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Ottoman Fabrics During the 18th and 19th Centuries

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This article introduces the general characteristics of the fabrics produced at the Ottoman court in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to show the changing tastes when the Ottoman Empire was culturally opening to Europe. At the beginning of the 16th century, fabrics that were used to make sultans' costumes were produced at the special court workshops of the palace by skilled masters (*ehl-i hiref*). The designs for the fabrics used for court apparel were created by court designers known as *hassa nakkaşları* and the fabrics for court apparel were woven by the court weavers known as *hassa dokumacıları*. A plan showing a weavers' workshop in the palace which is kept today in the Topkapı Palace Archive is attributed to the court weavers.² Because the palace workshops were unable to meet the demand, orders were also given to workshops in Istanbul and Bursa. In addition fabric was imported from the renowned weaving centers in Italy, such as Venice, Genoa and Florence.

The most striking feature of women's fashions at the Ottoman court in the 18th and 19th centuries was the assimilation of European models. This process of Westernization was first seen in military clothing, and only a short time later did the trend spread to women's and children's fashions at court, as well as to male civilian dresses. Evidence for this major shift comes from visual contemporary sources such as miniatures and other types of painting, prints and photos, from surviving clothing, and from documentary sources, which include tailors' account books. Account books are particularly useful because they include information on fabric types, tailors' names and seals, and the orders tailors received from the ladies of the court. They also provide information on social history in terms of the tailors' relationships with their customers, as well as on the women's fashions of the time.

The quality of Ottoman luxury fabrics reached a peak in the classical period, particularly in the 16th and early 17th centuries but in the 18th century, their quality declined, in line with the failing economy. In the classical period, heavy silk textiles were produced in a variety of techniques, namely, *kemha*³, velvet⁴, *diba*⁵ and *seraser*⁶, and these had a strong pattern scheme that covered the

¹ Sponsored by the Turkish Cultural Foundation and Barakat Trust, UK.

² In the palace archives is a plan for a workshop located behind the Hall of Justice that was designated for producing this fabric. Cf. Behçet Ünsal: "Topkapı Sarayı Arşivi'nde Bulunan Mimarî Plânlar Üzerine", in: *Türk San'atı Tarihi Araştırma ve İncelemeleri*, ed. Tarih Enstitüsü "İstanbul". (Istanbul: Berksoy Matbaası, 1963), 172.

³ *Kemha*; this silk fabric was a favourite of the palace and the wealthy people, and was a heavy, rich and stiff fabric. Both the warp and the weft of *Kemha* were of silk, and the top row of the fabric was strengthened and reinforced by either gold or silver gilding. From sources we also learn of *gülistanî kemha*. This cloth represents a magnificent technique and included 7,000 warp threads. With today's techniques this cloth is impossible to weave. The caftans made of this special fabric in the *saz style* are found in the Topkapı collection. Both are considered garments belonging to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent's sons Beyazid (D. 1562) and Mustafa (D. 1553). For detailed information see Nurhan Atasoy-Walter Denny-Louise Mackie-Hülya Tezcan, *İPEK Imperial Ottoman Silks and Velvets* (See footnote 17.) (TEB Publication, London 2001).

⁴ *Kadife*; both the warp and the weft of this fabric are made entirely of silk. The flat style is called *sade* (plain) while the patterned type is called *münakkaş*, and the metallic version *müzehep*. *Kadife* with an embossed pattern is referred to as *çatma*. The metal threads used were silver that was mixed with European gold. Gradually, lower grades of gold were used and the amount of gold was also decreased so that the velvets began to lose their former vibrancy.

⁵ In its broad meaning *Dibâ* is described as a good type of atlas. Based on the information provided by sources, *dibâ* was something between *atlas* and *kemha*; the base was *atlas*, which was overlaid with metallic thread and patterns.

whole surface. In the 18th century, these were replaced by lighter fabrics with smaller patterns. At the same time, the use of gold and silver thread decreased, and warp densities diminished. The new fabric type, marked out by these changes in pattern and technical properties, was called *nevzuhur* which means “newborn” in tailors’ account books and other manuscript sources. We also learn of sub-types called *Selimiye*- a silk fabric with both warp and weft made of silk threads-, and *Savayi* –a kind of cloth woven from silk and gilt copper wires.⁷ Here, close ties of the Ottoman court with France must be mentioned to better understand how the empire imported modern weaving techniques.

In the late eighteenth century the wife of the reigning Sultan Abdülhamid I (1774-1789) was a woman of French origin. Nakşidil Sultan, formerly known as Aimée was the cousin and childhood friend of Napoleon’s wife Josephine and the two women seem to have kept up a correspondence over the years. The death of Abdülhamid I and the succession of his nephew Selim III coincided with the French Revolution of 1789. Nakşidil Sultan, mother of the future Sultan Mahmud II, was still in close contact with France at the time, therefore Ottoman ambassador who was sent to France in 1797 were warmly received by Napoleon. Selim III was a man open to new ideas, interested in the West and hoping to achieve reform and modernization in his own country. When he built a mosque in Üsküdar he built fabric weaving workshops around it. A European study has revealed that Selim III hired expert weavers from France for these weaving ateliers. These weavers had studied silk weaving techniques in Greece and on their arrival in Istanbul they were settled in a former Venetian colony in Üsküdar. In honour of the sultan who established the looms, fabrics woven by these weavers later known as *Selimiye*, are characterized by stripes alternating with bands of flower motifs worked in a technique which looks similar to satin stitch embroidery. The use of the warp threads to produce the floral pattern, in contrast to the use of the weft for patterning in traditional Ottoman fabrics, bears witness to its European origin. The same workshop also produced *savayi* which is as well a *nevzuhur* type textile, and a new style of *çatma* named as *Üsküdar çatma*. These workshops were burnt down in the janissary uprising of 1814, but it seems that some other workshops producing *Üsküdar çatma* continued to operate in Üsküdar for some more years until they were supplanted by weaving mills established in Hereke by the palace in 1844.⁸

The sample of *Selimiye* fabric which is kept in the department of the Sultan’s Costumes in the Topkapı Palace Museum is characterized by use of the warp threads to produce the floral pattern, in contrast to the use of the weft for patterning in traditional Ottoman fabrics, bearing witness to its European origin.⁹

⁶ *Seraser*; among all of the fabrics woven of gold and silver threads, *seraser* is the most impressive and expensive. This fabric was not mentioned in the 1502-dated Kanunname-i İhtisab-ı Bursa (The Law of the Municipality of Bursa), so based on this, we can assume that it was not used until the middle of the sixteenth century. It was a heavy and expensive fabric. The warp and weft were both silk, but the weft also included threads of gold and silver alloy. *Seraser* was woven with double strands of warp. *Seraser* also uses abundant quantities of gold and silver thread. In addition, the silver that is used in the fabric thread loses its characteristics since it is used twice. For this reason production was restricted and in the sixteenth century looms that produced *seraser* faced increasing edicts that decreased the number of looms that could produce the fabric. *Seraser* producers were encouraged to weave a fabric called *serenk* in its place. *Seraser* was not a fabric the general public could afford. It was used primarily in the palace for *hil’at* [outer caftan]. This was also used in the throne decoration and prince’s blankets at the palace. Hülya Tezcan, “Osmanlı Dokumacılığı”, *Türkler*. (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları 2002), 12, 407.

⁷ See Hülya Tezcan, *Atlaslar Atlası, Pamuklu, Yün ve İpek Kumaşlar Koleksiyonu*, (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Collections- 3, 1993), 35.

⁸ Hülya Tezcan, “Ottoman Fabric Weaving and Women’s Fashion In the Eighteenth Century”, *P Art, Culture, Antiques*, Issue 3, Spring-Summer 2000, 24-25.

⁹ For the illustration see Hülya Tezcan, “Ottoman Fabric Weaving and Women’s Fashion In the Eighteenth Century”, *P Art, Culture, Antiques*, Issue 3, Spring-Summer 2000, p. 20. Selin İpek, “European Influences on Eighteenth-Century

In the Topkapı Palace Museum archive, an account book¹⁰ includes orders from the period 1208–1236/ 1794–1821. Among these orders *savai* and *selimiye* fabrics produced in the workshops established by Mustafa III and Selim III can be noted. While there is only one order for a *Selimiye* fabric there are numerous ones for *Savai* fabrics in different types; such as *plain savai*, *metallic threaded savai*, *flowery savai*, and *golden savai*.



Figure 1, left. Detailed *savai* fabric from three paneled *antari*, Late 19th century, Sadberk Hanım Museum, 14155-K.813



Figure 2, right. Detailed *savai* fabric from three paneled *antari*, Late 19th century, Sadberk Hanım Museum, 14600-K.861

The collections of the Topkapı Palace Museum include 18th-century dresses made for women of the dynasty in these lightweight silks, and these reflect both the fashions of the period and the types of fabric produced.¹¹ Sadberk Hanım Museum has also a large and diverse Ottoman costume collection consisting mainly of articles of dress worn by women. The museum's collection includes several costumes reflecting their period tastes made of *selimiye* and *savai* fabrics (Figures 1 & 2).¹² Kenan Özbel Collection also has *savai* fabric samples in their collection.¹³ In addition there are costumes made of *savai* fabrics in the Italian collection of Fondazione di Venezia.¹⁴

Ottoman Imperial Fashion", Ottoman Empire and European Theatre–From the Beginnings to 1800. – Part I. Sultan III. Selim & Mozart, Wien (in print).

¹⁰ Account book D. 3017. See M. Ç. Uluçay, *Padişahların Kadınları ve Kızları*, (Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara 1980), 103, note 4. See also Selin İpek, "Beyhan Sultan ve Masraf Defteri'ndeki Tacir İsimleri", *Filiz Çağman'a Armağan – Uluslararası Sempozyum*, (in print), Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, 7–11 Şubat 2005.

¹¹ Selin İpek, "Fashion in Court Women's Attire of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in the Light of Written and Visual Sources kept in the Topkapı Palace Museum", [in Turkish], unpublished PhD. Thesis, Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University, (Istanbul 2009), Institution of Social Sciences/ Turkish-Islamic Arts Program. See my article from this dissertation; Selin İpek, "Women's Fashions at the Ottoman Court in the 18th and 19th Centuries", *International Costume Conference ENDYESTHAI (To Dress): Historical, sociological and methodological, approaches at Athens*, Benaki Museum, 9–11 April 2010, Conference Proceedings, 2012, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundations, 30–34.

¹² Lale Görünür, *Women's Costume of the Late Ottoman Era from Sadberk Hanım Museum Collection*, (Exhibition catalogue), Istanbul, 2010.

¹³ Hülya Tezcan: *Atlaslar Atlası, Pamuklu, Yün ve İpek Kumaşlar Koleksiyonu*. (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi, 1993) (Yapı Kredi Koleksiyonları-, 3).

¹⁴ Doretta Davanzo Poli, *Le collezioni della Fondazione di Venezia. I tessili Fortuny di Oriente e Occidente*, (Torino, 2008), 40, 44, 45, 55.

The Victoria & Albert Museum has a fabric sample book that once belonged to a Greek merchant. This book contains fifty silk fabric samples from the 18th century called *Savai* and *Selimiye* sold in Istanbul (Figure 3).¹⁵ Written in *Karamanladika* [Turkish written with Greek letters], the notebook was a donation to the Victoria & Albert Museum by the G.P. & J. Baker Company, a company that had been active in Istanbul in the late eighteenth century.¹⁶



Figure 3. Merchant's sample book, 1790-1820, London V&A Museum, T.671-1919.

As we understand from the inventories of the Victoria and Albert Museum, the sample book can be dated to 1790–1820 and that these types of fabrics were produced in a numerous varieties in Ottoman looms. European scholars attribute these patterns to French influence. Tezcan in her article suggests that Selim III's establishment of Ottoman workshops to produce silks similar to the French ones is quite reasonable since Paris had become the center of fashion at that time and women at the court preferred Parisian models and fabrics.¹⁷ The additional notes given next to the samples in this book provides us with more information about the quality of these fabrics. The colors, metal amounts and metal thread numbers and ratios are given. Most likely the initials M.T. belong to the owner of the book. Although there are more than two hundred samples, only six of them have written information. This book is important since it shows us the variety of fabrics made in the late 18th-early 19th century.

Evidence from surviving miniature paintings and prints shows that the women's costume worn at the Ottoman court in the 15th and 16th centuries was more modest and had simpler cuts than in later periods. In the 18th century, the lives of the daughters of the sultan became less trammled. For instance after they got married the daughters of sultans started to reside in their own palaces. In parallel with their changing lives, more daring cuts and more ornaments appeared in their clothing during the second half of 18th century.¹⁸

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<sup>15</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum (T.671-1919). For this book See. Patricia L. Baker: *Islamic Textiles*. (London, British Museum Press. 1995), 150–151. I gratefully acknowledge the help of the Barakat Trust, UK, whose financial support enabled me to search this sample book for my PhD. thesis in 2008. Thanks also to Tim Stanley at the V&A Museum.

<sup>16</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum (ed.): *From East to West. Textiles from G.P. & J. Baker*. V&A Museum, 9 May-14 October 1984 (Exhibition catalogue), (London, G.P. & J. Baker Ltd., 1984), 38.

<sup>17</sup> Hülya Tezcan, "18. Yüzyıl'da Kumaş Sanatı", 18. Yüzyılda Osmanlı Kültür Ortamı, 20-21 Mart 1997 Sempozyum Bildirileri, 202, see note 19.

<sup>18</sup> Tülay Artan, (1992), "Boğaziçi'nin Çehresini Değiştiren Soylu Kadınlar ve Sultanefendi Sarayları", İstanbul, Issue 3, 109–118.

An illustrated copy of a literary work named *Hubanname* (The Book of Beauties) and *Zenannname* (The Book of Women) includes a miniature which shows the daily life of Ottoman women. This miniature depicts women having a picnic near a watercourse, swinging, smoking and having fun in Kağıthane.<sup>19</sup> This work is dated 1793 and the painting also reveals entertainments of women and their garments, all of which are represented in full color.

Records of expenses and account books from the 18<sup>th</sup> century not only show us the names of textiles but also the types of clothing. In this period the clothing preserved its traditional cut but was trimmed with items such as lace and ribbons that also appear in the purchase orders. Fabrics imported from Europe gradually became more and more influential in Ottoman court fashion over the century. Tailors' account books and clothing surviving from the era also show that, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both clothing and accessories went through a transitional period before being assimilated to Western fashions.<sup>20</sup>

Written sources from the 19<sup>th</sup> century (tailors' account books<sup>21</sup>, letters<sup>22</sup>, announcements in women magazines etc.), as well as contemporary items of dresses in the Topkapi Palace Museum, reveal that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century women's clothing and accessories underwent a great change. In this period, women's fashions were assimilated to those contemporary trends in the West and included, for example, one-piece dresses and two-piece ensembles of skirt and jacket. As a result, women's fashions at court underwent three phases which can be termed the *traditional style*, the *transitional style* and the *Western style*.<sup>23</sup>

The turning point in women's fashion was during the reign of Abdülaziz (1861–1876) when European fashions including dresses and skirt-jacket ensembles became popular among elite women. Abdülaziz was the first Ottoman sultan who made an official trip to Europe. The sultan who was invited by the French emperor Napoleon III also visited England, Germany, and Austria on his return. In return the Ottoman sultan invited the French emperor and his wife Eugénie to the Ottoman court. During the reception given in their honor in Istanbul, several women of the court joined. As recorded in the journals of foreign guests the mother of the sultan, Pertevniyal wore a European styled dress although her hair ornaments and shoes were traditional.<sup>24</sup>

In addition Eugénie's dress, hair due, and her physical beauty is recorded to have impressed all the other guests including the women of the court who became jealous after the sultans's somewhat

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<sup>19</sup> Istanbul University Library 5502, folio 78a.

<sup>20</sup> Hülya Tezcan, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Son Yüzyılında Kadın Kıyafetlerinde Batılılaşma", *Sanat Dünyamız*, (Istanbul 1988), 37, 45–51.

<sup>21</sup> Selin İpek, "19. Yüzyıl İstanbul'un Saray Kadınları için Çalışan Ünlü Terzileri" (Famous Tailors of 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the service of Court Ladies), 7. International Turkish Cultural Congress, Istanbul in Turkish and World Cultures, Ankara, 06-10 October 2009, Bildiriler IV, January 2012, 525-538. Selin İpek, "Festive Finery for The Harem: Seamstress Mademoiselle Kokona's Order Book", HAREM House of the Sultan, Imperial Stables (13 June- 15 October 2012), Exhibition Catalogue, (Istanbul 2012), 56-59. Selin İpek, "Saray Arşivi'ndeki Terzi Defterlerinden Refia Sultan'a Ait Defterin Değerlendirilmesi" (Examination of Princess Refia's tailor's notebook at the Palace Archive), Turkish Historical Society, XVIth Turkish Congress of History, 20-24 September 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Perot, Frédéric Hitzel, Robert Anhegger, *Hatice Sultan ile Melling Kalfa Mektupları*, (Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, Istanbul, 2001),.

<sup>23</sup> See for detail Selin İpek, "Women's Fashions at the Ottoman Court in the 18th and 19th Centuries", *International Costume Conference ENDYESTHAI (To Dress):Historical, sociological and methodological, approaches* at Athens', Benaki Museum, 9-11 April 2010, Conference Proceedings, (Peloponnesian Folklore Foundations, Athens 2012), 30-34.

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer M. Scarce, "Turkish Fashion in Transition", *Costume*, 14, (London 1980), 21.

overt admiration of her. After this event, interest in European fashions increased at the Ottoman court and dresses made after European models with imported European fabrics became common.<sup>25</sup>

Tailors' account books from the 19<sup>th</sup> century also show that some orders were made for items of dresses that conformed to international fashions of the period; some were tailored in Istanbul following French models, while others were *prêt-à-porter* items ordered directly from Paris. The account books indicate that most of the tailors were non-Muslim, and that the ladies of the court placed their orders through their *kalfas* (senior servant) and sometimes wrote instructions about the models they preferred.

As an example of this, seven pages showing models from Paris (years 1873-74) which are kept in the Topkapı Palace Museum Archive can be shown (Figure 4). Palace women took notes on the pages and samples were attached. These pages are particularly important since pieces of notes and textile samples are attached on them by court ladies. One of these sheets is cold-stamped with an address in Istanbul: "32 Passage Hazzapulo, Pera". The models went directly to the Hazzapulo Passage, not to the palace, and it was from there that the palace women got their models.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 4. Page from Fashion Journals, TSMA D. 10739/ 7.**

Although ladies of the court generally made their textile and other purchases through their 'kalfas', they sometimes invited merchants to the palace to present them fabric samples. Orders were made on the basis of such samples, and when purchases were made through an intermediary, the types of fabric and their prices were recorded in account books copies of which were kept in the palace in case of disputes over payment. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this form of shopping was replaced by visits to shops called 'bon marché', especially those located in the Pera district of Istanbul.

In conclusion, we can say that the account books, sample books and other original documentation from the archives provide us a wealth of information that we usually lack for earlier periods.

<sup>25</sup> Hülya Tezcan, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Son Yüzyılında Kadın Kıyafetlerinde Batılılaşma", *Sanat Dünyamız*, (Istanbul 1988), 49.

<sup>26</sup> Topkapı Palace Museum Archives, D.10739. For the reference see Hülya Tezcan, "Batılılaşma döneminde Saray Kadınının Modası", *P Sanat Kültür Antika*, (Istanbul 1999), 12, 82–88 (see Footnote 37).

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