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Jeweled Islamic Textiles - Imperial Symbols

Louise W. Mackie

The Cleveland Museum of Art

Soon after Islam was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia in the early 7th century, his followers began spreading the faith. Within one century, Islam had been carried across North Africa to Spain and across the Middle East to Central Asia. Great centers of civilization developed in the political capitals, such as Damascus, Baghdad and Cairo, and later in Istanbul and Isfahan, accompanied by elaborate court ceremonies to promulgate their wealth and power. Imperial ceremonials were equivalent to theatrical settings, usually based on strict hierarchies and rigid protocol, in which luxurious textiles were vital symbols.

Four overt textile symbols of imperial wealth and power - throne covers, throne room carpets, red-carpet receptions, and robes of honor - will be considered here. All together, they provide insight into the original significance of extant Islamic textiles whose status, given the comparatively few archival tidbits, often challenges evaluation.

The documented ceremonial practices of the Ottoman Turks during their political and artistic height in the 16th and early 17th centuries provide an illuminating framework for considering other wealthy Islamic courts. The Ottomans preserved and documented one of the largest treasuries in the world in the imperial Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. It contains, for example, numerous fabrics and more than three hundred and thirty imperial kaftans dating from the 16th and 17th centuries.¹ About twenty percent of the kaftans are patterned, including foreign fabrics dominated by Italian velvets, and some eighty percent are plain (Figure 5).² In addition, traveler's accounts and historical miniature paintings have been consulted. First, however, the significance of precious gems will be summarized.

When the Arabs conquered the Middle East, gemstones already symbolized imperial power and wealth, especially in Iran during the Sasanian empire (226-651).³ Pearls and rubies enriched clothing and carpets.⁴ Most renowned was the immense floor covering known as King Khosrau's spring garden carpet, which was made around 600 for the imperial audience hall at the palace in Ctesiphon. It contained paths covered with gemstones flanked by blossoming trees and fruits formed with gold, silver, and precious stones.⁵ Was it a knotted pile carpet or an embroidery?

¹ This author recorded 333 kaftans attributed to sultans Mehmet II through Mustafa II who ruled 1451-1703.

² For Italian silks made for export to the Ottoman sultans, see this author in Nurhan Atasoy, Walter B. Denny, Louise W. Mackie, Hulya Tezcan, *IPEK Imperial Ottoman Silks and Velvets*, London, 2001, pp. 182-190.

³ Prudence Oliver Harper, *The Royal Hunter, Art of the Sasanian Empire*, New York, 1978.

⁴ R.A. Donkin, *Beyond Price, Pearls and Pearl-Fishing: Origins to the Age of Discoveries*, Philadelphia, 1998, p. 94, tunic embroidered with pearls and rubies of King Khosrau II.

⁵ Qadi ibn al-Zubayr, *Book of Gifts and Rarities*, trans. and annotated by Ghada al-Hijawi al-Qaddumi, Cambridge, MA, 1996, pp. 171-74, nos. 192-193.

Wealthy Islamic dynasties continued to amass pearls and gemstones, along with gold and textiles, in their treasuries. Pearls were valued the highest and came primarily from the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. They were identified by over forty terms in Arabic and Persian - more than in any other languages - according to the great 11th century Iranian scholar Al-Biruni and published in some fifty lapidary treatises.⁶ Later around 1600, the Mughal emperors of India divided pearls into sixteen categories based on their size, color, and luster.⁷ They also swathed themselves in large pearls and presented them as gifts.

Pearls served symbolic as well as medicinal roles. In some instances, pearls even represented political legitimacy. For example, the so-called "Great Pearl," admired for its "radiance and whiteness," was transferred from one dynasty to the next, the Umayyad to the Abbasid, in 750.⁸ Huge pearl pendants within double rows of large pearls celebrate their revered status in the silk woven in Iran during the late Sasanian or early Islamic period, in a complementary weft twill with inner warps, or *samit* (Figure 1).

Today, pearls and precious gems rarely survive on textiles. Instead, they exist primarily as imitations, represented in various materials and techniques, especially before about 1200. Most designs with pearls evolved from imperial Sasanian images, and are believed to have conveyed royal associations. The most prestigious were undoubtedly richly colored silks, such as the 8th-century prince's coat woven in Sogdiana in "samit" (Figure 2). Less costly woolen fabrics in tapestry weave were also presumably available at court, such as the complete example from 9th-century Egypt (Figure 3). Two strands of large pearls demarcate the field pattern featuring smaller strands which frame birds. The Arabic inscription states it was woven in a tiraz, or textile factory.⁹

All four imperial textile symbols under consideration share associations with throne rooms which often exuded opulent displays of wealth and power. At the Ottoman court, jewels abounded in the furnishing fabrics in the throne room of the Topkapi Palace. Throne covers were selected according to the occasion, including a category for show (Figure 4). According to the French jeweler Jean-Baptiste Tavernier in 1631-32, the throne was usually covered for display with rich fabrics and cushions studded with pearls, rubies and emeralds, and replaced by more comfortable furnishings when the sultan arrived.¹⁰

Tavernier also recorded an illuminating hierarchy of eight throne covers, the selection of which was an overt political statement readily understood by experienced ambassadors. "The throne is decorated with one of these covers, according to how the Sultan regards the Sovereign whose embassy he will receive, and he gauges his largess on the envoy whom he wishes to honor."

The throne cover hierarchy contains six embroidered velvets and two brocaded silks. The finest was black velvet embroidered with large pearls, the second was white

⁶ Donkin, p. 109.

⁷ Donkin, p. 112, from *A'in-i-Akbari*.

⁸ al-Zubayr, pp. 179-80, no. 218.

⁹ Cleveland Museum of Art, acc. no. 1959.48, text: "In the name of God, blessing from God to its owner. What has been made in the tiraz."

¹⁰ Gulru Necipoglu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, And Power, The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, Cambridge, MA and London, 1991, p. 152.

velvet decorated with rubies and emeralds, and the third was deep violet velvet embellished with turquoises and pearls. The next three were velvets in different colors "with rich gold thread embroidery."

The last two, brocaded silks, were described as having "their particular beauty."¹¹ These lowly silks are the most numerous today in the Topkapi and in other museums (Figures 5 and 6). Bold patterns featuring flora in medallions and undulating vines are woven in a combination of satin and twill weaves, also called *lampas*. Had Tavernier recorded the hierarchy during the peak of Turkish production in the 1500s, he might have included cloths of gold (*taquete* or *seraser*). In 1533, Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent was described as "seated on a slightly elevated throne completely covered with gold cloth, replete and strewn with numerous precious stones."¹²

Tavernier's hierarchy raises the larger issue about the original status of surviving Islamic textiles. Were they also imperial quality at the lower end of the hierarchy like the brocaded silks cited above? Since jewels abounded in many wealthy Islamic courts, we can hypothesize that jeweled textiles upstaged many of the patterned textiles that have survived.

In another example of imperial power and intent, the selection of carpets to be displayed in throne rooms was undoubtedly determined by the political occasion, as Tavernier indicated above. Silk carpets were often mentioned in the Topkapi Palace, sometimes embellished with gold thread and usually identified as Iranian. None has survived. However, historical Turkish miniature paintings provide additional evidence. For example, a medallion carpet studded with precious gemstones and pearls was featured when sultan Selim II received the envoy from emperor Maximilian of Austria between 1566 and 1574 (Figure 7). Large rubies and emeralds decorate the central gold-thread medallion, corner medallions and borders, along with thousands of small pearls in the presumably silk Iranian carpet.

Two European ambassadors even complained about the jeweled carpets in the Topkapi Palace. One disliked the discomfort of walking on them. The jewels caused another envoy to lose his shoe during an audience with the sultan, which caused laughter amidst austere imperial silence.¹³

The Iranian predilection for jeweled carpets, already noted in King Khosrau's spring garden carpet or floorcovering, also continued in the early Islamic period. Some were used at the capital in Baghdad that were adorned with pearls and threads of gold. Nothing has survived to the best of my knowledge, except one carpet.

In 1907, the Iranian consul general in New York, H. H. Topakyan, gave President Theodore Roosevelt this little-known Iranian silk carpet with brocaded gilt-metal thread and studded with seventy-five gemstones plus thousands of pearls (Figure 8).¹⁴ Emeralds,

¹¹ Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Nouvelle Relation de l'Interior du Serrail du Grand Seigneur*, Paris, 1675, pp. 108-110.

¹² Necipoglu, p. 100, quoting Schepper.

¹³ Necipoglu, p. 103.

¹⁴ Betty Monkman, *The White House*, New York, London, Paris, 2000, p. 197, acc. no. 907.471.1, L. 5'9" x W. 3'8 1/4". A second jeweled carpet associated with President Taft no longer exists, possibly burned in a house fire after his term. Jeweled "carpets" without pile are excluded, such as the Indian "Baroda carpet." See Stuart Cary Welch, *India, Art*

aquamarines, tourmalines, rubellites, turquoises, and pearls are featured, plus the seed-pearl fringe.¹⁵ It was probably woven in Tabriz in the late 19th century. The quality is excellent. It has a high number of rug knots which form the pattern, over eight hundred asymmetrical knots per square inch, woven in eight colors of silk, many of which have faded.¹⁶

The prayer rug design was precisely planned to feature large gemstones in the centers of blossoms surrounded by small pearls which sometimes also form petals. The silk pile was omitted exactly where the gemstones and pearls are located. Consequently, the plain weave foundation provided a smooth surface for the gemstones, most of which were drilled and sewn on.

A tourmaline surrounded by one large and one hundred and ninety-seven small pearls forms the central area of the lotus blossom in the upper-left corner of the border, and an emerald and two hundred and thirty-two small pearls form the lotus in the lower-left corner. The Iranian poetic text, interrupted in the upper band by a trefoil composed of three hundred and thirty-eight pearls,¹⁷ alludes to the offering of a humble gift. This exceptional carpet clearly continues a highly accomplished and otherwise lost tradition.

In another example of overt symbolism, carpets and textiles were laid out in the hundreds, if not thousands, in the renowned "red-carpet treatment" to convey hospitality, wealth, and power (Figure 9). Kings staged it for their own glory and for worthy dignitaries. Streets in cities and walkways in palaces were covered with thousands of brocaded silks and costly carpets.¹⁸ In one example, Sultan Mehmet III held a red carpet celebration in Istanbul after successful conquests in Hungary in 1597. Two years later in Isfahan, the Iranian king Shah 'Abbas staged a comparable display of power and wealth. "For some two English miles, the wayes [*sic*] were covered all with Velvet, Sattin (*sic*), and cloth of Gold, where his Horse should passe [*sic*]," according to Sir Anthony Sherley.¹⁹

In the most renowned red carpet treatment, textiles and carpets were used as a

and Culture, 1300-1900, New York, 1985, and *Christie's, Arts of India*, 27 Sept. 2001, lot no. 110.

¹⁵ For identification of gemstones and pearls, see Robin Hanson, *Silk Tabriz Pile Carpet, The White House*, report, National Park Service Division of Conservation, Harpers Ferry Center, Feb. 1999.

¹⁶ The asymmetrical knot open on the right count varies considerably, from 784 (28x28) to 870 (29x30) to 930 (31x30) knots psi. Warps are ivory silk, I2Z, with alternate warps very depressed. Wefts are ivroy silk, I2S or I3S. The silk pile colors, many faded, are: light and medium olive-green, light-medium red, rust (brownish red), brown, blue, yellow, and ivory. Gilt-metal strips are wrapped loosely around a pale yellow silk core; the strips are mostly broken off and the silk core is abraided. The selvedge has 4 cords, light green silk, I3S. A braided band sandwiches the carpet ends and suspends seed pearls on metal threads.

¹⁷ Hanson, grid designations A2, A7, and B2.

¹⁸ Necipoglu, p. 88.

¹⁹ Sir Anthonie Sherley, "A Briefe Compendium of the Historie of Sir Anthonie Sherleys travels into Persia," *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, edited by Samuel Purchas, 20 vols., 1625, Reprint 1905, Glasgow & New York, vol. 8, p. 422.

political statement to symbolize the greater glory of Islam over Christianity.²⁰ This was staged in Baghdad in 917 at the Abbasid court by Caliph al-Muktadir for ambassadors from Byzantium. Twenty-two thousand pieces covered the corridors and courts from the Official Gate to the Caliph, but this did not include "the fine rugs...spread over other carpets, and these were not to be trodden with the feet."²¹ Were they jeweled carpets?

Imperial Iranian silks imbued with symbols of imperial power could have been displayed, such as this sturdy 10th-century "shroud of Saint Josse" (Figure 10). Elephants richly caparisoned with gemstones are framed by a camel caravan and cocks in the corners. The inscription identifies a ruler who died in 961.²² Seven colors are woven in "samit."

Robes of honor are the final overt imperial symbol under consideration. Rulers bestowed robes of honor on deserving government and military officials, and at times on visiting ambassadors, based on their worth and importance, as Tavernier recorded (cited above). Robes of honor, which are not known to have jewels, were evaluated based on their quality and quantity. Numerous citations mention the quantity bestowed, whereas evaluations of their quality, suggesting the existence of an established and internationally recognizable hierarchy, are rare.

In 1618, the Transylvanian ambassador Thomas Borsos wrote, "We went to say farewell to the [Ottoman] Sultan, but were not received in great honour. We were given very poor kaftans and were not offered food."²³ In contrast, Borsos observed that a Persian ambassador was given "a very beautiful kaftan, the kind worn by the Sultan himself," and members of his delegation also received about sixty "good kaftans."²⁴ In his text, Borsos identified three qualities: "very poor kaftans," "very beautiful kaftan, the kind worn by the Sultan himself," and "good kaftans." Such evaluations reveal that ambassador Borsos understood the overt symbolism conveyed by the quality of robes of honor bestowed as imperial gifts. Presumably both the quality and quantity were defined by a government document, as occurred in Iran. There, a hierarchy of robes of honor, composed of cloth of gold for the highest rank and plain silk fabrics for the lowest, plus the ordering procedure, was recorded in a court administration manual in about 1725.²⁵

Portraits of individuals wearing robes of honor are rare. The Hapsburg ambassador, Siegmund von Herberstein, commissioned a woodblock print with surcaption of himself dressed in the robe of honor that the Ottoman sultan Suleyman the

²⁰ For another example, Caliph al-Ma'mun (813-833) said, after receiving a gift from the Byzantine emperor, "Send him a gift a hundred times greater than his, so that he realizes the glory of Islam and the grace that Allah bestowed on us through it," al-Zubayr, p. 77, no. 31.

²¹ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, New Haven & London, 1973, pp. 168-71. For silk "rugs" of Caliph Harun al-Rashid in 809, see al-Zubayr, p. 207, para. 302, fn. 5.

²² "Glory and prosperity to Qa'id Abu Mansur Bakh-takin, may God prolong his existence."

²³ Veronika Gervers *The Influence of Ottoman Turkish Textiles and Costume in Eastern Europe*, Toronto, 1982, p. 14.

²⁴ Gervers 1982, p. 39, fn. 81.

²⁵ Patricia L. Baker, *Islamic Textiles*, London, 1995, p. 113.

Magnificent presented him in 1541, composed of inner kaftan of Turkish velvet and an outer ceremonial kaftan of more prestigious Italian velvet (Figure 11). Later in 1622, Van Dyck painted the English ambassador Sir Robert Shirley wearing the robe of honor presented to him by the Iranian king Shah 'Abbas I, made of an opulent Iranian figural velvet with a gilt-metal thread ground (Figure 12). In presenting robes of honor, Islamic monarchs continued an ancient tradition which had been practiced since at least 750 in Baghdad.²⁶

In summary, the significance of jeweled Islamic textiles has been considered through an Ottoman framework, after summarizing the imperial status of pearls. Ottoman throne covers, with a recorded hierarchy, served as a springboard for evaluating jeweled carpets, the red carpet treatment, and finally robes of honor. All together, they reveal that the most prestigious textiles in wealthy Islamic courts, which often featured pearls and gemstones, served several significant roles. They projected dazzling beauty, they symbolized wealth and power, and they conveyed imperial intent.

²⁶ Dominique Sourdel, "Robes of Honor in 'Abbasid Baghdad During the Eighth to Eleventh Centuries," *Robes and Honor*, edited by Stewart Gordon, New York and Houndmills, England, 2001, p. 137. For a rare early portrayal, Mahmud of Ghazna dons a robe bestowed by Caliph al-Kadir in 999, see N.A. Stillman, "Khil'a," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, ed. C.E. Bosworth et al, vol. V, pp. 6-7.

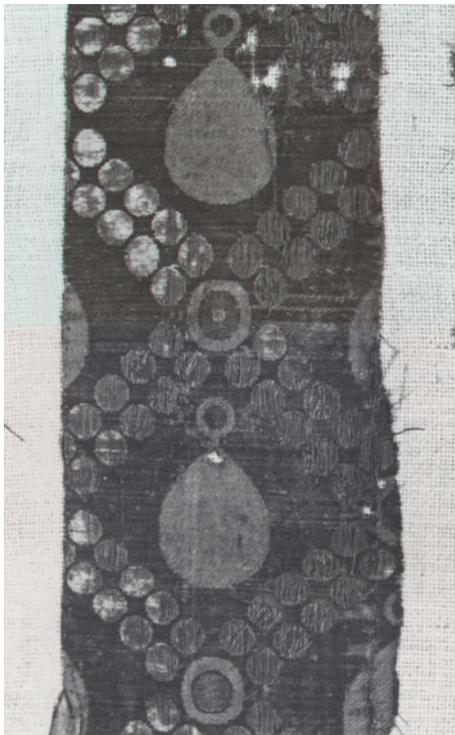


Figure 1 (left) Silk Fragment of Pearls, Iran, 7th c., "samit," Victoria & Albert Museum, 2189-1900. After P.O. Harper, *The Royal Hunter, Art of the Sasanian Empire*, New York, 1978, p. 129.

Figure 2 (above) Prince's Silk Coat, Sogdiana (Central Asia), 8th c., "samit," The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J.H. Wade Fund, 1966.2a.



Figure 3 Wool and Linen Tiraz, Egypt, 9th c., tapestry, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J.H. Wade Fund, 1959.48.



Figure 4 Imperial Jeweled Silk Throne Covers, Turkey, Istanbul, ca. 1600, silk embroidered with gems, pearls and gold, Topkapi Palace Museum.



Figure 5 Silk Kaftan, Turkey, Bursa or Istanbul, late 16th c., "lampas," Topkapi Palace Museum, 13/584. After H. Tezcan and S. Delibas, *The Topkapi Saray Museum, Costumes, Embroideries and other Textiles*, trans. expanded and ed. by J.M.Rogers, Boston, 1986, pl. 38.



Figure 6 Silk Length, Turkey, Bursa or Istanbul, second half 16th c., "lampas," The Cleveland Museum of Art, J.H. Wade Fund, 1946.419



Figure 7 (above) Detail, Sultan Selim II Receives Ambassador on Jeweled Carpet, *Account of the Siege of Szigetvar*, Topkapi Palace Museum, H. 1339, fol. 178a, 1568-69. After N. Atasoy and F. Cagman, *Turkish Miniature Painting*, Istanbul, 1974, pl. 11.



Figure 8 (right) Jeweled Prayer Rug, Iran, Tabriz, ca. 1890, The White House, 907.471.1, Gift of H.H. Tapakyan.

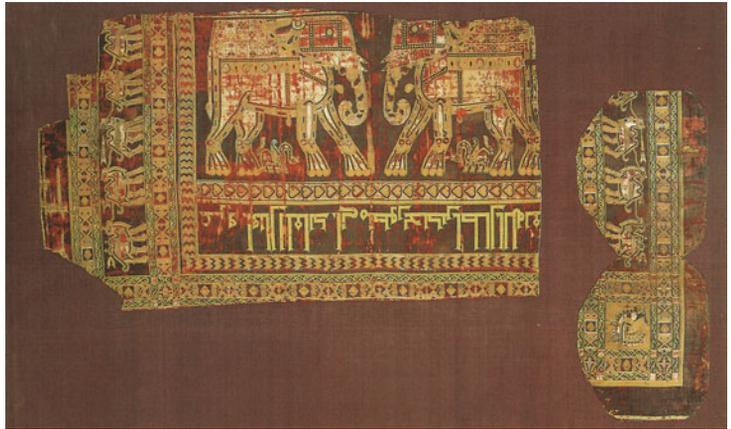


Figure 9 (left) Imperial Moroccan Red-carpet Reception for President of Brazil, Morocco, Fez, early 1980s. After *National Geographic Magazine*, March, 1986.

Figure 10 (above) Silk Floor Cover Fragments, Iran, pre-961, "samit," Louvre Museum, 7502. After R. Ettinghausen, O. Grabar, and M. Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250*, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 126.



Figure 11 Ambassador Siegmund von Herberstein wearing Robes Presented by the Sultan in 1541, colored woodblock, *Gratae posteritati Sigismundus liber Baro in Herbestein*, Vienna, 1560, in Victoria and Albert Museum, 86.B.67.



Figure 12 Sir Robert Shirley wearing Robe Presented by the Shah, by Van Dyck, 1622. After P.L. Baker, *Islamic Textiles*, London, 1995, p. 114.