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The Dazzling Treasures Amassed by the Sultans

By STEPHEN KINZER

ISTANBUL
THERE is bad news for anyone planning to visit Turkey this year. The velvet-lined case that houses the country's most famous artifact, the glittering Topkapi dagger, will be empty. Nor will visitors be able to see the curved battle sword that hung from Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror's hip when his army captured Constantinople in 1453, or the inlaid ebony-and-ivory throne from which the vast Ottoman Empire was once ruled, or the dazzling emerald-studded turban decoration that awed visitors to the court of Sultan Ahmed I in the 17th century.

The good news, however, is that these objects and more than 200 others, some of which have never before left the Topkapi Palace, will be missing because they will be on tour through the United States. They are part of one of the most ambitious exhibitions of Ottoman treasures ever assembled. The exhibition, called "Palace of Gold and Light: Treasures From the Topkapi, Istanbul," opened on Wednesday at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington and is to travel to museums in San Diego and Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

"Ottoman art has great variety because it draws on so many different cultures and aesthetic approaches," said Tulay Artan, a history professor at Sabanci University in Istanbul and curator of the exhibition. "The Ottoman Empire was an umbrella for a very diverse group of peoples, and the palace became an umbrella for all sorts of artists. Their sensibilities blended together, and Ottoman art became a distinct style that is immediately recognizable. It isn't well known in the West because it's not represented in most Western museums. That's what should make this exhibition so interesting for American audiences."

The Topkapi Palace was once the seat of some of the world's most enticing mysteries. Its inner courtyards and pavilions, which only a handful of highly privileged lords and ladies were allowed to enter, were the stuff of countless fantasies in Europe and beyond. They were both the political heart of a great empire and the home of



From the Topkapi, a rich collection of Ottoman artifacts (among them a dagger made famous on film) sets out on tour.

concubines about whose sensuality outsiders dreamed for centuries.

Built in the 15th century, the Topkapi stands high atop a bluff overlooking the southern end of the Bosphorus, with panoramic views of Asia and Europe. It is a walled complex that housed not only the famous harems and their royal masters, but also thousands of courtiers, bureaucrats, diplomats and teachers, not to mention hundreds of cooks, bakers, confectioners and other servants. It boasted elaborate and fragrant gardens, a menagerie of exotic animals, and even a fountain where the

royal executioner could wash his sword and hands after decapitations, flanked by two marble niches where the severed heads were sometimes displayed.

The Topkapi's intricate chambers were decorated with an exquisite skill that reflected a highly developed aesthetic sense while also conveying the grandeur of Ottoman power. Many outsiders who were permitted to enter came away deeply moved and impressed. That was hardly surprising; during campaigns of conquest that spread Ottoman rule over much of Arabia, Persia, North Africa and southern and eastern Europe, commanders were under orders to find the most skilled craftsmen in captured lands and send them to the Topkapi.

Unlike many palaces in other lands where objects of beauty were assembled, the Topkapi was never sacked by conquerors or otherwise pillaged. It remained the residence of sultans until the 19th century, when they finally moved to more modern palaces along the Bosphorus. Later it was turned into a museum displaying the finest work of Ottoman artists and craftsmen. The exhibi-

tion that is now coming to the United States includes more of these items than have ever been shown outside the Topkapi itself.

Certainly the best known, although by no means most artistically significant, is the celebrated dagger. Part of its modern fame comes from its central role in the 1964 film "Topkapi," a minor classic of the caper genre starring Maximilian Schell, Peter Ustinov and Melina Mercouri. In it, thieves sought unsuccessfully to steal the dagger by lowering themselves from a skylight. Its true history is as exciting as any film.

THE dagger was not originally meant to be kept at the Topkapi at all. It was made in 1747 as a gift from the sultan to a Persian shah, and few objects have so successfully conveyed one monarch's regard for another. The scabbard is mother-of-pearl, gilded and decorated with rows of diamonds. Three enormous emeralds shine from its handle and a fourth, set into the top and cut into an octagon, conceals a small timepiece.

As the caravan carrying this extraordi-

nary gift made its way toward the shah's court, shocking news arrived: the intended recipient had been overthrown and killed. The caravan turned back, and the dagger was placed in the royal treasury. Today many visitors to Istanbul consider it a prime attraction.

Other items in the exhibition are grouped to convey aspects of life in the Topkapi. Several are connected with the conquest of Constantinople (now Istanbul), which was a turning point in world history. One of the most fascinating is a talismanic shirt that Mehmet the Conqueror wore under his armor. It suggests that he may have been something other than an orthodox Muslim, and indeed John Freely, an authority on life at the palace, writes that "he seems to have been basically irreligious, and in his observance of Islam he merely observed the forms of the Muslim faith."

Other objects are ceremonial pieces meant to suggest the empire's strength and magnificence. They include ornately embroidered caftans, military equipment and

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The Treasure Of Sultans

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banners as well as books bound with precious metals and gems. Ceremonial seals, keys, scales and writing sets reflect administrative aspects of life in the Topkapi.

Many of the most beautiful objects come from the palace's inner sanctums. Among them are superb examples of the wall tiles and calligraphic panels that awed outsiders and still influence popular taste in many parts of the world. Other items, like a pencil box that is almost entirely covered with jewels, reflect the luxury of daily life inside the palace.

There are also fine works of Chinese porcelain, samples from a rich collection that reflects the sultans' fascination with arts and crafts from distant places.

One of the books included in the exhibition is a register of artisans who worked at the

palace. It shows the variety of arts and crafts that the sultans prized, for among those on salary were scribes, illuminators, painters, bookbinders, furriers, weavers, musical instrument makers, armorers, woodworkers, carpet designers, goldsmiths, embroiderers, glaziers, tile makers and even specialists in making incense-burning vessels. The book is displayed along with examples of the work these masters produced.

"This is the first exhibition to focus on the Topkapi and to address the questions of what an Islamic palace was, how it worked and how it integrated the arts," said Walter Denny, a professor of art history at the University of Massachusetts who is an adviser to the exhibition organizers. "One of its most interesting aspects is that it focuses quite a bit of attention on Sultan Mehmet, who with all due respect to Suleiman the Magnificent and several others was really the most compelling, the most interesting, the most terrifying and at the same time most fascinating of all the Ottoman sultans. But it also brings together a whole spectrum of objects that show the delicacy, the sophistication, the marvelous complexity, the subtlety and the fantastic beauty of Ottoman art." □

Private Lives of Topkapi

VISITORS to the exhibition of Topkapi treasures have several ways of learning more about the palace, the Ottoman sultans who lived there and the legends they inspired.

The magisterial chronicler John Freely has collected dozens of fascinating anecdotes in a new book called "Inside the Seraglio: Private Lives of the Sultans in Istanbul." Most of them are from the Topkapi, where sultans lived from 1465 to 1856.

Mr. Freely tells of passionate loves that unfolded within the Topkapi's walls, like that between Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and his Ukrainian-born wife, Roxelana, who came to him through an Istanbul slave market.

In one letter written from a battlefield, he called her "my very own queen, my everything, my beloved, my bright moon, my intimate companion, my one and all, sovereign of all beauties, my sultan."

The book relates stories about the scores of princes whose brothers ordered them strangled as soon as they took power, hoping thereby to avoid dynastic challenges. Other sultans locked their brothers for years, sometimes decades, in a luxurious prison on the palace grounds called "the cage." Sultan Osman III, for example, took power in 1754 at the age of 55 after spending 51 years there. It is no wonder that he, like many other later sultans, proved quite unprepared for leadership.

Much of the book deals with mysteries of the harem. It tells of women who rose to great power by their hold over one sul-

tan or another, and others who suffered sad fates after falling from favor.

Among the details of harem life Mr. Freely has uncovered is that only sliced cucumbers could be taken to the sultan's women. It was feared that they might use whole ones for what a 17th-century chronicler called "deeds of b...y and unnatural uncleanness."

A very different book just published in Istanbul, "Topkapi Sarayi," is filled with vivid photos of the palace and its treasures. The text is in Turkish, but the pictures make it worthwhile for anyone whose curiosity is not sated by the exhibition catalog.

Perhaps the most original new work based in the Topkapi is a 90-minute film called "Mozart in Istanbul," which is to be given its theatrical premiere in London on March 18 and is then to play at cinemas and on television stations abroad, possibly in the United States. It is based on Mozart's "Abduction From the Seraglio" but is more than a simple filming of the opera.

Pivotal scenes from the opera are played out in the Topkapi, with music by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and a cast including Paul Groves as Belmonte and Yelda Kodalli as Constanze. In between the scenes, the film's opera director, Elijah Moshinsky, who has staged productions at the Metropolitan Opera and other leading houses, reflects on the plot's relation to Enlightenment ideals, its parallels to Mozart's own love life and his apparent view that "it is the Turk who is more enlightened than the Westerner."

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