange of culture, commerce, and human connection. Merchants are hawking their wares, while the call to prayer echoes from the Yeni Cami's minarets. This is a space where the Islamic soul of the old Imperial city reaches out to its European quarters, creating one of history's most vibrant crossroads. In the middle of the bridge, Zonaro captures a moment of humanity. A street vendor with a tray of fresh *pide* — a Turkish flatbread with savoury toppings — greets his first customer of the day. Before him stands a reddish-brown dog, standing on point, nose stretched forward in that familiar canine pose of hopeful anticipation. It is not just a picturesque detail; in the Islamic tradition, showing kindness to all creatures is a sacred duty. The street vendor will almost certainly share one of these tasty snacks with his four-legged customer, continuing a tradition of caring for street animals that has defined this city for centuries. The figure of the striking woman in the foreground of the painting, in a blue dress, her face framed with a white embroidered hijab and softened by a sheer veil, captures the viewer's attention. In her right hand she holds prayer beads while a basket hangs from her left arm. Whereas the other figures in this bustling scene go about their daily business, she looks directly at the artist with warmth. The model is likely to be Zonaro's wife, Elisabetta, who he is known to have used as a model in some of his Constantinople scenes.

The artist was born into a humble family on 18 September 1854 in the Masi region of Padua, then part of the Austrian Empire. Fausto's father, Maurizio Zonaro, a stonemason, and his mother, Elisabetta Bertoncin, hoped that young Fausto would follow in his father's footsteps and become a mason; however, Zonaro displayed a prodigious talent for drawing at an early age and enrolled at the Technical Institute in Lendinara, in the province of Rovigo, to begin his training. He later studied at the Cignaroli Academy in Verona, where he was mentored by the Venetian realist painter Napoleone Nani (1841-1899). After completing his studies, Zonaro established a small painting school at the Palazzo Pesaro, located on the Grand Canal in Venice. It



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was there that he met fellow artist and future wife Elisabetta Pante (1863–1946), who, as a talented photographer as well as a painter, enrolled as a student at Zonaro's school.

The Italian writer Edmondo De Amici (1846-1908) proved instrumental in inspiring Zonaro and Elisabetta's journey to the Ottoman Empire. De Amicis's popular travel narrative *Constantinopoli*, first published in 1877, became one of Zonaro's most treasured books and profoundly influenced his decision to explore Turkey. Elisabetta preceded Zonaro to Constantinople, where the couple would eventually marry in 1892 at the Catholic Cathedral of St. Esprit, making a life for themselves in the city. During her initial months there, she demonstrated remarkable initiative, establishing crucial connections within the artistic community through the Italian Embassy—relationships that would prove invaluable to Fausto's career. She supported herself by teaching drawing and Italian language to children while securing lodgings in Pera (now Beyoğlu), the bustling commercial quarter that housed the European embassies. Upon his arrival, Zonaro was immediately captivated by Constantinople's extraordinary beauty. His subsequent paintings would provide a vivid visual counterpart to De Amicis's poetic descriptions, particularly the writer's evocative account of arriving in Istanbul on a mist-shrouded morning.

*“.. the fog parted on every side, and through its rifts, mosques, towers, patches of verdure, houses upon houses gleamed; and as we went on, the city rose higher, and her grand, irregular, fantastic roofscape could be seen more and more distinctly, white, green, pink, and glittering in the light, while the gentle slopes of the Seraglio Hill could already be made out against the receding fog. Four miles off the city, all that part of Stamboul that faces the Sea of Marmara, lay spread out before us ...”*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> De Amicis, *Constantinople*, with an introduction by Umberto Eco, Trans. Stephen Parkin, Richmond, Surrey, Alma Books Ltd., 2013, p.9.

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In Constantinople, Zonaro worked tirelessly to gain entry into aristocratic circles, and in 1896, he was appointed as the court painter to Sultan Abdul Hamid II. The Sultan commissioned Zonaro to create a series of history paintings depicting events from the life of Sultan Mehmet II. As a result, Zonaro felt a kinship with the Venetian Renaissance artist Gentile Bellini, who visited the Ottoman capital in 1479 to paint Mehmet II's portrait, now displayed in London's National Gallery (Fig. 1). Abdulhamid II refused to sit for a portrait, though he acquiesced before the end of his reign, conferring this honour upon Zonaro, who once wrote,

*"Like Bellini painting the portrait of Mehmed the Conqueror, as a Venetian painter, I'd like to paint your portrait as well."*<sup>2</sup> Zonaro worked across various genres, but some of his most striking canvases were cityscapes.

He painted the Galata Bridge on many occasions. Arguably, his most famous work was *The Ertugral Cavalry Regiment Crossing the Galata Bridge*, 1901 (Fig. 2), which was a contributory factor in securing Zonaro's position as Court Painter in 1896. In the painting shown below, the Ottoman Imperial Guard, an elite cavalry force whose duty was to protect the sultan and his family, participated in official processions across the Galata Bridge. The Sultan regularly moved between his residence at the Yildiz Palace and the imperial office, which would have taken the cavalry across the Bridge.

Zonaro's scenes exhibit an almost photographic realism, and it is known that he drew inspiration from his wife's photographs, as well as de Amicis's evocative penmanship. Zonaro was forced to leave Istanbul following the deposition of the Sultan in 1909, making it impossible to maintain his position as Court Painter. He returned to his native Italy, settling in Sanremo on the Italian Riviera and spent his time creating small-scale paintings depicting the Ligurian Coast and the French Riviera for well-heeled tourists. Even so, he continued to paint nostalgic scenes of the Bosphorus

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<sup>2</sup> Fausto Zonaro: Sultan Abdulhamid II's Sole Portrait Painter, Istanbul: Daily Sabah, January 2018. <https://www.dailysabah.com/portrait/2018/01/29/fausto-zonaro-sultan-abdulhamid-iis-sole-portrait-painter> accessed 9 September 2025.



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and paintings commissioned by patrons who appreciated his Turkish subjects. Zonaro died in Sanremo in July 1929, and his memoir, *Twenty Years of the Reign of Abdul Hamid*, was published posthumously in 2011.



Fig. 1 Gentile Bellini, *The Sultan Mehmet II*, 1480. The National Gallery, London NG3099.

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Fig. 2 Fausto Zonaro, *The Ertugral Cavalry Regiment Crossing the Galata Bridge*, 1901. Milli Saraylar Resim Müseisi, Istanbul.

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