

Ottoman Art and Architecture

by Dr Fiona E. Hill

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Together with Western Europe at the beginning of the 1st millennium AD, Anatolia and Central Asia emerged from a period of major disorder. The relative stability created under the Seljuks, and later the Ottomans, engendered a great age of building. Whereas during the early Abbasid period (with its capital in Baghdad ca.750-1258), aristocratic culture maintained a certain distance from Islam, the Seljuks (ca.1055-1194) combined secular studies with Islamic instruction for the education of an aristocrat. The Ottoman Empire also emphasised a combination of Islamic and cosmopolitan qualities, and even the less enterprising of the late Ottoman sultans proved to be great patrons of the arts.

Caliphs, and in the Ottoman case, Sultans, were cosmopolitan patrons of the cultures which they "conquered", so that local languages, poetic traditions, architectural and musical motifs, and cultic practices made each Muslim regime in part an expression of a particular locality. Following the European model, kingship (or sultanship) was justified by the construction and decoration of mosques, schools, tombs, minarets, and so on, and so we see an imperial variant of specifically Islamic civilisation in the institution, for example, of domed monuments and multiple minarets. So symbolic of Islamic empire did such structures and artistic forms become that, even today, Muslim architects and artists often encounter opposition in their bids to challenge them.

Exchange with Europe

As early as the beginning of the 9th century, the Byzantine Emperor Theophilus (829-42) had built a palace (on the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus) that owed much in design and decoration to Islam. Only

some substructures remain, but it probably marked a high point in the influence of Arabic taste on the Byzantine court. Further afield, in the Monastery of Daphne, near Athens, window arches show Islamic influence, including Qur'anic inscriptions.

Much earlier, the Byzantine rotunda dome was used in the 7th century Mosque of `Umar, or Dome of the Rock, in Jerusalem. Then the Arabs developed a transitional structural support known as corner stalactites, or muqarnassat, which was used in the Capella Palatina in Palermo, Sicily (1132). The horse-shoe arch was an early Islamic form, as was the mashrabiyya, a grille of stone or wood interlacing constructed without the use of glue or nails. While mashrabiyyas can be seen in many mosques, they are also found jutting out from the exterior walls of old Arab houses. In Damascus they overhang the streets of the old quarters, offering shade for pedestrians and air, filtered light, and privacy aspect to residents.

The minaret also is said to be a Muslim innovation. While the minaret recalls the Babylonian ziggurat (as seen in the mid-9th century Great Mosque of al-Mutawakkil in Samarra, Iraq), as well as the Christian bell tower, it is said that the campaniles of Renaissance Tuscany and the towers of rural medieval English churches were influenced by the Muslim tower.

In Anatolia today, the great works of Islamic art and architecture to which we now turn are attributable to the Ottoman era, of which there are two phases. There is the work done prior to, or soon after, the fall of Constantinople, and that done after 1500. The former work exhibits strong Seljuk elements, and is centred in Bursa, while the latter centres around Istanbul where, in terms of architecture, it is influenced by Byzantine models.

The Seljuks

There are exquisite architectural remains of the Seljuks in Turkey. The Seljuks were members of a Turkic-speaking tribe from Turkestan, and were converted (ca.956) to Sunni Islam early. By 1043 they were firmly established in Khorasan, and twelve years later their leader entered Baghdad and was named by the Caliph "Vice-regent of the successor of the Prophet and Lord of all Muslims". His successor Alp Arslan conquered Asia Minor, most of which was established completely as a Seljuk state by the early twelfth century. Both Alp Arslan and his son owed much to the wise counsel of their vizier Nizam al-Mulk, mentioned in the chapter herein, entitled The Study of Islam.

In 1081 the Seljuks captured Nicaea (about 50 miles from Istanbul, as the crow flies) and established the capital of their new Sultanate of Rum. When it was won back in 1097 by Emperor Alexis I Comnenus and the army of the so-called First Crusade, the Seljuks founded another capital in Konya (Iconium). Trade and other association with the Byzantines was such that the latter often preferred the Seljuks over the Crusaders in forming and maintaining good relations. The considerable economic prosperity under the Seljuks allowed the flowering of arts and architecture which owed much to Persia, Central Asia, and even further afield, but which was novel and distinctive in design and fabric.

The Seljuk legacy is most striking in the architecture and its decoration. They favoured stone over brick in their buildings, and their stone and wooden decorative carvings, together with their tile-work, are intensely complex in geometric design. In Konya, the main centre of the Seljuk area, one sees magnificent examples of architecture and ornament. One of the outstanding developments by the Seljuks is the caravanseray (or khan/han), safe-havens that were built at intervals of a day's journey along the trade routes. The size and number of these hans was a tribute to the prosperity, if not the security, of the Seljuk period. The series of caravanseray extant along the Konya-Kayseri road is particularly noteworthy, the Sultan Han being the largest and best preserved.

The Seljuk development of the tomb and the minaret is also important. The latter are usually constructed singly, but in Sivas, at the Cifte Minare Madrassa, a pair of minarets flank the mosque entrance. The intricacy and artistry of the wooden carving found in the religious buildings make it clear that timber was plentiful at that time. Yet another notable facet of Seljuk building is the unusual care in the construction of secular edifices, such as the covered ships' docks at Antalya.

The Ottomans and Byzantium

Complete order was never established by the Seljuks, and the clans were riven with internal strife. It was at the breakup of the Seljuk sultanate into independent principalities that the Ottoman emirate emerged. In 1326, under Orhan Gazi, Nicaea was retaken from the Byzantines. However, it was not this city, but Bursa, that then became the capital of the ascendant Ottoman state. This is of immense historical importance, for it was the turning point for the essentially nomadic group, who now settled and established a state organisation, in 1327 minting the first Ottoman coin, the silver akĖa. The most important examples of early Ottoman architecture are to be found in Bursa.

The Ottoman Empire, which lasted from 1300 to 1922, was led by 36 Sultans all in direct male descent from the founding father of the Turkish tribe, 'Uthman (from whose name we take the English approximate "Ottoman").¹ In 1453, after several long and unsuccessful sieges, Mehmed II captured Constantinople. Thereafter, Istanbul became the Ottoman seat of government and the focal point of Ottoman artistic achievements.

Although Mehmed's first action was to have the Muslim faith proclaimed from the pulpit of the Hagia Sophia, thus rendering it a mosque, his intention was that the conquered peoples retain use of all their other churches. In their zeal, however, his subjects and successors took over the churches for other functions, one by one. There is documented reference to 345 monasteries and convents, and 500 churches, while in his chronicles a Spanish traveller in 1403 mentions 3000 churches. Typical of the churches of Constantinople that did not survive the Ottoman zeal is that dedicated to St. Mary Pammakaristos. In 1587 it became the Fethiye Jami'a (mosque), but from 1455 until that takeover it was the seat of the Greek Patriarchate, and thus of great political significance.

Another of the churches became Kariye Jami'a. When taken over by Beyazit II's Grand Vizir, a very discreet mihrab was installed, a minaret constructed, and most of the mosaics and frescoes were white-washed. These mosaics have since been restored, making the Kariye Jami'a a magnificent artistic specimen. At the apex of the south dome, the effect of light and shadow on the magnificent mosaic of Christ Pantocrator surrounded by two rows of forty-six ancestors makes it appear to hover over you. After the conquest of Constantinople, Christians were not permitted to build domes, or any kind of masonry roof, on their churches, and had to use wooden roofs, as in the earliest Byzantine basilicas.

The Ottoman mosques mimic the great Eastern churches, but go further still in artistry and majesty. A strong influence was exerted by the Emperor Justinian's (ascended 527, died 565) Hagia Sofia, the greatest of Byzantine Churches. The apse, eastern semi-dome and main dome rise one upon the other, and the intricacies of the sculpture and inlaid marble decoration were at their (Byzantine) greatest height in this building. When it was dedicated on December 26th, 537 AD, Justinian is reported to have declared: "Solomon, I have surpassed thee!"

The New Solomon

In the middle of the 16th century, Selim I "the grim", grandson of the conqueror of Constantinople, defeated the Shah of Persia and the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria. The Ottoman Empire then stretched

from Hungary and the Adriatic to Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, Central Asia, and the Near East.²

But it was under Sultan Suleiman I (who reigned 1520-66), the milder natured son of Selim, that the Ottoman Empire reached its zenith. Under Suleiman's reign, the greater part of Hungary was reduced, Vienna was besieged, and the island of Rhodes was occupied. Indeed, his sway from Budapest to Baghdad, from the Crimea to the first cataract of the Nile, constituted the greatest Muslim state of modern times. It was little wonder that, in 1543, Titian (who studied in Venice with Gentile Bellini's younger brother Giovanni), included in his *Ecce Homo* a portrait of Suleiman as one of the enemies of Christ. Yet at the same time, for his political success as well as for his artistic legacy, Suleiman became known in Europe as Suleiman "the Magnificent". As a paradigm of good government, embracing Islamic principles in political thought, he was known by his own subjects as "Kanuni", the Legislator.

Suleiman incorporated the Persian legacy, not only of artistic motifs and modes, but also of such political notions as the exaltation of the Monarch, with the Arab legacy of sciences, poetry, and theology. He beautified his empire, and in particular its capital of Istanbul, with magnificent mosques, schools, bimaristans (hospitals and asylums), bridges across the Bosphorus, aqueducts and public baths, caravanserais, palaces and mausoleums. Architectural patronage by women was encouraged by Suleiman, and his mother, wives and daughters had mosques, hospitals, madrasas, hospices and kitchens built in return for the prayers of their beneficiaries.

Each mosque, according to its endowment, had annexes of simple buildings. These housed rooms for Quranic instruction, libraries, baths, alms kitchens, hospitals, hostels, sometimes even shops. The largest of these complexes is attached to the Suleimaniye Mosque. Mosques founded by Sultans generally were surrounded by tomb chapels for their families. These tombs, called turbe, were always domed, but seldom architecturally significant. However Suleiman's tomb is a magnificent feature of the mosque that takes his name.

Suleiman's chief architect was Sinan (1490-1578), a Christian convert to Islam from around Kayseri (Cappadocia), who made his way into Istanbul, perhaps in the same manner as youths continue to make their way to the opportunities that the capital affords today. Sinan became a member of the crack Janissary, seeing service in Belgrade, Vienna, Baghdad, and Rhodes, during which he was building bridges and siege works of extraordinary strength and remarkable in the harmony of their design. So remarkable, indeed, that Sinan was suddenly appointed 'Architect of the Abode of Felicity', and became the most distinguished architect Turkey (ever) produced. According to his own notes, Sinan erected no fewer than 318 buildings, and his personality impressed an entire epoch.

Arguably his greatest achievement was the Suleimaniye mosque, which was designed to exceed the magnificence of Hagia Sofia, already 1000 years old. At the time that construction of the Suleimaniye Mosque was begun (1550), Michelangelo had been working on the dome of St. Peter's for four years. He was still working on it when Sinan completed his masterpiece in 1557. Inside this mosque, four enormous and irregularly shaped piers support the central dome, which is flanked by semi-domes and tympanum arches, the latter being pierced by 23 windows. The central area of this mosque is similar in plan to Hagia Sophia, although the dome is smaller in diameter. An unusual feature is the situation of the four minarets at the four corners of the forecourt.

Sinan himself regarded the Selimiye mosque in Edirne as his masterpiece, where, for the first time, he was able to surpass the breadth of span of Hagia Sophia's dome. The vaulting here is set on eight twelve-sided piers, while pillared galleries with tribunes are laid round about, and the walls are pierced with innumerable windows to banish the least hint of weight or pressure. The only incongruity, according to Taylor, is that such an elegant and harmonious mosque should have been commissioned by such an

obese and alcoholic man as Selim II, Suleiman's son. Where his father was known as the Magnificent, Selim was known as the Sot. His mosque was completed in 1575, a year after his death, by the now elderly Sinan.

Sultan Ahmed I had a disciple of Sinan build the Sultan Ahmet Mosque in the early 17th century, and in 1609 the Sultan himself dug the first piece of turf. It is known commonly as the Blue Mosque due to the predominant colour of the ceramic tiles which decorate its interior. The over 50 designs of these tiles, together with their great number, put such a strain on the Iznik kilns that they never fully recovered. The mihrab and minbar are of intricately carved white marble, while the doors and shutters of the 260 windows (originally of Venetian glass) are of carved wood inlaid with tortoise shell, ivory and mother-of-pearl. The interplay of vivid blues and natural light in this vast mosque is breathtaking. Since the time of its opening in 1617, it has been the most popular mosque in the city, and the non-Muslim visitor must make his/her visit out of prayer time, which can be fraught, but worthy of perseverance.

On the Istanbul skyline, the Blue Mosque is distinguished by its six elegant, fluted minarets, where other major mosques of the city have four. Characteristic of Istanbul in the early 16th century are spire form minarets with registers of balconies (sherifes), which Kuhnel finds presaged in the squatter Seljuk mosque towers. The needle shape of the spire minarets contrasts with the heavy masses of domes and semi-domes. Those gracing the Blue Mosque have finely carved stalactite corbels over their sherifes.

Manuscripts and Painting

Since the artists were brought to Istanbul from the Persian cities of Tabriz, Shiraz, and Herat, Ottoman manuscripts between 1451 and 1520 clearly followed Persian precedents. In the 16th century, manuscripts turned from illustrations of classic literature to depictions of contemporary events, such as diplomacy, conquest, collection of taxes, festivals, battles and skirmishes. Of course, the Qu'ran remained a primary inspiration for illustration and calligraphy, and one can see "luxury" copies of the Qu'ran, as Kuhnel calls them, collected in the Istanbul Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art. The Ottoman Sultans were very keen to establish calligraphy as one of the noblest of arts, and many were recognised themselves by the guild as masters of calligraphy. Suleiman was also a poet, with the nom-de-plume Muhibbi, "the loving one."

But among the most famous documents of the Ottomans, and the most important artistically, are the ferman, decrees which relate to civil and military matters, foreign relations, and personally addressed edicts. Ferman are of Persian origin. Unlike other documents which carry only the seal or signature of the Sultan, the ferman were validated by the magnificently illuminated tughra, the Imperial monogram of Suleiman which is formed from the principal letters of his name. One sees these tughra executed in divani script, often in cobalt blue outlined in gold. The most beautiful examples are on a group of eleven mulkname (property deeds granting free ownership), granted by Suleiman to his wife, Hurrem Sultan, in order to provide for the imperial waqf, the public endowment used to maintain religious institutions, which is decreed by Islamic law.

As for painting, the history of Ottoman painting is obscure, but it is known that the Venetian painter, Gentile Bellini (1429?-1507), was summoned to the court of Sultan Mohammed the Conqueror, in order to guide it in new directions. Gentile was the son of Jacopo Bellini, whose paintings are nearly all lost. For an example of Gentile Bellini's work, see his Venetian Received by the Mamluks (Cairo).

During the reigns of Selim II and Murad III, Seyyid Lokman Ibn Husayn al-'Asuri al-Hussein al-'Urman was a court historiographer who illustrated his works with portraits of the Sultans. His book of 12 portraits of Ottoman rulers, from 'Uthman Gazi to Murad III, was completed around 1579. Since portraits of the

Sultans were hard to come by, he had to send to Venice for paintings and pored over historical documents, not only to discover details of their costume, but also to gain an insight into the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of each Sultan.

Seyyid Lokman's sentiments are well evidenced not only in his portraits, but also in his description of them. Of his portrait of Sultan Suleiman, for example, he writes; "A beautiful round face, frowning brows, azure blue eyes, a ram's nose, an imposing and majestic build, like a gracious lion, with a luxuriant beard, a long neck and a good height; a handsome man with a wide chest and flat shoulders, long fingers, strong feet and arms; a fearless, faultless and glorious ruler."

Ceramics and Textiles

The finest examples of Seljuk tile work are found at Konya, the centre of their manufacture. The colours of these tiles were limited to blue, white and black, and they were cut in small sections and set in mosaic form to make intricate, geometric, angular patterns which were often set into the small stalactite niches for which the Seljuks are known. This technique was a legacy of the Persian influence on the Seljuks, while the ornamentation appears more Chinese, or Central Asian, in character.

With the retaking of Nicaea by the rising Ottoman state (1326), the city became known as Iznik, a Turkification of its Greek name. After the Mongol sacking (1402), Iznik became famous for its production of exquisite ceramics, right up until the mid-18th century. The Iznik faience industry heralded a new development in ceramic tiles, as the mosaic work that had been favoured by the Seljuks was discontinued. Iznik tiles still adorn the mosques and other buildings of the Ottoman period, many of the finest examples being in the rooms of the Imperial Harem.

The artists of books (mentioned above) were amongst those commissioned to provide motifs for the wall facings of mosques and palaces. The motifs, therefore, were adopted from Persia, and were mostly arabesques, cloud bands, lotus palmettes, and so on. The Ottoman style of decoration was based on naturalistic plant patterns, on tulips, hyacinths, carnations, roses, vines, and pomegranates. These same motifs were used on the exquisite silk and velvet textiles that were produced by factories under the patronage of the sultans, and used for hangings, furniture covers, and costumes at court.

Better known than this courtly production of silk is the peasant production of rugs and carpets. Oriental rugs are hand woven or hand knotted, and produced on a loom. The oldest known hand knotted rug was found in a frozen tomb in Russia, dated to around the 5th century. Central Asian rugs are still hand knotted, and emerge now, as then, from a tribal environment. The oldest known surviving rugs of the Ottoman period are from the second half of the 15th century. Between them and the earlier Seljuk rugs, we depend on the portrayals of the Dutch school and the early Italian paintings to fill the gap. Holbein rugs, for example, are so named because they appear in the paintings of that great German painter (although they do appear earlier, ca.1451, in Italian paintings).

The institution of carpet manufacture in Asia Minor is credited to the Seljuks, although it reached its peak of importance under the Ottomans. Early this century, a number of Seljuk carpets were recognised in the Ala'ed Din Mosque in Konya, while others were found in Beysehir. These carpets are now found in Museums in Konya and Istanbul. Turkish production favours rugs over the large-scale carpets that are common in Persia, and from the mid-16th century the prayer rug, with a central mihrab design surrounded by a border, became characteristic of Anatolia.

The Turkish Baroque

French Rococco arrived in Istanbul in the mid-18th century and was enthusiastically received at court, and with those artists who were unconvinced by the resilience of the Ottoman tradition. Because the Ottoman structural elements were retained, the decorative details entitle us to speak of a Turkish Baroque or Rococco. It is most clearly witnessed in the mosque of Nur-i-Osmaniye (the Light of Osman, completed by Osman III in 1755), and also in some rooms of the Eski Saray (the old palace, sited where the University of Istanbul now stands, which was first razed by fire in 1541, and totally demolished by 1870). Of the Nur-I-Osmaniye mosque, it is said that its original commissioner, Mehmet I, wanted it built in the European baroque style. The religious authorities ruled against this, but a compromise was reached by the architect, a Greek who had studied in Europe.

European armchairs, sofas, and grandfather clocks were introduced into imperial apartments, and there are some decorative paintings in rooms of the Topkapi Saray Harem. Imperial palaces built on the Bosphorus in the 19th century are connected in details with this phase, but are only valued as a classical reaction, without any claim to having replaced the native tradition which their new Western stamp overrode. Beylerbey, Dolma Bache, Chiragan Saray, and Yildiz Kiosk are the first stages in a complete Europeanisation of Turkish domestic architecture.

Endnotes

1. Sultan Selim, somehow, is known as "jidd al-uthmani", grandfather of the Ottomans. In 1231 he was drowned in the Syrian Euphrates. Although his body was never recovered, Sultan Salim's tomb in Syria is Turkish territory, flying the Turkish flag, and holding a garrison of about a dozen Turkish soldiers. Due to flooding by a lake associated with the Tabqa Dam, the tomb was moved from its original site at Qalat Jabr upstream to Qeraqozak, where it is surrounded by well tended gardens, and it can at times be opened for visitors. Spanish archaeologists dig at Qeraqozak, while Australians dig a little upstream at Tell Ahmar, and also not far downstream at Jebel Khalid.
2. Genoa was granted commercial privileges in 1385, and the consular tradition began in Aleppo, Syria, in 1517 when the Ottomans allowed a Venetian diplomat to reside in the heart of the market place (souq). The Venetian Consulate remains to this day in Aleppo. The Sublime Porte, Bab-i Ali, was the famous gateway to the great offices of government from the latter part of the 16th century onwards. Foreign ambassadors would present their credentials here, and hence were known as Ambassadors to the Sublime Porte. The particular Rococco gateway we see today in Istanbul was built in 1840 by Abdul Majid I, although Suleiman's last Grand Vizier moved his offices from Topkapi to this site, and by the late 18th century all administrative and executive offices had likewise moved. See the painting by Jacques-Andre Joseph: Portrait of the Ambassador of the Porte (1742).

Glossary of Architectural Terms

- bab: gateway, opening.
- bimaristan: hospital, lunatic assylum.
- hammam: (steam) bath, often attached to a mosque.
- haram: that which is sacrosanct and forbidden
- harem (from haram): a place which is sacrosanct and limited in accessibility; hence one's wife/wives is one's harem, as is the private quarters in a household.
- iwan: large, expansive niche looking onto an open courtyard
- jamī'a mosque: used for regular prayer but also for the Friday congregational prayer when the sermon is preached
- khan: an inn, or large building with central courtyard, which is associated with a trade.
- kursi: lectern for the Qur'an, often hexagonal

- kuttāb: Qurʿānic school
- madrasa: college often with mosque attached, to teach religious science (also secular use)
- maqsura: compartment, or stall, near the mihrab of the mosque, reserved for the ruler/governor
- mashrabiyya: window of wooden or stone latticework
- maydan: square, open space
- mesjid: mosque for regular prayer, without a minbar
- mihrab: niche in mosque wall to indicate qibla
- minara: minaret
- minbar: (mimbar) pulpit
- muqarnas: stalactite-like projections at the junctions between domes and their substructures
- musalla: place of prayer, open sanctuary
- qaʿa: reception hall
- qalāʾa: citadel
- qamariya: skylight, small window often of coloured glass
- qibla: direction of Mecca towards which Muslims pray, and physically turn in times of crisis (eg. sickness and death)
- qubba: dome, and by extension a domed building which houses the tomb of a saint
- rahle: collapsible lectern for book, particularly Qurʿān, which looks like an X (modelled on camel saddle)
- sirdab: subterranean vault for use in hot weather (Persian lit. cold water)
- suq: bazaar
- tekke: a dervish convent
- turbe: mausoleum

Further Reading

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