TURKISH ART OF THE MUHAMMADAN PERIOD

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Since the time of Muhammad Turks have played an active role in the history of Islamic art and culture, and to illustrate their contribution the Museum has installed in several of its Near Eastern galleries an exhibition of Turkish art composed of outstanding objects in its own collection and a number of important loans.

The home of the Turks was Central Asia and the region of the Altai mountains, whence from time to time various tribes migrated westward. As early as the ninth century, under the rule of the Abbasid caliphs, Turkish slaves and mercenaries attained high rank and power at the Arab court in Baghdad.

As a result of Turkish influence, there soon appeared in Muhammadan art a new abstract style of decoration and a new method of carving with sloping surfaces, the prototypes of which may be found in the early animal style of Scytho-Siberian art of Central Asia. This Abbasid style is exemplified in the Samarra stuccos and wood carvings exhibited in Gallery H 8.

Of major importance in the history of the Muhammadan world was the arrival in Transoxiana in 985 of the Saljuks, who belonged to the Ghuzz tribe and had migrated from the Kirghiz steppes of Turkestan. By 1037 they had conquered the province of Khurasan and within the next few years had crushed every dynasty in Iran, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Asia Minor. In 1055 their leader, Tughril Beg, entered Baghdad, the Abbasid capital, proclaiming himself sultan.

A brilliant new era of Islamic art was inaugurated when the Saljuks embraced Islam and brought new life into the dying empire of the caliphs. At the courts of the various branches of the Saljuk family and their regents, or Atabegs, who founded dynasties in Persia, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor, arts and crafts flourished as never before. The arabesque, the supreme achievement of Islamic ornament, found its most magnificent development under Saljuk patronage. Architecture became more monumental and was enriched by new ornamental forms. Among the structures introduced by the Saljuks were round and polygonal tomb towers made of brick. These tombs were decorated with geometrical patterns, Kufic inscriptions, and arabesques cut in brick and terracotta. Early Saljuk ornament of this kind was found by the Museum’s Iranian Expedition in Nishapur, which was an important Saljuk art center.

A notable innovation of the Saljuks was the use of figure subjects and animals in architectural decoration. The Kara Saray, or Black Palace, of the Saljuk ruler Badr ad Din Lulu (1233-1259) at Mosul, in northern Mesopotamia, and the palace of Sultan Ala ad Din Kai Kubad (1219-1236) at Konia, in Asia Minor (Rum), are known to have had elaborate decoration in stucco with human figures and birds. In the present exhibition there are several examples of Saljuk sculpture in stucco from Iran, a splendid head of a prince and a
Portrait of the Ottoman sultan Ahmad I (1603-1617).
Recently acquired by the Museum
Miniature from a mid-XVI century manuscript of a “History of the Ottoman Sultans,” showing a Turkish army entering a Persian city. Lent by Mrs. George D. Pratt.
standing figure, the latter lent by Mrs. Cora Timken Burnett.

Under the patronage of the Saljuks other branches of art, such as calligraphy, painting, metalwork, ceramics, wood carving, and rug weaving, also received a new impetus. Magnificent Korans of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, richly illuminated with geometrical designs and arabesques in gold and other colors, are still preserved in museums and private collections. The art of metalwork reached new heights. Among techniques which were perfected and developed by craftsmen working for the Saljuks was that of inlaying engraved bronze and brass vessels, such as kettles, candlesticks, and ewers, with copper and silver. The first school of inlaying originated in Khurasan, in eastern Iran, in the eleventh or twelfth century. At first the inlay consisted of red copper only; later silver was used together with copper. Some of the ewers and candlesticks of Khurasan manufacture reveal not only Iranian motives but Turkish ones, including rows of stylized lions or birds with human heads (sirens) rendered in high relief.

In the thirteenth century Mosul became the most famous center of Saljuk metalwork. Here the technique of inlay, in which silver was now used almost exclusively, was brought to perfection. Many pieces, like the fine candlestick base shown in the exhibition, were made for the Saljuk sultan Badr ad Din Lulu, a great patron of the arts. The elaborate arabesque decoration of the Mosul work reveals features which are typical of the Saljuk style and which may also be found in woodwork from Asia Minor preserved in several Turkish mosques and museums at Istanbul.

Under the Saljuks the potters of the Near East created ceramic wares which must be classified among the most beautiful ever produced. Many patterns and techniques known in the pre-Saljuk era were perfected in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Rayy, a flourishing Saljuk city near Teheran, was a ceramic center of great importance. Among the finest pottery attributed to the kilns of Rayy is a group of twelfth-century lusterware. In these pieces, as in the fine bowl with the Pegasus and others shown in the exhibition, the design is usually reserved in a gold-brown background and rendered in the highly decorative style of the Saljuks. Rakka, on the Euphrates, produced handsome lusterware as well as a type of pottery with the decoration painted in black under a turquoise blue glaze. One of the most famous pieces of the latter group is a splendid bowl with a masterly composition of two peacocks, lent by Horace Havemeyer.

Among the Turkish tribes which arrived in Asia Minor in the thirteenth century were the Ottoman Turks, who established a new dynasty, succeeding the Saljuks. They gradually pushed the Byzantine frontiers farther back, carrying their flag and that of Islam into Europe. In 1453 the vigorous Ottomans conquered Constantinople, which became the capital of a new world empire. In the sixteenth century, under Suleyman the Magnificent, the Turkish empire stretched from Hungary to Egypt. The Ottoman sultans also inherited the religious power of the Caliphate.

Under the Ottoman Turks the development of art was based to a certain extent on Iranian influence and Saljuk tradition, but Turkish artists soon created a style of their own. Their architecture, particularly the mosques, developed new features such as the large central dome, which was inspired by the Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia (transformed by the Turks into a mosque). The architect Sinan is generally considered the creative genius of sixteenth-century Turkey. The most magnificent mosques of Constantinople and Adrianople are the work of this master, who is credited with the construction of 318 buildings. Among the most famous ones are the mosque of Suleyman in Constantinople and that of Selim II in Adrianople.

Turkish painting was derived from Persian and European sources. Among the famous European painters summoned to Constantinople by Sultan Mehmed II in 1480 was Gentile Bellini, who painted a portrait of the sultan which today is in the National Gallery in London. Several Persian artists also worked at the Turkish court, including Shah Kuli, foremost painter in the time of Suleyman the Mag-
Turkish prayer rug of about 1600, made in a court manufactory.
Gift of James F. Ballard, 1922
significant, and Wali Jan of Tabriz. Turkish painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although based on Persian prototypes, has a number of characteristic features—the costumes, the realistically drawn faces, and the use of a certain shade of yellowish green. Most Turkish in style are the portraits of sultans, several of which, lent by H. Kevorkian, are shown in the exhibition. Calligraphy was also highly developed by the Turks and some of the documents, imperial edicts, and appointment (firman) bore the highly decorative tughras, or emblem, of the sultan.

Turkish arts and crafts flourished in many centers established in Asia Minor as well as in Constantinople. In the mosques of Brusa, the early capital of the Ottoman sultans, there are some fine examples of interior decoration with enameled tiles, which replaced the faience mosaic favored in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In the mosque of Sultan Murad in Adrianople, built in 1433, we find tiles painted in underglaze blue on white. With the Ottoman sultans appeared a new fashion of covering palace rooms, mihrabs, and sometimes the entire interiors of mosques with faience tiles. The great center of this ceramic industry was Isnik in Asia Minor, where a new Turkish style of decoration arose, consisting of naturalistic plant motives, such as tulips, carnations, hyacinths, roses, and pomegranates, usually painted in cobalt blue, turquoise blue, green, and tomato red. The last was made of bolus clay and was thickly applied. Besides tiles, Isnik produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a great quantity of mosque lamps and vessels decorated in typically Turkish style with great richness and a variety of patterns. Among other Turkish ceramics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we can distinguish a group in which purple manganese is substituted for tomato red. Tiles of this type are found mostly in the mosques of Damascus, and their attribution to that center is quite justified, although others regard them as products of Isnik.

Asia Minor, especially the town of Brusa,
was famous during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for its velvets and brocades, many of which were exported to Venice, Genoa, and other Italian states trading with Turkey. In the fifteenth-century velvets there had been a strong European influence, chiefly Italian, but this gradually disappeared and was replaced by designs of purely Turkish inspiration. Made for curtains, hangings, and covers, these velvets show bold patterns of stylized flowers. The richness and variety of design and color of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Brusa brocades, of which several fine examples have been lent by Dikran Kelekian, reflect the splendor of the Turkish court.

In the history of oriental rugs Turkey occupies a prominent place. The Museum’s collection of Turkish rugs is very extensive, though only a few important types are included in the present exhibition. As early as the fourteenth century rugs from Asia Minor were known in Europe, being first represented in Italian and later in Dutch paintings. The majority are animal rugs rendered in a geometrical style, of which only three fragments are in existence, one in the Berlin Museum, another in the Historical Museum at Stockholm, and the third, found at Fustat, in the Metropolitan Museum. Purely geometrical rugs began to appear in Italian paintings in the middle of the fifteenth century. To this class of rugs, made in Anatolia, belong the “Holbeins,” so called from the fact that they often appear in paintings by Hans Holbein the Younger. One variety has a geometrical design of stars and crosses forming a tile pattern, another has an angular arabesque pattern in yellow on a red ground. Rugs of the latter type are occasionally called “Lottos” as they also appear in the paintings of Lorenzo Lotto. A well-known type of Anatolian rug of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is attributed to Ushak. These were quite popular in Europe and usually show patterns with stars and arabesques. Another variety of Ushaks features medallions.

An entirely different type of Turkish rug was made in the royal manufactories at Constantinople established by Sultan Sulaiman. They are finely woven, as are all court rugs, and show motives which are known to us from Turkish roccades. Arabesques, large palmettes, and floral motives are rendered in white, olive green, yellow, and blue outlined in white, against a red ground. A beautiful rug of this type was received by the Museum by bequest from George Blumenthal. Prayer rugs also were made at Constantinople, and one of the finest pieces known is in the Ballard collection in the Museum. This rug is of interest to students and collectors, as it is the prototype of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anatolian rugs of the Ghiordes and Kula varieties.

Panel of wall tiles. Asia Minor, XVII century