

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

FOURTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215/842-6353

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THE AGE OF SULTAN SÜLEYMAN THE MAGNIFICENT
TO OPEN JAN. 25, 1987 AT NATIONAL GALLERY

Philip Morris Provides Grant for Exhibition of 16th Century Turkish Art

WASHINGTON - The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, the first major U.S. exhibition of art from the Golden Age of the Ottoman Empire, will be on view at the National Gallery of Art's East Building Jan. 25, 1987 through May 17, 1987. The exhibition is made possible by Philip Morris Companies Inc.

J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art, said: "The artistic legacy of the Ottoman Empire is one of history's richest and most enduring. The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent brings together works of extraordinary beauty and sumptuousness. We are delighted to present this remarkable collection at the National Gallery of Art, marking the first time in more than 20 years that Turkish art has traveled to the United States. I believe this exhibition will be one of the major arts events of 1987."

During a state visit to Washington on April 5, 1985, the Prime Minister of Turkey, His Excellency Turgut Özal, appeared at the National Gallery's East Building to announce the forthcoming exhibition.

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R. William Murray, president of Philip Morris International, said: "Philip Morris is privileged to play a role in bringing the spectacular art and culture of Turkey to the American people. This exhibition will heighten American appreciation for the rich contributions Turkey has made to world civilization."

The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent presents the highest aesthetic and technical achievement of the Ottoman Empire during the rule of Sultan Süleyman I (1520-1566), renowned legislator, statesman, poet and generous patron of the arts. In Turkey, Süleyman is known as "Kanuni," or the "Lawgiver," in reference to his exemplary judicial acts which became the basis of many Western constitutional laws. In recognition of the splendor of his court and his brilliance as a military strategist (during his 46-year reign he more than doubled the extent of his realm) he is known in the West as "Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent."

The exhibition will include 210 objects: illustrated manuscripts, drawings and paintings; imperial items made of silver, gold, jade and rock crystal embellished with gems; kaftans, textiles, embroideries and rugs; inlaid woodwork, ceramics and tiles. On view will be such Turkish national treasures as an inlaid wood throne, a unique map of the Americas made in 1513, the illustrated history of the sultan's reign, illuminated copies of his collected poems, as well as his kaftans, swords and other personal items.

The majority of objects will be loaned by Turkish national museums, with the remaining works to come from American, European and Western Asian collections. The largest lender to the exhibition is the celebrated Topkapı Palace Museum, İstanbul, which served as Süleyman's administrative center and residence.

Under Süleyman's patronage, the arts flourished. Court studios employed men from all parts of the empire, including European, Iranian and native artists. His reign saw the synthesis of Eastern, Western and Turkish traditions, giving birth to a vocabulary which became unique to the Ottoman world.

Süleyman personally oversaw the activities of the "nakkashane," the imperial painting studio where artists produced hundreds of illustrated manuscripts and created designs to be used on all decorative arts commissioned by the court.

Süleyman was also interested in architecture and commissioned Sinan, the chief architect of the empire and the master of dome construction, to build the Süleymaniye, an enormous 400-dome complex which has in the center a mosque surrounded by 18 buildings that included four universities, a medical college, elementary and secondary schools, a hospital and mausoleums for Süleyman and his wife. The sultan supervised the design and decoration of the complex, which was built between 1550 and 1557.

An eminent authority on Turkish and Islamic art, Dr. Esin Atıl (Center of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institution), guest curator at the National Gallery, has selected the exhibition and written the fully illustrated exhibition catalogue. According to her, "The extraordinary burst of creativity that took place during the age of Süleyman had a long-lasting impact on the art of Turkey and on the traditions of its neighboring states, the vestiges of which are still visible today."

Dr. Atıl is also the author of Süleymanname: The Illustrated History of Süleyman the Magnificent, a study on the illustrations of the Süleymanname, the monumental work which describes the political and social achievements of the sultan. Süleyman himself commissioned the manuscript and arranged for a special group of court painters to illustrate the volume. It influenced the tradition of Ottoman painting by establishing models for future illustrated histories. Both the catalogue and the study on the Süleymanname are co-published with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in conjunction with the exhibition.

After its Washington premiere, The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent will be seen at The Art Institute of Chicago, June 13 through Sept. 6, 1987, and at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 4, 1987 through Jan. 17, 1988.

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NOTICE TO EDITORS:

The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent
Jan. 25, 1987 - May 17, 1987

ENTRY SYSTEM

Admission to The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent is on a first-come, first-served basis only. No reservations are available.

For most days, except for weekends and holidays, there will be no restrictions on entering the exhibition. When there is a possibility of overcrowding, a waiting line will be established temporarily to control entry into the exhibition area.

On weekends and holidays passes will be distributed to avoid lengthy waits in line. The passes will be distributed on a first-come, first-served basis from the pass desk on the Ground Floor of the East Building. The passes will be timed for entry by the half-hour and will be valid for the same-day use only.

For additional information, please call (202) 842-6690.

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[c.1986]

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Title: THE AGE OF SULTAN SULEYMAN THE MAGNIFICENT

Dates: Jan. 25 - May 17, 1987 at the National Gallery of Art; June 13 - Sept. 6, 1987 at the Art Institute of Chicago; Oct. 4, 1987 - Jan. 17, 1988 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Credits: This exhibition is made possible by a grant from Philip Morris Companies Inc. and was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Content: More than 200 works of art including manuscript illuminations, textiles, ceramics, metalwork and objects from the sultan's treasury have been selected for this exhibition.

Lenders: Most of the objects in this exhibition are on loan from Turkish national museums in Istanbul, among them the Topkapi Palace Museum, the Archeological Museum and the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum. Other objects are on loan from major museums in the United States, among them The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Other lending institutions include the David Collection in Copenhagen, the British Museum in London, the Musee du Louvre and the Kuwait National Museum.

Historical Context: The age of Suleyman (1494-1566) corresponds to an era of tremendous achievement in art, science and literature, as well as religious upheaval, in Western Europe.

Art: The 16th-century was the age of masters such as Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Titian, Tintoretto, Albrecht Durer and Hans Holbein.

Science: Copernicus' theory of the heliocentric movement of the planets published in 1543. The 16th century was the great age of discovery in America: Spanish explorers Cortes and Pizarro mapped and colonized parts of the New World.

Literature: Publication of Chaucer's Works in 1532.

Religion: The Protestant Reformation: In 1517 Martin Luther first challenged the authority of the Catholic Church.

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THE SULTAN

Suleyman the Magnificent was born in a turbulent age of almost continual political and military conflict, and at the same time unprecedented artistic creativity. Powerful rulers such the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Henry VIII of England and the Valois king of France, Francis I, vied with each other in attempting to consolidate and extend their kingdoms, forming and breaking political and military alliances. Suleyman was a dynamic and energetic leader who more than doubled the boundaries of his realm: at the time of his death the Ottoman Empire included, in the west, Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary and parts of Czechoslovakia and Austria; in the north, the Crimea; to the east, Georgia, western Iran and regions along the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea; and in the south, Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and northern Africa to Morocco.

Suleyman was a brilliant military strategist, statesman and legislator. At the age of 15 he was made governor of a province in northwestern Anatolia; he continued to serve as governor of several other provinces until the death of his father, Selim I, in 1520.

Suleyman was trained as a goldsmith, in the Ottoman tradition that every ruler should have a trade. He was a linguist and a poet who wrote under the pseudonym "Muhibbi," meaning beloved friend. His wife, Hurrem, is thought to have been of Slavic descent. Suleyman was a devoted husband and had five sons and a daughter with Hurrem.

Suleyman died at the age of 72 on September 7, 1566, during the siege of Szigetvar, in Hungary. His body was laid to rest near the Suleymaniye Mosque, next to the mausoleum of his wife.

Throughout his life the sultan was the driving force behind the flowering of Ottoman culture, and served in many capacities: administrator, judge, general and diplomat, as well as patron of the arts.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF OTTOMAN CULTURE

The cultural and artistic richness of the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent is unparalleled in Ottoman history. As the principal patron of the arts, Suleyman supported societies of painters, architects, metalworkers, weavers and ceramists. These artists produced works of extraordinary quality during the sultan's long reign. Truly the golden age of Ottoman culture, the legacy of artistic creativity from this era has endured for centuries.

The Ottoman Empire was highly centralized with an organized administrative structure. The sultan lived and worked in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, the capital city.

NAKKASHANE - Imperial Court Painters

The most important group of artists belonged to the society of court painters. This society was called the nakkashane, and its members developed the designs that were applied to many different kinds of objects. The members of the nakkashane were responsible for the decorative themes and designs in all the artistic products of Suleyman's court. Primarily painters, these artists illuminated and illustrated manuscripts both religious and secular, and produced single paintings and drawings. Called "the creative brain" of the Ottoman court style, nakkashane artists devised the themes that were transmitted to architectural decoration and furnishings, as well as to metalwork, textiles and ceramics.

Ottoman decoration relies heavily on floral elements, and the hatayi, a lotus blossom rendered in profile, along with the rumi, a stylized split leaf, became two of the major decorative motifs. Cloud bands, thin bands of scrolling cloud shapes, and cintemani patterns, triple balls with double wavy lines, are other traditional designs. Formulated by nakkashane artists, these motifs occur repeatedly in the Ottoman decorative vocabulary.

During the reign of Suleyman new design concepts were introduced by nakkashane artists. Three important innovations were: 1) the saz style, 2) the naturalistic genre, and 3) elaborately illustrated historical texts. Although the names of most nakkashane artists are lost, and many of their projects were collaborative, a few individuals are recorded.

ARTISTS OF THE NAKKASHANE

Sahkulu was a revolutionary painter and the creator of the saz style. The word saz is of ancient Turkish origin and refers to a mythical enchanted forest, often described in poetry, that is inhabited by fantastic spirits. The saz style recreates this world with the rendition of decorative floral elements. Hatayi blossoms and leaves were painted in a highly stylized way, with a twisting, turning, elegant calligraphic line.

Kara Memi was another innovative artist, responsible for the development of the naturalistic genre. This style of decoration is used to recreate paradise gardens. Ottoman art is often heavily imbued with symbolic elements; in the naturalistic style the depiction of such flowers as roses, tulips, carnations and hyacinths symbolizes sacred and profane love, abundance and perpetuity. The floral themes that evolved from nakkashane drawings and illuminations, both in the saz style and in the naturalistic genre, formed the basis of Ottoman decorative arts.

Osman was the foremost painter in another revolutionary trend of the nakkashane, that of illustrated contemporary histories. Osman worked with the court biographer and created hundreds of paintings that record the lives and achievements of the sultans.

THE SULTAN'S TUGRA

Among the many duties of the nakkashane was to illuminate the sultan's personal monogram, which was affixed to all official correspondence and business documents. The sultan's tugra, a calligraphic emblem with his name and titles, was a sign of authority that authenticated all official transactions. This symbol was chosen by the sultan himself and remained unchanged throughout his reign. A tugra (cat. no. 4) of Suleyman, produced in the late 1550s, is one of the finest examples of this type of monogram. The use of gold and depictions of sprays of pink and blue flowers, as well as blossoming fruit trees, were standard themes for these elegant emblems.

THE NOBLEST OF THE ARTS

Calligraphy was considered the noblest of all the arts in the Ottoman court. Copying the Koran was an act of piety, and calligraphers and illuminators of the Koran were the most respected artists in Suleyman's court. A page from a Koran (cat. no. 9a) is one of the finest of these manuscript illuminations. The decorative panels surrounding the text indicate the hand of a master painter as well as calligrapher. Rumis, hatayis and cloud bands decorate the page. The oval panels on either side of the text are in the naturalistic style, showing blossoms growing from a cluster of leaves. The delicacy and exuberance of this illumination give it a brilliantly decorative effect.

A special group of bookbinders was employed to create the bindings for the holy book. A Koran binding (cat. no. 20) shows the Ottoman taste for precious materials. Jade plaques are inlaid with gold wire, which form floral sprays with emeralds and rubies in the centers. The spine is made of gold chains.

MANUSCRIPTS AND ALBUM DRAWINGS

Literary manuscripts were also produced in Suleyman's court. The Divan-i Muhibbi, the collected poems of Suleyman, were among the most carefully executed volumes. One of the most elaborate versions of Suleyman's Divan-i Muhibbi was transcribed by Mehmed Serif, an artist from Tabriz. This version (cat. no. 25) has a superb binding, stamped with gold and decorated with floral sprays. Each page is decorated with gold drawings in the margins that are in the naturalistic style.

Another function of the nakkashane was to create single paintings and drawings that were compiled into albums. Album drawings are often in the saz style and represent the best and most elegantly detailed examples in this genre. One of the largest and earliest of these (cat. no. 46) depicts a ferocious dragon entangled in leaves. The dragon attacks an enemy that is part foliage, part creature. The floral sprays and feathery leaves twist and turn delicately on the page.

COURT OFFICIALS AS ARTISTS

During this creative period in Ottoman art members of Suleyman's administration also practiced painting, illuminating and writing, frequently on their own texts. Two of the most famous of these were Piri Reis, a naval captain, and Nasuh, a court official.

Piri Reis conducted several military campaigns in the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Arabian Gulf and Indian Ocean. He was a man of many talents who is best known for his cartographic studies and naval charts.

His most famous work is a parchment map of the Atlantic Ocean showing the western shores of Europe and Africa and the eastern shores of Central and South America (cat. no. 35). The inscription in the lower left lists more than 30 sources that Piri Reis used in making this map, including one made by Christopher Columbus. This map is not only a document but a work of art, with details of ships and figures as well as animals and fantastic creatures. At the upper part of the map two figures are shown building a fire on the back of a whale; according to the inscription, this is a story of two sailors who mistook a whale for an island and had to swim quickly back to their ship when the whale dove underwater to put out the fire.

Another maritime scene (cat. no. 40) is by the court official Nasuh. Part of a manuscript describing the history of Suleyman's 1543 campaign in eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, this particular scene shows the city of Genoa. The fleet of ships with graceful sails in the foreground represents the Ottoman armada. Genoa is shown in great detail with its buildings, bridges and rivers.

THE SULTAN'S TREASURY

The ceremonial and personal items in Suleyman's treasury reveal the high technical and artistic brilliance of his court. A rock-crystal pen box (cat. no. 59) reflects his passion for objects decorated with precious materials. The panels of the box are joined by gold bands and are set with emeralds and rubies. Tiny gold leaves and blossoms decorate the outside of the box. The interior has three glass compartments for holding ink, sand and writing implements.

A mirror (cat. no. 73) created for Suleyman by an artist named Gani is an object made for daily use by the sultan. This elegant mirror has an ebony handle with an intricately carved ivory back. The outer rim of the back has a carved inscription, which asks the Creator to keep the beholder's beautiful face forever radiant, and to preserve the mirror itself as long as the world revolves.

Suleyman was an accomplished statesman and legislator who personally led over a dozen military campaigns. His concern for majestic display is exemplified in a short sword (cat. no. 86), one of the most famous pieces of Suleyman's ceremonial regalia. This sword, called a yatagan, is a dazzling work of art richly encrusted with gems. The hilt is ivory and is set with rubies and turquoises. The steel blade is inlaid with gold, and the decoration includes representations of mythical creatures in combat.

A ceremonial helmet (cat. no. 84) demonstrates the high level of expertise in Ottoman metalwork. Set with gems, this helmet uses both flat and raised gold inlay to create surface decoration.

Suleyman's throne is among the unique objects of his treasury (cat. no. 107). This walnut throne is completely covered with ebony, ivory and mother-of-pearl inlays in the form of geometric designs. Carved ivory finials are attached to the front and back projections of the arms. The crested back is decorated with a large inlaid mother-of-pearl medallion.

THE IMPERIAL WARDROBE

The Ottoman world is famous for its textiles. Embroidered and decorated silks and satins were luxury items cherished by both the Ottomans and Europeans in the 16th century. The Ottoman Empire was on the path of the silk trade route, and an imperial society of weavers was established in Istanbul. Among the garments that the sultan wore were an inner robe called entari and an outer robe called kaftan. Both inner and outer robes were lined and embellished with contrasting bands of colored fabric. The motifs used to decorate these robes were the same as those for manuscript illuminations: saz style blossoms and naturalistic flowers, as well as cloud bands and scrolls. These designs were the creation of nakkashane artists.

One of the most spectacular examples of Ottoman textiles is a ceremonial robe (cat. no. 116). The long sleeves are decorative and meant to hang at the back; slits at the shoulders allow the arms to pass through. The floral decoration in the saz style is of an extremely rich and complex design. This robe represents the highest technical and aesthetic achievement of the textile designers and weavers.

This exhibition also includes a talismanic shirt, which was worn next to the skin (cat. no. 122). These garments are inscribed with verses from the Koran, prayers, and magical numbers and letters. Talismanic shirts were believed to protect the wearer from illness and evil forces. This example is made of white linen and lined with white cotton. Bands encircling the shoulders, cuffs and front openings are painted with inscriptions.

Refined and intricate rugs were also produced by court weavers. Small seccades, or prayer rugs, were among the finest examples. A seccade (cat. no. 159) represents a mihrab, the niche oriented towards the Kaaba, the holiest shrine in Mecca, and was meant to be used by a single person during prayer. Seccades reflect religious themes: in this example the hanging lamp in the central niche represents celestial light, and the profusion of flowers woven at the base of the columns symbolizes a garden of paradise.

THE ROYAL KILNS

Ceramics were produced in abundance during the reign of Suleyman. Tiles as well as vessels were decorated with nakkashane-inspired elements such as saz designs and naturalistic flowers. Ceramists during the reign of Suleyman were extraordinarily adept technically, with full control over glazes and decorative patterns. Pottery from this period has a hard, smooth body and clear bright colors.

A plate (cat. no. 179) has a foliated rim decorated with a band of turquoise flowers, and the central medallion is filled with scrolling floral elements. The delicacy and refinement of this plate demonstrate the extraordinary abilities of the court ceramists.

Another plate, in the saz style (cat. no. 184), shows a completely different application of nakkashane designs. A plate such as this, with its skillful brushwork and harmonious composition, functions as an individual work of art. The decorative elements are not confined by the rim of the plate, but extend beyond the plate's boundaries with an exuberant freedom. The central pine cone is flanked by hatayis, peonies and other floral elements. The curving body of the pale blue peacock in the center echoes the shape of the looping, twisting saz leaves.

A lamp (cat. no. 195) shows the mastery of color and glaze in Ottoman ceramics. The turquoise bosses in the middle of the body were originally gilded and now show only a few traces of gold. This lamp was made to hang in a mosque, and the rim has an inscription reading "There is no god but God, Muhammed is His Prophet." The lamp is decorated with hatayi blossoms and other foliage which winds rhythmically around the body.

Tiles were used in religious and secular buildings for wall decoration. One of the best examples is a large panel, consisting of 45 square tiles, made for the room adjacent to the imperial baths in the Harem of the Topkapi Palace. This particular example depicts a central flowering fruit tree; the turquoise branches are laden with red and white blossoms. At the base of the tree tulips, carnations and roses grow in an elegant profusion. The tree is framed by a turquoise and red band decorated with white rumis and is inscribed with Persian verses. The fruit tree on a blue ground was a theme used in manuscript illumination, showing once again the important influence of the nakkashane to the Ottoman decorative vocabulary.