

The Ancient Craft of Parchment-Making In Western Turkey, 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAAO2b9Mguw>

Narrator: İsmail Araç is one of the last artisans in the world who still makes parchment completely by hand. The 92-year-old spends one hour scraping every single piece of hair off a sheepskin.

İsmail: Gücüm yok, gücüm yetmiyor. Ama hevesliyim.

Narrator: It can take a month to make one of the most durable canvases in the world. But this art nearly disappeared when mass-produced paper became a cheaper and faster alternative. And İsmail has struggled for years to find apprentices to train.

İsmail: Ben şimdi bunlara öğretmesem, burada bu iş kapanır. Bitti. Bergama Parçümen diye kapanır.

Narrator: We went to Bergama in western Turkey to learn how this ancient craft is still standing. İsmail buys sheep and goat skins from a local warehouse. After doing it for 70 years, he can spot high-quality ones quickly.

İsmail : Her deriden olmaz. Öyle delikli, arızalıysa onları almıyoruz, onları bırakıyoruz. Bunun iyisini seçiyoruz biz, bakıyoruz, iyi deriyi...

Narrator: He puts on his work clothes, tough boots, and a homespun nylon apron and begins the day. This was once a popular area for tanneries but now only İsmail's stone workshop has survived. He knew he was interested in making parchment since he was just 6 years old. He remembers leather tanners and parchment makers cleaning their hides near his home.

İsmail: Bizimkiler burada bıçaklar bu kadar, houuv, houuv, sen, ödümüz patlıyordu biz oradan, yolu var, çalışılan yerin.

Narrator: He started his career as a leather tanner, too. Many of the skills he learned helped him master parchment-making.

İsmail: Beş sene dolunca ben sanatı tamamen öğrendim. Ustama dedim, “Usta, bana izin ver, ben kendi başıma işleyeceğim.”

Narrator: First, he uses a pump to wash the skins.

İsmail: Şimdi, deride tuz var. Tuzla olduğu zaman zarar verir, perçumene yaramaz.

Narrator: He hangs the hides for 10 minutes before soaking them in lime water. The calcium hydroxide breaks down the hair and excess fat. The chemicals are harsh on human skin, but İsmail never wears gloves.

İsmail: İlla o deriyi alacağım elime. Bundan ekmek yiyorum.

Narrator: The hides soak for five days. He has to be careful not to leave them in for too long.

İsmail: Kabarıyor, daha çok şey yaparsan, geç bırakırsan elinde kalır, pelte olur, tutarsız böyle elinde patır patır akar.

Narrator: This block of wood helps İsmail keep the hides in place as he cleans. Scraping the hair off is the most physically demanding part of the job. The curved knife, called a kavaleta, is extremely sharp, so he has to be precise to avoid damaging the skin.

İsmail: Elini oynattın mı, tamam, pencere.

Narrator: İsmail bends and scrapes both sides of the hide to get it as smooth as possible.

İsmail: Tabak çilemek hareketli iş, canlı iş, canlı. Herkes yapamaz.

Narrator: For years, he did this work alone. It was not easy to find an apprentice willing to follow in his footsteps.

İsmail: Bende şimdi iki tane çocuk var. Deri dedin mi kaçır. Ev kokmuş. Ne kokmuş?
Tuzlu deri.

Narrator: İsmail nails the hide into a wooden board to stretch and dry. These nails are as old as he is.

İsmail: Ustamdan gördüm, bu çiviler, ustamdan kalma. Ne zamanın çivisi bunlar. Tahminim 33 yılları, 1933 yılları. Öteki çivilerle denedim, denedim öbür çivilerle de, elimi kan içinde bıraktı.

Narrator: He leaves the hides to dry for up to five days.

İsmail: Bunu yapmazsan perçümen olmaz. Şey kalır, katlanır, ufalır, küçücük kalır. O deri söner bak, kuruyunca ben tamam, der, oldum.

Narrator: Parchment was first used over 2,000 years ago. It was invented in the ancient Greek city of Pergamon and became the main writing material across Europe by the Middle Ages. Its durability made it ideal for manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Magna Carta, and the Constitution of the United States. Early Christian monks wrote religious texts and formal documents on it. But gradually, paper took over as it became easier and cheaper to mass-produce. By the 15th century, scribes all over Europe had mostly switched to paper. The market for parchment dwindled, and in the following centuries, it never recovered. İsmail says many stopped making parchment altogether in his lifetime, but his passion for the craft kept him going.

İsmail: Rahatlıyor, vücudum rahatlıyor. Öyle ki, sanki gençleşiyorum. Ben buna aşkıttım. Bana zanaatmışım, bakkalmış, hiçbirinde gözüm yok. İlla alıcam o kokuyu. İlla o deriyi alıcam elime.

Narrator: He's sold parchment to tourists and relied on leather sales to stay afloat. In 2006, he partnered with the Bergama Culture and Art Foundation to open the city's only parchment store: Pergamon Parchment. His reputation as a master parchment maker is what attracted local artists, Meltem Demirel and her husband, Sinan. The couple started out working in the store: painting, cutting, and packaging parchment for sale. Eventually, İsmail took them under his wing and accepted them as apprentices.

Meltem: İřin iine girdikten sonra zorluęunu ğreniyorsun, ama sabrın sonunda da iř daha da gzelleřiyor. Aynı zamanda bir terapi gibi. Parřomen aynı zamanda lmsz bir kaęıt. Parřomenin zerine ne yazarsanız yazın kalır. Yani, vardır ya bir sz, hani, sz uar yazı kalır.

Narrator: Today, Meltem is also a master. But the couple still values still values İsmail's guidance.

İsmail: Tamam, řimdi yanlarını yap biraz.

Meltem: řuraları?

İsmail: He.

Meltem: İsmail Amca, Allah razı olsun, gerekten bize ok gzel řeyler ęretti.

Narrator: Now, they both run the shop by themselves. But just like İsmail did before them, the couple has struggled to find young people interested in learning the craft.

Sinan: ıraklar dkkanımıza geliyor ilk bařta, iki hafta duruyor, ertesı gn yok ocuk. E ne oldu? ok pis, ok kokulu, diyorlar.

Meltem: Tabi ki kokuyacak yani, burası lavanta bahesi deęil. Burası parřomen evi.

Narrator: Other than that, Meltem says business is going well. They work with government agencies that still use parchment paper for official records. And ship it to customers all over the world. But their main clients live in the city. Clients, like Fatıma Kayalı, who started using the material for her artwork 30 years ago. Today she gets her parchment exclusively from Meltem and Sinan.

Fatma: Parřomen milli kaęıdımız. Bizim salatamızda buluşması ona eksta bir deęer katıyor diye dřnyorum nk.

Narrator: Fatma showcases her work depicting scenes from nature at exhibits around the world.

Fatma: Emekle sevgiyle yapılmış işlerin ölümsüz olduğunu düşünüyorum. Çünkü doğada hiçbir şey kaybolmuyor aslında. Her şeyin bir dönüşüm hikayesi var.

Narrator: The physically demanding nature of parchment making became too difficult for İsmail and in 2020, he had to stop working full time. But Meltem and Sinan are determined to pick up where he left off.

Sinan: Bir kağıda can veriyorsun, milattan önce bulunan bir kağıdı tekrar yaşatmaya çalışıyorsun.

Narrator: The couple is now teaching the history of parchment at schools and through workshops to younger children.

Meltem: 10 sene sonra, 15 sene sonra o çocuklar bize gelecek. Çıraklar yetiştirmeye başlayacağız ileride, inşallah. Umutluyum, parşömenin geleceği ile ilgili çok büyük planlarımız var.

Narrator: As İsmail nears 100, he's focused on the legacy of the craft in Bergama, and he's confident he's left it in the right hands.

İsmail: Ben huzurlu olayım, hah, diyorum, benim, diyoru, öğrendiğim sanatı almışlar, diyorum. Anya'dan Konya'dan değil gene İsmail'den aldılar.

End of narration

Text scrolling over the film while music plays:

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