

“Cultural exchanges between the Ottoman world and Latinate Europe”
in *The Sultan’s World, The Ottoman Orient in Renaissance Art*, ed. by Robert Born,
Michał Dziewulski, Guido Messling, exhib. cat., Brussels, Centre for Fine Arts, 2015.

During the 1400s, 1500s and 1600s, the inhabitants of France, the Habsburg Empire and Venice when writing about the Ottoman world, mostly expressed a profound conviction that the sultans and the Islamic religion that they represented were the ‘archenemies of Christendom’. As for the Ottoman authors who touched upon the topic – due to the absence of printing, the number of relevant texts is much smaller – they also saw the ‘king of Vienna’ as the Habsburg sovereign was often called, as an ‘unbelieving’ enemy who had simply usurped the imperial title. For after the conquest of Constantinople and the acquisition of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the Ottoman sultan was the only sovereign who could legitimately claim a paramount status over other, lesser rulers. At least this was the opinion of Süleyman the Lawgiver (or the Magnificent, as he was often called in European sources, r. 1520-66).¹ Furthermore the popes of the early modern period were often active in promoting alliances between Catholic rulers against ‘the infidel’; and in Ottoman eyes, the pope of Rome (*Rimpapa*) was an enemy whose capital was a ‘red apple’ (*kızıl elma*), this term denoting a city whose conquest was on the agenda.²

However in the end, the anti-Ottoman alliances promoted by the popes were mostly of short duration, with especially the Venetians tending to rapidly end wars in which they had originally joined with much fanfare, in order to protect their Mediterranean trade. It was due to a major change of the political and commercial context, namely the precipitous decline of Venetian commerce in the ‘Levante’ that the Holy League founded in 1684 lasted till the actual conclusion of the war in 1699. Thus quite often, the popes had very little to show for the elevated subsidies that they had paid out to supposedly crusading monarchs. Conversely the Ottoman conquest of Vienna and Rome never took place; nor did the sultans ever besiege Venice, during the 1400s and 1500s still the capital of an – albeit contracting – seaborne empire. However these statements are based on hindsight: in the late 1400s, Ottoman raiders devastated Friuli, and supposedly the smoke of burning villages was visible from the Venetian bell towers.³ But in times of peace, commercial relations between Venice and Istanbul were close, and the Serenissima was almost the only Christian government that allowed sizeable numbers of Muslim merchants to visit its port.

¹ Veinstein, 1997.

² Fodor 2000.

³ Pedani, 2010, p. 58.

Thus there was a gap, often quite wide, between bellicose statements and short-term aggression on the one hand and *longue durée* linkages on the other. For in practice people, goods and information circulated quite widely across political and religious divides. But in Latinate Europe and also in the Ottoman context, such ‘exotic’ persons and things would be accessible to some few people and not to others. Thus Ottoman angora fabrics, soft and translucent as silk, might be quite common in late sixteenth-century Venice, but were not often seen in England or Denmark. Similarly, an Ottoman scholar and sea captain such as Piri Reis (d. 1553-54) might have access to new European maps that remained quite unknown to scholars from a less cosmopolitan background.⁴ When discussing the movement of persons and goods both material and immaterial, we thus need to specify the hosts and recipients, and find out what they did with the goods and information to which they had access. To summarize: social status, education, place of residence, gender and other factors combined to make certain material goods and elements of knowledge easy to locate -- or else totally inaccessible.

From West to East: Printing in Venice and Rome for Near Eastern Readers

In the early days of printing, broadsheets with news both real and invented reached a non-elite market throughout Latinate Europe, while schools and scholars needed standardized texts for classroom use. All these items were printed in the Latin alphabet. However Ancient Greek had by this time found a place in the curricula of the more demanding schools, so that larger print-shops found it useful to work with Greek characters as well. But at least in Venice, there was also a market for texts in the vernacular Greek of the late middle ages. After all in spite of territorial losses to the sultans’ armies and navies, the Serenissima of the 1500s still had a significant number of Greek-speaking subjects. For its colonial empire included Cyprus until the 1570s and Crete throughout the period under discussion; the Ottomans only conquered the latter island in the mid-seventeenth century.

Greek-speaking inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire might also be interested in the products of the Venetian presses; for while Jews had printed books on Ottoman territory ever since the 1490s, in the period discussed here, books in Greek were not printed locally. Certainly the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Cyril Lucaris had in the early 1600s tried to establish a printing press in Istanbul.⁵ But due to a combination of impediments from the Ottoman government and from the patriarch’s foreign Catholic opponents, this press had a rather limited output. In consequence quite a few Venetian publishers printed works in Greek

⁴ Piri Reis, 2002; Soucek, 1992.

⁵ Hering, 1968, pp. 161-76.

for a non-scholarly public; apart from religious texts customers could buy romances in verse and in prose.⁶

Less successful were the attempts of publishers in Italy to produce books in Arabic; competent proof-readers were few and far between and printers often failed to produce the ligatures between characters indispensable to printing in Arabic. Even so, particularly in Rome, religious texts were printed for the use of missionaries attempting to convert Ottoman Christians to Catholicism. Moreover in the 1980s a printed sixteenth-century Qur'an 'made in Venice' was discovered in a local library; no other copies having come to light, the purpose of this enterprise remains unclear.⁷ At the same time, Venetian map-makers were quite willing to invent Arab origins for their products if such claims made them more acceptable to customers from the Islamic world. The most obvious example is the so-called map of Hajji Ahmed, for which the printers posited a Tunisian author; but present-day scholars agree that this personage was perhaps a collaborator in an enterprise otherwise dominated by Venetians.⁸

From East to West: The Trans-Mediterranean Travels of Book-bindings

If printed books thus travelled from Venice to the eastern Mediterranean, the reverse was true for bindings. In the age of manuscripts, high production costs meant that their owners usually sent them to the binders; for texts on parchment, inhabitants of Latinate Europe used heavy wooden boards covered with cloth or leather.⁹ By the 1400s books normally were written/printed on paper and given the fragility of the latter covers were even more necessary.

By the mid-1400s patrons and artists active in Florence and Padua began to use decorated leather in the Mamluk or Ottoman style for the bindings of manuscripts they planned to present to high-ranking patrons. Some wealthy owners even sent their manuscripts to be bound in Egypt or Syria and at a later stage, to Istanbul.¹⁰ Blind-tooling and later on, tooling in gold were especially esteemed types of ornamentation imported from the Islamic world. Moreover when printed books became more frequent in the late 1400s and early 1500s, printers/publishers sought for even more unusual bindings to attract wealthy customers; for the printed works of this period were still expensive enough to feature as luxury items.¹¹ In the university town of Padua, part of the Venetian *terraferma*, binders produced filigree cut-

⁶ Layton, 1994, pp. XXI-XXXII.

⁷ Vercellin, 2000.

⁸ Arbel, 2002.

⁹ Mack, 2002, pp. 125-37.

¹⁰ Mack, 2002, pp. 125, 127, 131.

¹¹ Grube, 2006.

outs placed over a coloured background, a technique imported from Egypt and Syria; these areas were to become Ottoman provinces but a few decades later.

In the age of printing, as we have seen, publishing and commercializing printed books became a significant economic activity. In this as in other crafts, the extensive use of models from the Islamic world became typical of Venetian -- rather than Florentine -- manufactures. Some bindings from Venice resemble lacquer-work; however the resinous substance upon which true lacquer is based was as yet unknown outside of China and Japan. Thus binders from the Islamic world used a preparation of gypsum on a wooden base, a technique soon imitated in Venice. As an alternative, what might be called 'Venetian lacquer' was made by heavy varnishing, so that the under-lying leather became almost unrecognizable. Remarkably it was especially the bindings of appointment documents given to doges and other high Venetian officials that showed these 'ottomanizing' features. Apparently the use of pseudo-Ottoman/ Islamic bindings had no political implications: one such work was dated to 1572, when the Veneto-Ottoman war over Cyprus (1570-73) was still raging.¹² In some cases, Venetian imitations of Ottoman or Iranian bindings were so close to the originals that at first glance, it is possible to confuse them. As an example, we might refer to the binding of Giovanni Giocondo da Verona's *Syllogus* that even featured the 'Chinese cloud' motif so beloved by Ottoman faience painters.¹³ But in most cases, the patrons apparently wanted 'Italian' touches including stamps visibly inspired by Roman coins.¹⁴

Textiles on the Move

In early modern Europe, book-binders and their patrons thus 'acclimatized' design motifs from the Islamic world. By contrast, the art of making rugs and carpets with pile did not spread widely beyond the Ottoman borders, one of the few exceptions being the French carpets made in the Savonnerie manufactures. But the latter prospered mainly during the seventeenth century and thus will not concern us here. On the other hand, the importation of carpets from the Islamic world was widespread; even in a small town such as Ferrara around 1500 there was an Egyptian who made a living as a rug trader.¹⁵ Anecdotal evidence apart, we possess numerous studies of Flemish, Italian Early Renaissance and late sixteenth-century Dutch paintings which show that from the 1400s onward, Anatolian carpets were reaching the

¹² Mack, 2002, p. 134.

¹³ Grube, 2006, p. 239.

¹⁴ Mack, 2002, p. 131.

¹⁵ Ricci, 2002, pp. 27-28.

-- economically speaking -- central lands of Latinate Europe in significant numbers.¹⁶

Unfortunately most of these items have long been lost; and therefore the study of paintings, whose survival rate has been much higher, has been an indispensable tool for the carpet historian. In international carpet terminology, also adopted by Turkish specialists, we thus find references to “Holbein carpets”. For Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543) frequently depicted carpets featuring a design consisting of large or smaller octogons, which were imports from Anatolia; but these pieces were manufactured over a period much longer than the brief life of the Renaissance artist.

However European painters and their patrons were interested in Middle Eastern carpets only at certain times and in certain places, namely when and where depicting the details of the ‘real world’ became a major concern. In fifteenth-century Flanders painters began to depict items of clothing and domestic interiors with special care, and early Renaissance painters in Italy showed the same inclination. A few High Renaissance masters, particularly Lorenzo Lotto (c. 1480 – c. 1557) continued this trend.

By contrast a dominant concern with classical antiquity, as was typical for Rafael or Michelangelo, was not very propitious for the depiction of textiles; and most baroque painters seem to have disdained the mundane world of which such items formed a part. However the archetypal baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) was a notable exception: extremely versatile, he adopted very different ways of viewing according to the subject of his painting and the preferences of his patrons. He thus produced a formal portrait of Lady Alethea Howard Countess of Arundel featuring a detailed depiction of the carpet under the feet of the English noblewoman.¹⁷

We possess but limited information on the routes by which Anatolian carpets reached Venice and Florence and through these trade centres, north-western Europe as well.¹⁸ However it is likely that certain carpets and even some kilims transited through the fair of Maşkolur in Central Greece; in 1569 a foundation of Süleyman the Lawgiver’s grand vizier Ibrahim Pasha (d. 1536) collected sales taxes from these textiles. Evidently Maşkolur was a meeting point of wholesalers, as the tax list providing information on this fair, contained only dues to be paid from the loads of carts, camels and horses. Exceptionally, the traders bringing in carpets from the Balkans, presumably in smaller numbers, paid their sales duties according

¹⁶ Among others: Aslanapa, 1988; Ydema, 1991; Spallanzani, 2007. For an easily accessible collection of relevant images see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oriental_carpets_in_Renaissance_painting (accessed on 25 June 2014).

¹⁷ The picture is in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich/Germany. For a reproduction see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alethea_Howard,_Countess_of_Arundel#mediaviewer/File:Peter_Paul_Rubens_005.jpg (accessed on 25 June 2014).

¹⁸ Faroqhi, 1978, pp. 60-61.

to the loads that the porters in their service could carry. We do not have any records penned by Venetian traders, or by locals who sold to Venetians visiting this fair. But quite probably, some of the carpets on view in the paintings of Renaissance artists had at one time changed owners on this site.

On the other hand, Ottoman silks, which today are much admired, in the 1500s appeared but rarely in Italy or France. While these textiles were to become quite popular in Poland and other countries of eastern Central Europe, this happened mainly in the 1600s, in other words after the period concerning us here.¹⁹ However fabrics made of angora wool (*sof*), at this time only available in Ankara, were of some commercial importance as apparent from the numerous *sof* traders recorded in the Venetian archives. Merchants from Ankara both Muslim and non-Muslim appeared in the Adriatic of the later 1500s with some regularity; many of the surviving records concern those who had been robbed, while exchanges without mishap have not often made it into the archives. Unfortunately the terminology in use often makes it difficult to distinguish between the fibre, the yarn and the finished cloth. But *sof* was admired for its silk-like fineness and the wavy designs otherwise known only from silk, while there is no evidence that manufactures producing textiles of this sort were active in Latinate Europe. Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that a sizeable share of the *sof* arriving in Venice had already been woven, dyed, and passed through the presses which gave the finished textile its characteristic sheen.²⁰

From the mid-sixteenth century onward woollen textiles produced in Venice for the Ottoman market began to move eastward; and this trade flourished for roughly a century, from about 1550 to 1650.²¹ These fabrics went mainly to the great consumer market of Istanbul, where they competed with the woollens manufactured by Jewish weavers in the Ottoman city of Salonika, and also with the English cloths that reached the Levant during the 1580s and 1590s. As for the Salonika weavers, they were literally caught between two fires. On the one hand, Venetian and English competition limited their markets at a time when the cash flow problems of the Ottoman treasury reduced the buying power of the Salonika manufacturers' regular customers. Furthermore the demand for ever more uniform cloth for the janissaries – for which the Ottoman administration paid modest prices, or demanded unpaid deliveries in lieu of taxes – made it yet more difficult to make ends meet. In addition the Venetians secured much of their raw wool from the Balkans, thus cutting into the supply

¹⁹ Atasoy, Denny, Mackee, Tezcan, 2001, p. 178; Atasoy and Uluç, 2012.

²⁰ Faroqi, 2013.

²¹ Sella, 1968.

available to the Salonika weavers.²² Certainly the latter enjoyed precedence because they served the Ottoman military, but sheep-breeders probably found ways of selling wool to whomever offered better prices.

At the same time the Venetian traders' ships were often in danger, as anybody will remember who has ever seen Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice'. Shakespeare's audiences must have been at least partially aware that when struggling to establish their trade in the Mediterranean, English seamen quite often resorted to outright piracy, and this cut-throat competition contributed to the decline of Venice in international trade.²³ To compensate, Venetian merchants sometime around 1600 tried to branch out into the Istanbul retail trade and once even received an official permission to do so. But the objections of local traders, who invoked the widespread custom that required foreigners to only sell wholesale, soon put an end to this enterprise.²⁴

Yet Venetian luxury trades destined for affluent Ottomans survived much better; for there were workshops in Venice that throughout the 1500s and beyond specialized in silks and velvets appealing to Ottoman elite tastes. Especially velvets whose pile had been cut at varying lengths so as to produce a relief-like surface seem to have interested the sultan's highest-ranking servitors, especially if dyed red. Certainly most of the Venetian velvet cloths which -- converted into caftans -- survive in the Topkapı Palace Museum must have been diplomatic gifts. But it is worth noting that even though 'in principle' Ottoman and Venetian silks differ in terms of technical characteristics, there are items which today's museum experts hesitate to attribute.²⁵ These similarities are even more intriguing as the manufacturers of silk cloth in other Italian centres did not produce designs which could have been confused with Ottoman workmanship. Typically, Venetian manufacturers took up the floral designs which had become a standby in sixteenth-century Ottoman art. Conversely, certain designers of Ottoman silks adopted the crown as a decorative motif, although no crowns were in use at the sultans' court. Perhaps these crowns took on a new identity as stylized baskets of flowers.

Raw Silk and Spices from further East, in Transit through Ottoman Emporia

Venetian and Genoese merchants had frequented the Mediterranean in the thirteenth century, when the Ottoman polity did not as yet exist, or at least was a very small principality. At that time, spices, particularly pepper, arrived from the Indian Ocean by way of Egypt; and by the

²² Braude, 1979.

²³ Tenenti, 1967.

²⁴ Veinstein, 2008.

²⁵ Sarjono, 2006; Boralevi, Ciampini, Contadini, 2006.

1400s the Mamluk sultans, in financial difficulties because of population losses due to plague, monopolized the entire supply available in Cairo and Alexandria. However Venetian merchants had some influence on prices, as they might refrain from purchasing or even sailing to Alexandria. But all these arrangements came to be under threat when in 1497-98 Vasco da Gama reached the western coast of India. From now onward the Portuguese crown not only marketed large quantities of pepper in Latinate Europe, its sea captains also tried to destroy the Indian Ocean trade between the Arabian Peninsula and India. Even worse, they began to threaten Red Sea ports including Jeddah. As maintaining a navy in the Red Sea was extremely expensive, the Mamluk sultans sought the aid of the Ottoman ruler Bayezid II (r. 1481-1512). Until this time, the rulers of Egypt and Syria had treated the 'upstart' Ottomans with some condescension and even fought an inconclusive war against them for the control of eastern Anatolia. But in the new situation, the Ottomans, who did possess a navy, had the upper hand. Venetian patrons and artists soon responded to this situation, when they highlighted the round 'Ottoman-style' turban instead of the high fan-like headdresses characteristic of Mamluk sultans.²⁶

In 1516-17, Bayezid's son and successor Selim I (r. 1512-20) destroyed what had once been the foremost power of the Islamic world in a single campaign, and thereby gained control of Egyptian resources including the spice trade. Fortunately for the Ottoman exchequer from the 1530s onward this commerce regained importance. For as the Portuguese were unable to shut down the Indian Ocean routes and the pepper they delivered was often sub-standard, the trade in spices through Egypt revived and prospered down to the late 1500s.²⁷ Only at the century's end did the Dutch conquer the Spice Islands and also monopolize the transport of pepper to the West, thus ending the Venetian role in this commerce. However Ottoman demand for pepper was not negligible either, and as the Dutch were not able to prevent Indian and other merchants from trading across the Indian Ocean, Istanbul continued to receive pepper through the Red Sea route; and as long as they controlled Yemen, the sultans had taxes from local ports partly collected in the form of pepper.²⁸

But apparently the Ottoman elite of the late 1500s no longer had the ambition of making Istanbul or Bursa into a centre of the international spice trade. While Mehmed II (r. 1451-81) and Bayezid II (r. 1481-1512) apparently had made attempts in that direction, the two Ottoman capitals required detours that were so great as to discourage merchants from Latinate Europe.

²⁶ Raby, 1983.

²⁷ Braudel, 1966, vol. 1, pp. 497-515.

²⁸ Sahillioğlu, 1985.

Traders from this area also visited Ottoman marts to buy raw silk from Iran; in this field they competed directly against the silk manufacturers of Bursa, who in the 1400s and 1500s purchased their raw silk from the same source.²⁹ As long as the manufacture of silks and velvets was virtually an Italian monopoly, the problem seems to have remained manageable; but difficulties for Ottoman producers began when in the late 1500s silk-weaving spread into north-western Europe too, and merchants from this area, with more capital resources, coped with rising prices better than Ottoman manufacturers.³⁰

A Silvery Tribute from Central Europe

Commercial profit may have been difficult to achieve, both for Ottoman and Venetian traders. However trade was not the only source of luxuries from Latinate Europe arriving in Istanbul: silver-work from Central Europe was frequently seen at the Ottoman court in the second half of the sixteenth century. After all, the Habsburgs needed to pay tribute to the sultan for the section of Hungary that they controlled, and they made some of these payments in the shape of silverware. Especially items incorporating clockwork from Augsburg or Nuremberg amused members of the Ottoman court, at least for a while; for ultimately these pieces mostly went to the mint. Thus few examples survive; but we know that the Habsburg ambassador Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq presented a silver elephant that he claimed Sultan Süleyman did not disapprove of, although as a pious Muslim the monarch probably had reservations. Armour with inlays of precious metals also was part of the Habsburg gifts-cum-tribute; one such item survives in Vienna, as the outbreak of the Long War in 1593 prevented delivery. At least, this item allows us to judge what kind of ornamentation the Habsburg court regarded as appropriate for a high-ranking Ottoman dignitary. Moreover to complete the picture, the Archduke Ferdinand II (1529-95) a great collector of arms and armour that had belonged to figures whom he regarded as 'heroes', included both Sultan Süleyman and Sokollu Mehmed Paşa in his collection.³¹

Conclusion

The Ottoman elite was an active consumer of luxury goods; limitations of space have for instance made it necessary to omit the many high-quality furs that the sultans regularly purchased from Russia. Given the prominence of such imports it is probably fair to say that the inter-imperial rivalry between the Ottoman sultans and the Habsburg rulers, or between

²⁹ Inalcik, 1960.

³⁰ Çizakça reprint 1987.

³¹ Beaufort-Spontin and Pfaffenbichler, 2013.

Ottomans and Venetians, did not exclude an albeit limited appreciation for the military virtues and artistic or craft skills of “the other side”. Perhaps by including the work of outsiders into their court and treasury, the sultans indicated that they had truly conquered a world empire. Inclusiveness of this kind might not be a matter on which Ottoman officials chose to dwell often in writing, except for the irrepressible Evliya Çelebi who some sixty years after the end of the period treated here, told stories about the fabulous skills of Viennese surgeons and musicians, while expressing the hope that all these clever people might one day become Ottoman subjects.³² But a glance at the consumption practices of the Ottoman court shows that such a tendency was present even in earlier and less outspoken days.

³² Evliya Çelebi, 1987, p.