

# Ottoman by Design: Branding an Empire

THE 2012 TEXTILE MUSEUM FALL SYMPOSIUM



The Textile Museum presented its fortieth-annual Fall Symposium this October, in support of the exhibition *The Sultan's Garden: The Blossoming of Ottoman Art*. With record attendance and a slate of speakers that included both well-known and rising scholars, "Ottoman by Design: Branding an Empire" was a great success.

Walter B. Denny (University of Massachusetts, Amherst) gave the first presentation on Saturday at George Washington University's Jack Morton Auditorium. "The Legacy of the Ottoman Floral Style at Home and Abroad" provided an overview of the research on view in *The Sultan's Garden*, co-curated with Sumru Belger Krody, senior curator, Eastern Hemisphere Collections. Struck by the wide influence of the floral style, Denny and Krody set out to investigate its origin. In 16th-century Istanbul, under the rule of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, court artist Kara Memi advanced the earlier *saz* style by introducing a new vocabulary of naturalistic floral forms. Arguing that the court consciously executed this style across mediums in order to express Ottoman identity, Denny also noted how its beauty and popularity inspired people throughout the empire to create their own interpretations. As a result, weavers in Anatolian villages articulated straight-edged carnations in warp

and weft, without ever having seen the lush court gardens of Istanbul.

By investigating one type of textile, *çatma* cushion covers, Amanda Phillips (University of St. Andrews, Scotland) helped illuminate how the Ottoman floral style was disseminated across social strata. *Çatma* cushion covers are easily identified by their shape (rectangular), their design (a central medallion with a row of niches on the narrow borders), and their structure (red or green silk velvet with gold or silver brocading). The cost of these pieces restricted them to the most wealthy consumers, so through changes in design (lessening the amount of extraordinarily expensive gilt brocade used for the positive design elements in favor of increasing the amount of silk), weavers began to create economical versions of *çatma*



covers. By meeting popular demand, commercial *çatma* weavers increased the reach of court design trends.

In his talk "Alien Species in the Sultan's Garden...," Jon Thompson (University of Oxford, England) questioned Kara Memi's importance to Ottoman design. Instead, he suggested that the floral style developed from interpretations of the European art of illumination and evolving Chinese-derived lotus motifs. Taking up the quintessential Ottoman design of triple dots (often paired with "lips" or "waves"), Thompson argued that the motif could be traced to both Christian and Buddhist imagery. Similarly, Thompson attributed the floral style to a "felicitous blend of two separate traditions from the east and west"—rather than the creation of a single artist.

Warren Woodfin (Queens College, The City University of New York) took the symposium's theme beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire by investigating textiles made for export to Orthodox Christian communities. Woodfin pointed to the purposeful insertion

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"Attending the symposium was not only highly enjoyable, but also incredibly valuable for my future career...I thought the exhibition was stunning and the talks provocative."  
 - Scholarship Recipient Ashley Dimmig (University of Michigan)

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of native Turkish motifs into *sakkos* and other liturgical textiles with Christian imagery. He claimed artisans were asserting the power of the sultanate by surrounding Christian iconography with Ottoman tulips and carnations.

For over forty years, the Fall Symposium has provided a platform for new research while bringing scholars, collectors, and the curious together. This important program will continue to grow when The TM moves to GW—and be sure to mark your calendars for next year's symposium supporting *Out of Southeast Asia: Art that Sustains* (October 11–13, 2013).

Katy Clune, *Communications and Marketing Manager*

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**Top left** (from left to right): Walter Denny, Amanda Phillips, Jon Thompson, Warren Woodfin, and Thomas Farnham. **Middle:** Velvet *yastık face* (*çatma*), Bursa, 17th century. TM 1.54. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1951. **Above:** *Dalmatic*, Greek Orthodox, Turkish, late 16th century-early 17th century. Museum Appropriation Fund 28.008. Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. Photography by Erik Gould, courtesy of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI.