

In Search Of: Ottoman Empire textiles at the Textile Museum in Washington

The Sultan's Garden: The Blossoming of Ottoman Art September 21, 2012 through March 10, 2013 Textile Museum, Washington DC

Historic textiles hold many stories when presented in a context that can easily be expanded to take viewers on journeys of knowledge or curiosity. For me, it is a journey of curiosity. While attending the 2012 Textile Society of America's symposium "Textiles and Politics" in Washington D.C., I had the opportunity to visit Washington's Textile Museum and see "The Sultan's Garden: The Blossoming of Ottoman Art". Reflecting on this exhibition and looking through the lens of "Textiles and Politics", I am hoping to understand specific objects/artifacts on display as they reference the complex mediations that operated with in vast geographical region that was the Ottoman Empire and its support of textile production and trade.

"Ottoman art reflects the wealth, abundance, and influence of an empire which spanned seven centuries and, at its height, three continents. The Sultan's Garden chronicles how stylized tulips, carnations, hyacinths, honeysuckles, roses, and rosebuds came to embellish nearly all media produced by the Ottoman court beginning in the mid-16th century. These instantly recognizable elements became the brand of the empire, and synonymous with its power. Incredibly, the development of this design identity can be attributed to a single artist, Kara Memi, working in the royal arts workshop of Istanbul. The Sultan's Garden unveils the influence of Ottoman floral style and traces its continuing impact through the textile arts—some of the most luxurious and technically complex productions of the empire."

Fragment of kemha Istanbul first half 17th century The Textile Museum 1994.27.3, Gift of Neutrogena Corporation, 67.8 x 29 cm (26½ x 11½ inches), 1

The Sultan's Garden is lush -- dense with flat and pile woven textiles, resplendent in coiled gold and silver threads. The Turks gave western culture the rose, the tulip and an incredibly large visual vocabulary of stylized floral imagery that generally comes to us in the forms of ceramics and textiles. While some may see "Aniconism" (the restrictions on depicting sentient living beings (human figure) by Muslim art) as a restriction on the human imagination, this exhibition lays that absurd notion to rest if anybody who has ever looked at Islamic art and decoration still thinks that. What is fascinating about this exhibition is the range of "product"; the floral imagery is embedded (woven) in and embellished with (embroidery or printed) as well as the geographical sites of production. At its height the expanse of Ottoman empire included parts of Asia, Persia, North Africa and Eastern Europe and therefore included regional textile practices that adapted to the rules as they changed depending on who was currently in charge as in any political or religious regime.

When objects such as these are presented in a historical context in a museum setting, the material, method of production, site of production, ethnic and or regional origins, intended markets and provenance, then the journey the object took to end up on display becomes part of the presentation. The material/ fibre i.e.: wool, silk, linen, cotton, raffia, the complex or simple weave structures, surface pattern/ design, whether imbed by structure and yarn colour or applied as embellishment are intrinsic to the appearance of the object; they are equally important to appreciating the work. The shared floral motifs were created because of the Muslim beliefs of the makers/manufacturers or their eye to the market place in the upper echelons of the Ottoman Empire and/or those following the style influence of the Ottoman Court on other European Courts.

There were three pieces in this exhibition that caught my eye; A scrap of green ground "kemha" silk fabric made in Istanbul during the first half of the 17th century; a Sash, Sluck, Poland, Sluck Factory, circa 1758-1780; and a woman's Cap, Damascus or Aleppo, Syria, around 1800. While each is beautiful, finally woven and features floral motifs, their points of origins/ manufacture and position within the textile trade are equally interesting. The textural information provided with each builds this story of trade.

Since the 1954 exhibition Ancient Arts of the Andes, at the Museum of Modern Art mounted by curator René d'Harnoncourt, we have been given permission to view such things for their artistic merit rather than as ethnographic materials. As of the 1970s we are allowed to divorce textile objects from the methods of making and intended function while at the same time giving them the veneer of the socio-political voice of the "Anonymous

Maker” as seen through a feminist prism and assumed to be female. While Marx, Engel and Morris in the 1850s sought to give a context in which to situate a discourse on “production for use” and dignity to both the maker and the object, 170 years later we are directed away from acknowledging use or needing to recognize material and technique thus rejecting the skill and knowledge held by those anonymous makers.

Applying a social economic lens and or scientific analysis to the fibre content and dye stuff to the objects is a current trend (this science has been the backbone to textile conservation but behind the scenes) It is by combining all of these different points of departure that exhibitions of historic textiles have currency which can only add value to contemporary practices. The Sultan's Garden: The Blossoming of Ottoman Art the exhibition and catalogue brings all together in a stunning package. Sumru Belger Krody the Senior Curator of Eastern Hemisphere Collections at The Textile Museum has done a structural analysis of the pieces and the curators provide a context in which to view them.

This is the information provided for the scrap of green ground “kemha” silk, fabric from the catalogue, p 92 the Classical Ottoman Floral Style, 19

“This small fragment from a well-known bolt of mid sixteenth-century Ottoman kemha, now divided up among several collections, represents one of the earliest impacts of the floral style on Istanbul kemha weaving. The tulips, with their three segmented petals, are placed within small deeply-serrated gold (silver-wrapped yellow silk) medallions, themselves crowned by finials that both recall Ottoman carnation petals, and more importantly, show a striking parallel with Italian silk velvet design, as manifested in the Berlin portrait by Pollaiuolo (fig.4).'

Portrait of a Lady, Circa 1460-65 by Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo; oil and tempura on panel, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 1614 3

This resemblance demonstrates the important relationship between Italian and Ottoman design up to the time of Rüstem Pasa’s decision to develop a more distinctive Ottoman ‘brand’ it also underlines the impact of the very influential Italian velvet-weaving tradition on the early development of Ottoman floral kemha designs in mid-century Istanbul. The scale-like textured pattern of the thick ogival vines is also clearly influenced by contemporary Italian velvet design. Probably from the same fabric length as Bilgi 2007, pp.36-37.” 2

The above information provides insight into the role of textiles and “fashion” in establishing a “Brand” but also hints at the trade relations between the Ottoman Muslims and the European Christians. While strategically controlling the gateway between the Silk Road and the markets of the West by the end of the Ottoman Classic period (1299-1789), Italy and France had well established silk industries producing designs and goods and their dependence on an eastern supply was limited. As they were producing for the lucrative Ottoman market, they in turn developed a “Made It the Ottoman Empire” attitude that was responsible for the production of the fragment of kemha cloth on display. It is the next object I will look at next that representative of the extreme balancing act of managing political, territorial, ethnic and religious practices in the landmass which comprised the Ottoman Empire at its height.

Sash, Sluck, Poland, Sluck Factory, Circa 1758-1780. The Textile Museum 82.3, Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1947 392 x 35.5 cm (154½ x 14 inches) The “sash” from the Sluck Factory in appearance has a variety of carnations in the borders, interior horizontal stripes which take up the main ground and larger plant at the end of the sash; this sash also has a left/ right division of flower colour orange on the left red on the right. We are informed that the sash was made circa 1758-1780; it is from the Sluck factory (1758- 1894) in Poland (Sluck is located in modern Belarus). I was intrigued by this and had to do some research to find out about the Sluck factory in historic Poland and its position in the Ottoman Empire Classical Era (1299-1789) and Modern Era (1789-1856). In doing so, I discovered the published research of Phyllis Ackerman (b. Oakland, California, 1893; d. Shiraz, 25 January 1977), author, editor, teacher and translator in the fields of Persian textiles, European tapestries, Chinese bronzes, iconography, and symbolism. It was in her article on Polish Belts in the Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club, volume 13, 1929, that I found my first clues into the components of the balancing act of Ottoman textile production.

“The Sluck factory was founded under the patronage of Prince Michael Casimir Radziwill in 1758. The first Superintendent was an Armenian, possibly of Hungarian origin, Jean Mazzarian whose name took the Polish form Mazarski. He carried on the work with 24 looms until 1780 and made not only sashes but silks of many patters. 1 Sashes signed with his name, in Russian characters, are comparatively rare. Pieces signed simply with the place name in Russian characters are probably principally from his period but are almost equally rare.

Jean was succeeded by his son Leon who controlled the factory from 1780-1794 employing thirty workman. He became a naturalized Pole in 1790 received a court appointment. 2 he signed his name in Russian characters and examples of his work are numerous. The next notable director was Josef Borsuk who was superintendent between 1807 and 1844. The factory was greatly reduced in size at this time. His signature, also in Russian characters, consist of his last name and place name, Occasional examples have only the first two letters of his name. A hybrid signature appears on one

piece in the Cracow Museum, Sluck and the last two syllables of Marjarski in Russian on one end and the Borsuk mark on the other.

A number of scarves bear only the name Sluck in Roman Letters or Me fecit Sluciae. Judging from the style, these often date from the interim period between Leo Marzarski and Borsuk. Others are subsequent of Borsuk. The factory continued until 1894” 3.

While Phyllis Ackerman wrote this in 1929; much of her published research has been the background/ base for exhibitions of Ottoman Empire and other eastern textiles that have featured “Sashes” in the decades following. More recent articles have added a more complicated story to the “Sash”. (see Anna Muthesius, "Silk in the Medieval World." in “the Cambridge History of Western Textiles”. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003 and Manfred Holst and Maria Taszycka, "Symbols of Nationhood: History of the Polish Sash," London: Hali Publications, v. 17, no. 6, issue 84 (Jan/Feb. 1996): 72-77). Using these essays

Emily R. Sprouse wrote (while in the Art History M.A. Program at George Mason University - Fairfax, Virginia) in “The Polish Sash: it's Role in Polish National Formal Dress and National Identity” that Europe had long been at war with the East, and trade goods from the Eastern countries and empires were desired and fashionable. Rug, carpets, silks had all become part of the standard "treasure troves" of accumulated goods and accoutrements of the aristocracy. Persian, Indian, and Turkish trade goods had long been introduced to Europe, and by the 16th century "Turkish sashes were imported into Poland by Italian and Turkish merchants."3 Persian sashes were also imported around the same time period, and their "distinctive naturalistic, floral designs 4 " made them easily identifiable.

Interestingly enough, the demand for these sashes increased in Poland. In 1722, trade with Persia ceased, and Armenians living in Istanbul took over production of the Persia style sashes.5 At this point, some of these Armenians moved to Poland to "increase their quality of living" and so the production of the sashes relocated to Poland. Some of these migrants were located on the "estates of major landowners"6 although later the large-scale manufacturing of these sashes was related to small towns, the first of which was SBuck.7 "The SBuck manufactory created a particular type of sash, based on Eastern and primarily Persian models, from which the composition, motifs and weaving technique (weft-faced compound tabby) were adapted."8

She also writes:“The sashes produced in Poland are further proof that, both due to political/regime change and changes/limitations in trade, it was impossible to create a product that lacked outside influence. In fact, the sash itself is a singular example of an imported heritage item... The sash would be wrapped and folded around the kontusz in a manner directly parallel to the Eastern dress robes worn by the Turks and Persians.” .3

Cap, Damascus or Aleppo, Syria. Around 1800, Private Collection, Height: 17.78 cm (7 inches), diameter: 12.7 cm (5 in).

There is one last object I would like to mention and it was for me is a perfect object. This woman’ s cap is a dome composed of four more or less triangular silk tapestry woven panels With the wefts running vertically, sewn together with a tassel added at the top. This finely woven piece has discontinuous warp yarns of silver metal wrapped white silk as the main background with the tulips being created with 5 colors: red, pink, 3 shades of green silk yarns, it sparkles. All of the pieces I chose to present are silk and for the high end market. That is not to say they are the best or most interesting pieces. All of the pieces on display had their own draw, beauty, and skilled execution of the numerous textile construction techniques.

I have also included the image of the “Portrait of a Lady” because it is important to acknowledge the wealth of visual evidence of textiles in contexts that dominate art historical paintings, sculptures and back the archaeological record. It is this back and forth influences within the textiles circulating throughout the Ottoman Empire and into and out of the European market place that every object in the exhibition brings with them. This can provide hours of luxurious reading after the show has been seen. However, it is the appearance of the textiles themselves that made the show worth seeing. Images:

1. Fragment of kemha Istanbul first half 17th century The Textile Museum 1994.27.3, Gift of Neutrogena Corporation, 67.8 x 29 cm (26½ x 11½ inches),

Photo Credit:provided by the Textile Museum, Washington used by permission 2. Portrait of a Lady, Circa 1460-65 by Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo; oil and tempura on panel,

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 1614 3. Photo Credit: bpk, Berlin / Gemaeldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany / Joerg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY3. Sash, Sluck, Poland, Sluck Factory, Circa 1758-1780. The Textile Museum 82.3, Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1947 392 x 35.5 cm (154½ x 14 inches) provided by the Textile Museum, Washington

used by permission

4. Cap, Damascus or Aleppo, Syria. Around 1800, Private Collection, Height: 17.78 cm (7 inches), diameter: 12.7 cm (5 in).

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Notes

1 Press release Textile Museum website

<http://textilemuseum.org/exhibitions/SultansGarden.html>2 from catalogue, p 92 the Classical Ottoman Floral Style, 19

3. Ackerman, Phyllis “polish belts” the Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club, volume 13 1929 - University of Arizona - Computer Science Department

www.cs.arizona.edu/patterns/weaving/articles/nb29_blt.pdf Accessed January 14, 2013

4. Sprouse Emily R. The "Polish" Sash: it's Role in Polish National Formal Dress and National Identity, website

<http://elementsofculturalhistory.com/polishsash2.html> Accessed June 12, 2013Read Textile Museums Gallery Guide for the Blossoming of the Sultan's Garden Exhibition on line at Issue http://issuu.com/textile_museum/docs/sultans-garden-gallery-guide?e=3723601/2279283