Chapter XVII

An Exhibition of High Ottoman Art*

First, in 1985, it was the Festival of India which, through two handsome large exhibitions in Washington and New York, several smaller ones in other cities, and a great deal of publicity, provided the American public with a vision of worlds other than its own, of desirable exotic cultures. Next it was Turkey, or rather the Ottoman Turkish world of the sixteenth century, whose relationship to today's Turkish republic is as remote as that of Charles V and the huge Habsburg empire to the republic of Austria, but whose architectural masterpieces adorn the three cities of Bursa, Edirne and Istanbul, and whose treasures and other remains are found, for the most part, in the Topkapi Museum.

The exhibition, "The Age of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent," which opened at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in the winter of 1987, summered at the Art Institute in Chicago, and made its New York debut the following fall, was one of the most exquisite expositions of objects I have ever seen. It consisted of some twenty-seven examples of writing on paper or of aspects of book-making such as bindings; fifty-nine paintings, nearly all of them miniatures and most of them illustrating a text; sixty-one objects in various techniques of industrial or decorative arts; fifty-three textiles or rugs, and forty-eight ceramics. Their shapes were heterogeneous: at times they were totally two-dimensional; at other times they were meant to be viewed from several directions or even in movement (as, for example, with the fabulous robes). Their functions are prosaically mundane (underwear, a simple jug) or ceremonially and symbolically unique (a crown, an imperial signature, a map of conquered lands).

Shapes and functions made particularly arduous the task of designing an appropriate setting for objects which were all refugees from places other than museums. They were different from each other and collectively most of them deviated from the norm of exhibited objects of Western art, in which two-dimensional paintings and drawings made to be seen in public or semi-public contexts dominate. The National Gallery's presentation of such unusual and unexpected objects was truly spectacular. I did not see

* First published in *Muqarnas*, 6 (1989), pp. 1–11.

the Chicago version of the show, but the New York one, while spacious and softly mysterious, all too often had sets of objects so far from each other that the connection between them was lost. The visual judgments I shall produce are based primarily on the impressions given by the Washington exhibition.

Brilliance of presentation may have been the designers' responsibility, but the Turkish government deserves the credit for the show's very existence. It was a law passed as recently as 1985 that allowed for the lending of so many treasures from Turkish collections to foreign museums, although quite a few of the exhibited objects were in fact shown in a Smithsonian Institution exhibition which circulated between 1966 and 1968. The true creator of this show was Dr Esin Atil, longtime curator of Islamic art at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, for whom this had been a labor of love for many years. Her diplomatic efforts and skillful tact brought the exhibition together, and for this all must be grateful.

Following the pattern of many of her earlier and more modest shows, Dr Atil also produced two books to accompany the exhibition.[1] The first, *The Age of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent*, is both a catalog, in the sense that it contains a list and illustrations of all exhibited objects, and a series of essays on the media (manuscripts, precious objects, textiles, ceramics) of the exhibited objects and the organization of artistic patronage and labor in the sixteenth-century Ottoman world. The second, *Suleymanname: The Illustrated History of Suleyman the Magnificent*, is a beautifully executed quasi-facsimile edition of the *Suleymanname*, the one available complete section of a dynastic epic written in the manner of the Iranian *Shahname* and illustrated with sixty-nine miniatures. The manuscript was included in the exhibition, but of course only a few of its miniatures could be seen at a time.

All the objects shown originated in the sixteenth century and in the Ottoman court symbolized by the presence of Suleyman I. He was born in 1494, crowned sultan in 1520 when he succeeded his father, who had been the conqueror of Egypt and the Levant and was [2] known ominously but justifiably as Selim the Grim; he died in 1566 while campaigning in Hungary. He was known as the Magnificent in the West and as the Lawgiver (*qanuni*) in Ottoman historiography. His long reign was filled with wars, successful ones for the most part, but thanks to a well-established and well-trained bureaucracy, it also included decades of reasonable internal and social order and of administrative reorganization. It was the time of the great architect Sinan, the only builder from the Muslim world until Hassan Fathy whose name was known in the West. Sinan's mastery of

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[1] Esin Atil, *The Age of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent* (Washington, DC and New York: National Gallery of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 360 pp., 209 illus.; idem, *Suleymanname: The Illustrated History of Suleyman the Magnificent* (Washington, DC and New York: National Gallery of Art and Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 270 pp., 65 illus.

domical forms transformed the profile of Ottoman cities and remained until the nineteenth century the standard against which all Ottoman buildings were measured.

It is noteworthy that the past decade has witnessed several other major publications on Ottoman art written in English and an enormous scholarly effort in Turkish.[2] The results of the latter are unknown to most scholars and amateurs who are not Ottomanists. The existence of books in English and the accessibility to tourists of Turkey and other formerly Ottoman lands have not as yet propelled the Ottoman world at its heyday in the sixteenth century into the mainstream of historical culture, nor even among the pleasures of jaded jetsetters. Yet a look at any map shows that in the times of Charles V, Henry VIII, Francis I, Ivan the Terrible, Shah Tahmasp, Babur, Michelangelo, Titian, Palladio, Calvin and the Counter-Reformation, only the Ottomans had dealings, peaceful or otherwise, with all the protagonists of sixteenth-century Eurasia except China. Their culture and therefore their art cannot *a priori* be seen simply as an "Oriental" exoticism.

It has long been recognized that Sinan's mosques are major examples of a grand tradition of domical compositions from the Pantheon to Sir Christopher Wren. But the other arts clearly have nothing in common with Michelangelo and Mannerism, nor even with Benvenuto Cellini. Why not, especially after a late fifteenth century that had many artistic connections with Italy? What is it that makes (or made) architecture so different from other arts? Or, to introduce a different way of understanding the arts, at what point do differences constitute otherness? Is it a definable, measurable yardstick of values which makes an art or a culture different? Or is it a subjective decision of a historical moment or of today's observer to proclaim some arts or some artistic traditions as alien to one's own?

These questions, with obvious implications for other places and other times, are central to our understanding of Ottoman art. They are not the questions which led to the exhibition and to the books, nor are they raised by them. Yet, precisely because the books and the exhibition arose from needs other than the questions of global historians and of comparative art historians, they bring to the elucidation of the latter a documentation gathered with the common and straightforward desire to present and explain within their own context a sizable collection of items associated, rightly or wrongly, with Suleyman the Magnificent. I shall first review the impact made by the exhibition, then relate it to evidence from the two books before returning to the wider issues raised at the beginning.

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[2] Among easily accessible examples, Ekrem Akurgal, ed., *The Art and Architecture of Turkey* (Oxford, 1980); Esin Atil, ed., *Turkish Art* (Washington, DC, 1980); Yarim Petropoulos, ed., *Tulips, Arabesques and Turbans* (London, 1982); Oktay Aslanapa, *Turkish Art and Architecture* (London, 1971); Godfrey Goodwin, *A History of Ottoman Architecture* (London, 1971).

The primary statement made by the exhibition can be deduced from the objects shown in it. There is a bizarre but commonly held belief that objects speak for themselves. They do indeed, provided one knows their language, and on one level everyone does know the language of this particular selection. There was no way of escaping the dazzling display of gold. It was the medium for manufacturing nearly everything there, for emphasizing designs on miniatures or clothing, for embroidered textiles, for stamping bookbindings with involved arabesques. If one got tired of gold, there was a brilliant array of reds, stunningly tactile on robes, suddenly rising out of the surface of ceramics, enlivening the design of book illuminations, or reflecting light off hundreds of rubies. Even relatively mundane manuscripts, like Matrakçi's celebrated depictions of cities throughout the empire or the puppet-like soldiers and dignitaries of the historical manuscripts, were full of all sorts of reds. Less systematic but no less striking were the blues, greens and whites found on objects or as precious stones nearly everywhere.

This display was attached to things whose functions are, for the most part, easily recognizable. There were books with pictures or simply with non-representational illuminations which are meant to be read or simply perused. There were endless practical objects like ewers, plates, lamps (although there is some uncertainty as to whether the peculiarly shaped ceramics we usually know as "mosque lamps" were really that), canteens, bottles, shields, belts, buckles. There were clothes, undershirts or nightgowns, trousers and, of course, the great ceremonial robes. There were magnificent swords and daggers, so beautifully decorated that they no longer threaten. It was easy enough for the viewer to extrapolate from [3] these familiar objects an understanding of less familiar ones, shining jewel-studded helmets or maces. The manuscripts, on the other hand, may have seemed too obscure, too esoteric for immediate understanding, however elegant their writing. But a canteen or a penbox in rock crystal covered with gold filigree and precious stones was an intellectually and sensually imaginable gift for those who already had everything, and the powerful swirls of the imperial signature (*tughra*) projecting a simple name into exciting design gave an unexpected monumentality and dignity to the routine or ceremonial action of affixing one's name to a document.

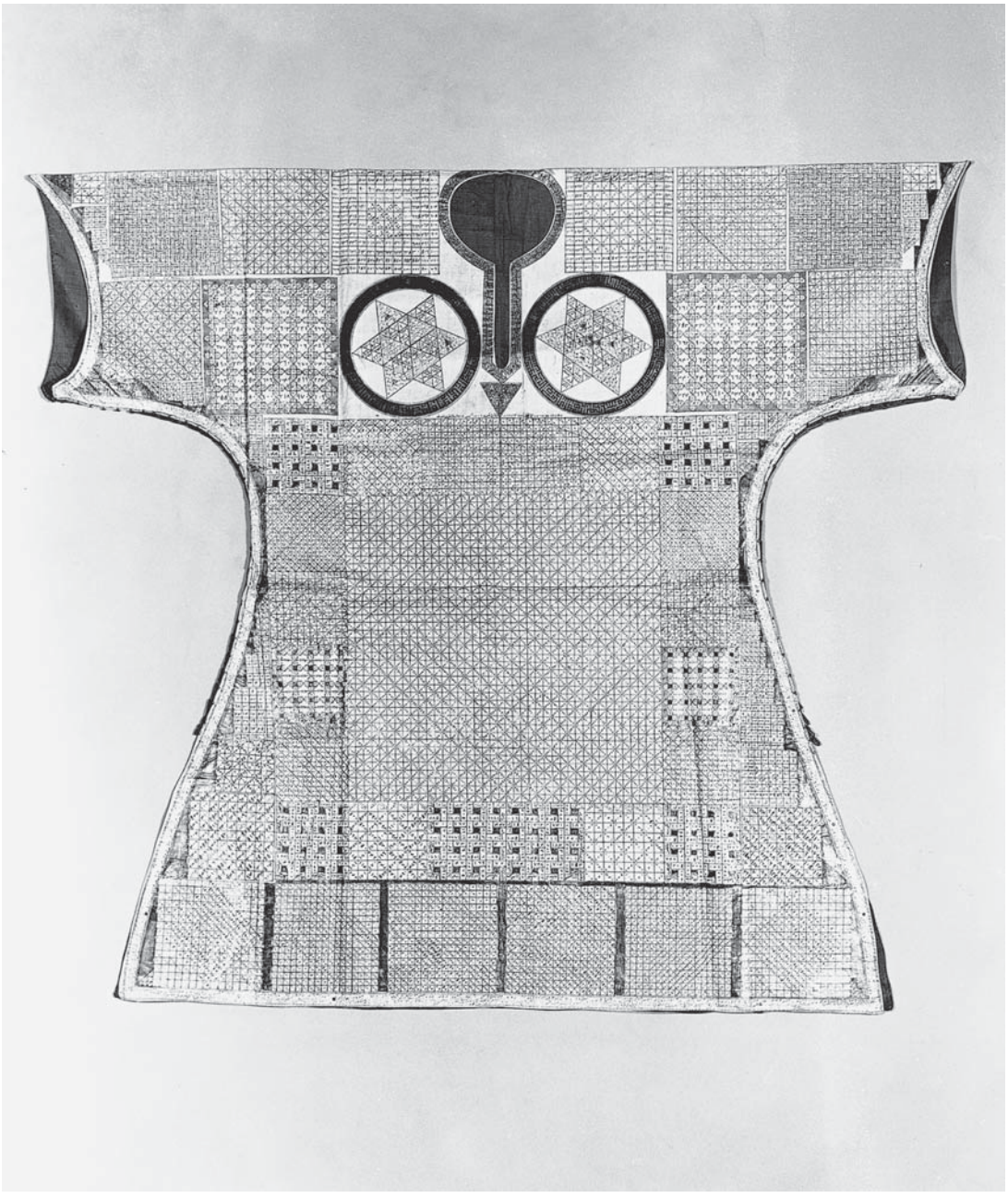
At this level of perception, objects do speak for themselves. They appeal to our sense of luxury or appear decadent, perhaps, to puritanical strands in every culture. But these or comparable objects have been found in royal, imperial and even religious treasures since time immemorial. Wonderful descriptions have been preserved in medieval Arabic texts of ninth- or eleventh-century objects which were as impressive as the ones in the exhibition. The treasure room of the Hermitage, the Tower of London, and the National Bank of Imperial Iran contain similarly spectacular, expensive, shining crowns, necklaces and cups. This was a particularly rich and particularly varied selection of such expensive but useful objects, and the

only appropriate reaction to them was to acknowledge that one loved, liked, or loathed some or all of them. Visceral attraction generated an equally visceral judgment.

Another way of seeing the exhibition required some sense of signs or codes which were not universally known or accessible, yet which did not necessarily require full immersion in the Ottoman world and Ottoman culture to discern. It also required, as any good exhibition does, a progression, a movement through a prearranged space according to a rhythm created or compelled by the organizers. The sequence of objects created, whether intentionally or not, an interpretation which had, in turn, to be evaluated by historical or visual criteria derived from other sources.

The first room set the tone and provided the key for viewing the rest. That key was writing. In the first room the viewer was overwhelmed by it, surrounded by the ascetic monumentality of the imperial signatures, the limpid qur'anic quotations on a group of storage boxes, and the masses of books and bookbindings with jeweled covers opening onto the austere severity of classical Ottoman cursive, only occasionally alleviated by playful variations or by memories of older square and other Kufic modes of writing. It was in this first room that the two most striking and, as we shall see shortly, moving items in the exhibition were to be seen. One was a white linen shirt entirely covered with several complete surahs of the Qur'an inked in different colors and according to complex geometric patterns. Medallions with gold letters contained pious formulas or endlessly repeated the Arabic word for "God." The second item was the shirt made in 1564–65 for Selim II, Suleyman's son, a year before his father's death (Fig. 1); magical squares and formulas covered the whole shirt. In that first room nearly everything – whether a book, a wooden stand, or a shirt – was highlighted by writing, always in clear and legible modes. The exceptions were the huge signatures, ornamental codes within the written code. Their appreciation required an understanding of the ornamental as well as of the written conventions used in their design. This domination of writing suggests that meaning in Ottoman art is primarily conveyed through the word, and not through the image as it is in Western art. Conventional letters are combined into the words and sentences of a language instead of representations of otherwise existing or imagined reality or of mnemonically meaningful signs such as heraldic ones. Reading the writing is necessary both for determining the meaning of objects and for visually appreciating them.

The rest of the exhibition was not without writing, but most of it was didactic, as in the cartographic examples or the depictions of the empire, informative, as with dates or signatures, or oddly casual and at times downright senseless as it was on several ceramic pieces. But the initial impact of writing as the key to understanding the Ottomans explains in part the lack of impact made by Ottoman painting. While Sinan's architecture can easily be compared with contemporary architecture in Italy, Ottoman



1 Shirt made for Şehzade Selim in 1564–65. Istanbul, Topkapı Serayi 13/1133

paintings show no awareness of anything done in Italy or elsewhere in the Mediterranean, although in the fifteenth century Italian artists and works certainly came to Istanbul, and a good third of the Ottoman empire was Christian and had been independent until a generation or two earlier.

The bright and cheerful lightness of colors in Ottoman painting was at times refreshing and its precise, even if schematic, recording of the surrounding world was often very useful, but Ottoman miniature painting abandoned the whimsical warmth, the manipulation of spatial conventions, the theatrical [4] arbitrariness, and the multiplicity of meanings that characterized the Iranian miniature painting from which its forms and many of its motifs derived. Furthermore, unlike Indian painters and Iranian painters in India, Ottoman manuscript illustrators did not, for the most part, investigate new ways within the tradition, nor did they innovate radically enough to create a truly novel art. Even the wonderful dragons and other imaginary beasts and angels so common on small drawings were totally overwhelmed by swirling leaves and [5] by forcefully thickened ink outlines. The procedure was one of pattern-making, not of representing, and animals or angels had to be discovered through a solitary process of visual analysis; they did not leap forward.

The reason for this absence of glitter and brilliance in painting is the willful rejection of representation as a significant mode for self-expression. It is telling and fitting that no portrait of Suleyman was included in the exhibition. A few exist, including Nigari's representation of the aged emperor which has a touching grandeur within a very restricted formal range. There may well have been technical reasons why that particular painting was not brought from Istanbul for the show, but the fact remains that the substitute "image" of the emperor consisted in a set of monumental signatures. Once again his portrait was the word, transmuted this time into flags dancing in the wind over the name and title of the ruler.

Images and representation, even if numerous, had to be sought out in the exhibition, for they had to be ferreted out of the manuscripts and albums. The main thrust of the show was to move the visitor along the dazzling row of luxury objects, which culminated in the stupendous official robes. There was no writing on them, neither a sign nor a symbol that would denote or connote anything other than themselves. These robes were amazingly silent. They were also physically restrictive, as their heavy cloth encumbered with gold threads hampered movement and compelled formal and ceremonial behavior. Form and silence were the main characteristics of the innermost space of the Ottoman palace, at the edge of the private harem. There an invisible sultan hidden behind curtains would communicate through formal gestures with the pages and officials of his entourage. The contrast between this external world of form and silence and the loquacious but usually invisible nightshirts illustrated, I think, the dichotomy between the external sense of power and certitude through ritual liturgies and the inner fear of a body which could only be protected by talismans.

The tension between fear of pain and death and certitude of power and authority is probably universal. Its visual expression elsewhere, as in the Italian Renaissance or Mughal India, was often found in astrology. It was absent from the Ottoman world that was presented in this exhibition, unless we do not know how to recognize its more arcane signs in decorative designs. Within the Christian world a series of mechanisms ranging from private confession to public (and private) court proceedings led to constant outpourings of feelings and of emotions about sins, conscious and unconscious. No such mechanisms existed within a Muslim society, except perhaps through mystical orders which were hardly likely at that time to be visible in and around the court. Fear was repressed and hidden in talismanic shirts; on the outside brilliance of form, design, or color ruled. But these brilliant forms and designs were used in silence, in carefully rehearsed ceremonies in which puppet-like characters went through motions without emotion, and lived or died (executions were numerous and swift) in pompous grace.

To understand Ottoman art as a luxurious array of ceremonially functional items, occasionally endowed with additional significance through writing, is a reasonable interpretation both of the ways of the Ottoman palace and of the selection of objects. For the historian of art, it brings up an additional problem. Little could be discovered from the objects themselves about who made them or who ordered them, but the transfer of motifs and compositions from one medium to another was evident throughout. There was a thematic, if not always stylistic, unity throughout the exhibition. This unity of high Ottoman art is usually explained by the institution known as the *naqqashhane*, what came to be known as the Palace School. To some it was both an École and an Académie des Beaux-Arts, but in the sixteenth century I think that it was more like a highly skilled specialized maintenance crew of artisans and craftsmen ready to meet the needs of the court. These needs could be very prosaic and immediate, like writing a letter, fixing a roof, or sewing a robe. They could also be very elaborate and long range, like the making of a circumcision robe or of an illustrated manuscript. These "schools" for the arts and crafts may also have been purchasing departments buying up the creations of artisans all over the city and even the world.

Concentrations of wealth always attracted providers of luxury goods and services, or in this case whatever pleased the court or was used by its members.[3] If we add that nearly all the salary sheets we have for people working on objects or paintings show a very heterogeneous group of individuals from many different places whose training took place *after* they were attached to the "school," the apparent stylistic and at least thematic unity of the objects in the exhibition could not have been achieved through

[3] Allan Fisher and Carol Garret Fisher, "A Note on the Location of Royal Ottoman Ateliers," *Muqarnas*, 3 (1985), pp. 118–20.

traditional family- or guild-taught ways. It required the existence [6] of tangible models rather than training to maintain standards. What form these models took – pattern books, scrap books, samples of designs – is still a matter of controversy, but the key questions are clear. Who created this unity? Suleyman himself? A bureaucratic committee of court dignitaries? The learned and religious leaders with their Anatolian or Syro-Egyptian background? The political leadership which, at the time, consisted almost exclusively of men brought as children from the Balkans and trained in the Palace School?

These questions cannot be answered by visual means alone, but assessing the visual means is essential because it leads to yet another manner of looking at the particular selection in the show. The exhibition appeared to be a collection of objects that performed dozens of different functions presented as works of art, that is to say, as possessors of qualities that transcended their functionality. If this was so, then we must also learn to read them as works of art, to understand them as formal responses to a variety of cultural or individual needs, and to evaluate the pleasure they give now and gave in the past. Yet in the presence of the object it was difficult to behave like a traditional art historian or even art critic, to elaborate on the balance of patterns or colors found on a robe or on a bookbinding, to imagine why and how either was made, and to identify and justify criteria for judgment. One's instinct was not to look, but to touch, to lift, perhaps even to appropriate. The exhibition mechanisms which deal with and through the eyes alone were used there for items which affected other senses, the sense of touch primarily, and which teased the imagination away from the object toward its use.

This point is, of course, true of any exhibition dealing with the industrial arts, and it is particularly true of Islamic art, which has given such prominence to the products of skilled craftsmanship. I only raise this point in connection with the Suleyman show because the apparently unique quality of most of the objects had to be reconciled with the industrial process of their manufacture. That reconciliation was difficult to make visually. Even when the reconciliation is attempted, as it has been in a number of exhibitions more anthropological than art-historical, which rebuild for the visitor the place in which the objects are used, the visual experiences of active contexts are difficult to perpetuate. They were not attempted in the Suleyman show, but such contexts as were imagined or suggested did come out of the books accompanying the show. They remain, now that the objects have gone home, and through them one additional set of data comes to light for our attempt at understanding Ottoman art: the discourse of the organizers, the key in which they would have liked us to see the exhibition.

This is where the difficulties begin. I have nothing against beautiful large books with gorgeous illustrations, but, on a practical and nostalgic level, I do miss the small and handy catalogs with postage-stamp illustrations that each

viewer could fill with scribbles, drawings, readings of inscriptions, or general observations like "ugh!" They allowed the recording of a visitor's immediate feelings and reactions and, especially for loan exhibitions which show objects that will never again be brought together, they were indispensable. They have now been replaced by slick presentations of scholarly information and interpretation available to the organizer(s) of the exhibition long before the show takes place. Ideally, this initial statement should be balanced with a post-exhibition explanation of how the show modified or confirmed the views it espoused. This ideal sequence occurs only too rarely, and in this case the facsimile of a royal epic with sixty-nine miniatures dated 1558 and a book of essays on the making of books and paintings, on the *Schatzkammer*, on the imperial wardrobe, and the royal kilns, with a series of useful appendices, are what remain of the show. Elaborate and very complete bibliographies accompany each volume.

Both books are impeccably presented with stunning illustrations, and they reflect two decades of dogged descriptive and taxonomic scholarship carried out primarily but not exclusively by Turkish academics. But, as soon as we go beyond the levels of ornamental typologies, of technical virtuosity, and of immediate contexts, problems and queries arise which need to be fleshed out. One reason is that, as we shall see shortly, the books give a different impression of the objects from that produced by the exhibition. The second is that the books exhibit a paradox wonderfully exemplified by a Melchior Lorichs engraving from 1559 (Fig. 2), which is reproduced in the catalog. In it a mighty and severe Suleyman is standing in front of a masonry wall; he looks exactly as one would imagine him or anyone else wearing the caftans in the show to look, uncomfortable and overloaded. To the left is a deep archway with a peculiar elephant and riders holding flags; they sit on a rug with huge crescents. In the background but dominating the city, the recently built Süleymaniye exhibits the technical mastery and intellectual concep-[7]tualization of vaults that characterize Sinan's works, and exaggerated minarets pop up into the sky. On the top of the arch in a medallion is written "Allah," God. Lorichs, a knowledgeable visitor, represented strength using signs and symbols and through a type of monumental expression which cannot mean anything other than power, even if it is tainted by minor Orientalisms. In a ponderous, austere and slightly boring way, it is an image of Suleyman the Magnificent, even of the Lawgiver.

Nothing like this appears elsewhere in the books. Suleyman is more visible and original in his signature than in his person; the fifty or so representations we have of him in the *Suleymanname* are all conventional images. Is, then, the image of power and strength an exclusively Western one? Or did the Ottomans limit their expression of power to architecture and to ceremonial parades at regular religious festivals or occasional feasts like the circumcision of a prince? It is easy enough to see the new Solomon in the man who had the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt, the Dome of Rock

2 Suleyman the Magnificent, as seen by Melchior Lorichs, dated 1559

re-covered with tiles, Mecca and Medina restored, and who outdid his predecessor Justinian in Solomonic comparisons ("I have now overtaken thee, O Solomon," Justinian is alleged to have said as he entered Hagia Sophia for the first time), with his great complex of the Süleymaniye. But *that* Suleyman, majestic "shadow of God on earth, ruler of the East and of the West," is absent from the books, although, with some difficulty, he can be conjured up in the exhibition.

One reason for this absence lies in Dr Atil's deliberate emphasis on a very different kind of Suleyman, on an almost superhumanly talented ruler who practiced crafts and especially writing – as old mirrors of princes used to advise kings to do – and who had a romantic family life. Such an image simply does not ring true for the sixteenth-century Ottoman world, but to argue against it requires an analysis of sources and events that does not belong in this review.

A more trenchant reason for Suleyman's absence is that less than one-fifth of the objects in the exhibition were directly and precisely associated with him and barely one-fourth were associated with any patron or with a specific date or place of manufacture. Only the manuscripts were consistently provided with vital statistics. This does not mean that the organizers missed any major examples of Suleyman's personal properties, nor that the Sultan's belongings have disappeared, although some no doubt have. It means rather that the Ottomans had no imperial art except the architecture of mosques which proclaimed visually and symbolically the presence of a new order from Tunis and Budapest to Baghdad and Mecca.[4] The Ottoman sultan in the sixteenth century had no need for art. He was alone at his level of power. Unlike Christian rulers, he did not get involved in endless political, matrimonial, geographical and economic deals which were celebrated through images and exchanges of symbols. Unlike the Mughals, he had at his disposal a working system for ruling over nearly everyone; he did not have constantly to pacify Hindu grandees. In the competition for the rule of Muslims, the Safavids of Iran were hardly a match. His only real equal could have been the Holy Roman Emperor. But by Suleyman's time, the brotherhood of kings was restricted to the same faith; an infidel could not belong to the club. [8]

If the art of the exhibition was not Suleyman's, whose was it? An answer comes from looking at the *Suleymanname.* A breakdown of its illustrations gives thirty images showing affairs of state such as receptions or gift-giving ceremonies, eighteen depicting war, eight of them with particularly gruesome deaths, ten representing executions of rebels, seven showing traditional

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[4] Gulru Necipoğlu-Kafadar, "The Süleymaniye Complex in Istanbul: An Interpretation," *Muqarnas*, 3 (1985), pp. 97–117. I owe a great deal also to Dr Necipoglu's dissertation on the Topkapi Serayi (Harvard, 1986), now published as *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power, the Topkapi Palaces in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries* (Cambridge, 1991).

hunting, and two with unusual topics to be discussed presently. It is reasonable that a royal panegyric would concentrate on conquests and on the activities of the court, but the emphasis on executions and often on an apparently gratuitous portrayal of massacres in Rhodes or the Caucasus is curious. One has to go back to Assyrian sculpture for such a vivid depiction of killing in the name of the state and of order. Ideologically, executions, especially of rebels, are the visible expression of justice, the central concern of a lawgiver, and their presence in the manuscript is indeed an attempt to portray justice.

For whom was this manuscript illustrated? The dedication, slightly mistranslated in the facsimile, identifies the book as a gift (*tuhfah*) of the treasury (*khizanah*) of Suleyman. The word *khizanah* could have referred to the library which was part of the imperial treasure-room, but the operative term is *tuhfah*, "gift," for it implies that the book was made by someone *for* – rather than by order of – the Sultan.

Who ordered it can be inferred from two further observations. The second miniature in the book, placed between Suleyman's accession and a meeting of the imperial court, before any of the gory details of later images, depicts the *devşirme*, the recruitment of tribute children destined for the army and administration of the empire (Fig. 3). It fits quite properly into a text describing how the "slave" system strengthened the Ottoman army, but the image is striking for its quaint charm. Six little boys have been registered by two neatly dressed officials and are about to be led away, while two Ottoman guards hold back a local population of men, women (the only representation of women in the whole manuscript), and girls led by a gesticulating priest in a black robe. In a manuscript filled for the most part with standard images or concrete depictions of combat, this topic, apparently never illustrated before or after, is shown in an unusually bucolic and sentimental mode, like a departure for camp or for boarding school. The event is portrayed as wonderful, not so much for the state as for the children and their families.

This is where the second observation comes in. With a few exceptions, the Sultan is rarely identified in this book by his clothes. Only his location on the page or the activities around him help in determining which personage is the ruler. The mass of handsomely dressed and turbaned participants are always court officials; even the learned *ulema* hardly appear. Officials were the mainstay of the empire. They had come as children from the Christian provinces and had became the servants more of the state or system than of the emperor. It is they or, perhaps more likely, one of them who could well have commissioned the illustration of the *Suleymanname* as a gift to the ruler and who would have recalled in rather idyllic terms the departure of the boys from the villages at the beginning of a book dealing with the power and rights of the state. Who precisely may have done this can be imagined from folio 266 (Fig. 4), which shows a group of handsomely dressed and turbaned soldiers climbing up trees to avoid a suddenly rising river. This

3 The *devşirme*. *Suleymanname*, fol. 31b

4 Soldiers in a tree avoiding a flood. *Suleymanname*, fol. 266a

episode suggests an anecdote about the hardship borne together by a group of veterans after one of the rare defeats of the Ottoman armies in the sixteenth century and recalled to the Sultan. One of these soldiers or the whole group might have ordered the manuscript for some festive occasion. It is also notable that the miniature is awkwardly composed, as though the painter did not quite know how to make the point requested by the patron.

This hypothesis can perhaps be extended to many other objects in the exhibition. What we see is neither an industrial art of luxury crafts, as existed in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Islamic art or in sixteenth-century Venice, nor a specifically imperial art in the fashion of Akbar's in India or of Francis I's in France. Instead it is the expression of the taste of a civil and military servant who is neither a technically trained mercenary nor the scion of a ruling class, but the uprooted alien who owes everything to his talents and to the beneficence of his ruler. This source would explain the anonymity of the forms, their lack of signifying charge, the relative poverty of written expression, the absence of expressions of faith from everything but a few restricted areas, and their visual brilliance. Some of the buildings attributed to the late Sinan may well have been built for that class.[5] Within this explanatory framework Suleyman recedes as a person and as a patron. He is replaced by a concept – Ottoman power – which constructs forms to act out and proclaim for itself the system's wealth and brilliance. The agents of this replacement were the products of the *devşirme*, and it is possible that further investigations will show the emergence of individual tastes among these grandees, [10] even though their loyalty to the state and the absence of a power base made unlikely the appearance of a duc de Guise or de Berry. The result was in line with an older Islamic tradition, a visual system which developed form over content and which made many simultaneous explanations possible for any one form.

It would, however, be wrong to see the Ottoman world simply as an antithesis to the Western Christian world of the time. It was rather the reverse of the same medal, struck originally in Assyria and honed ever after by all European and western Asian empires, and especially by the Roman empire and the myths developed, east and west, around it. Its Ottoman originality in the sixteenth century was not the quality of the ruling princes (extraordinary rulers existed elsewhere as well) but rather a constantly reformed and rejuvenated class of leaders, and it is therefore legitimate to attribute to that class the originality of the art. It is at least justified to do so in the sixteenth century. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the art of the ruling class would become a *turquerie* in the West and would be replaced by Westernized forms in the Ottoman world itself.

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[5] This idea was developed by Jale N. Erzen, "Sinan as Anti-Classicist," *Muqarnas*, 5 (1988), pp. 70–86.

It may be regretted that the exhibition and its concomitant books did not raise broader questions of the operation of visual forms in the sixteenth century or of the meanings of objects within a courtly culture. Or perhaps it is wiser, at this stage of scholarly and general thinking about Ottoman art, to lay out the information, to propose a few keys for understanding, and to let others develop their own interpretation.

One such interpretation could be that there was a paradox in Ottoman art at the time of Suleyman and a particularly striking one for the sixteenth century. Nearly all of its achievements, with possibly the one exception of Sinan's Selimiye in Edirne, were buildings and objects or paintings which could be and at times were repeated and which were not meant to remain forever or to be used in their original shape. Again with the exception of the religious buildings, they were short-lived actors in endlessly repeated theatrical ceremonies. In one sense, therefore, they are not works of art in the restrictive sense imposed upon the world by Western painting from the early Renaissance onward. At the same time, the immediacy of their sensuousness, their dazzling desirability, trigger physical rather than intellectual feelings. They appeal to our sense of pleasure rather than to our judgment, and thus courtly objects made for practical ceremonial purposes become works of art by virtue of what they do to us rather than of what they were meant for in their time. The implications of this point for any general theory of the arts is considerable, as it introduces the time of judgment as a significant variable in dealing with the arts.

The *Age of Suleyman* was, however, more immediately important in its presentation of the Ottomans in the heyday of their power. What distinguishes their art is that it was destined so exclusively, so relentlessly, almost pitilessly, for their own restricted world and, within that world, probably for a very small group of potential users and viewers. The Ottomans acquired this restriction of the space of performance of each object from their Islamic inheritance, but in the showy Mediterranean of the time, it appears like a conscious decision to be different, separate. Even Sinan's mosques were accessible to others from afar, as an outline on the skyline, not as a theatrical façade in the Italian manner. What psychological, ideological, emotional, intellectual, or other motivations led the strongest power of Eurasia, whose empire extended from Algiers and Budapest to the Caspian Sea and Baghdad, whose population was mostly non-Muslim, whose ruling elite came from conquered lands, to concentrate its investments and energies on the rich and brilliant surfaces of ceremonial life? And all of this when the remote kings of Scotland or the tsars of Muscovy eagerly called Italian artists and craftsmen to give modernity to their capitals, just as Suleyman's grandfather, the conqueror of Constantinople, had done less than a century earlier. It is for others than historians of art to answer these questions. But it is the arts with a sensual appeal lacking in diplomatic or religious documents which lead us to pose them.