

INTRODUCTION

Karışık ipliğin, bürüşik bezi.

Twisted threads make wrinkled linen.

—TURKISH PROVERB

The category of textiles is unique. No other art form—or type of craft, object, or medium—spans modes of production and kinds of materials so widely. In principle, a lone individual could grow flax or cotton, process the fiber, twist and spin it into thread, and weave it into cloth her- or himself. Paintings, sculptures, ceramics, metalwork, or books do not lend themselves to such a production process. By contrast, weaving a silk velvet might require the specialized labor of dozens of artisans, from rural women who raise silkworms to specialists who sharpen the metal blades used to cut some of the fabric's threads to create its characteristic luxuriant pile. In the Ottoman Empire, textile production touched the lives of laborers harvesting and spinning cotton, great merchants shipping cocoons or finished bolts of heavy silk cloth, pashas hoarding kaftans, tax collectors levying duties on thread, pilgrims bringing back textiles from the great fairs at Mecca and Medina, and shopkeepers selling secondhand goods, never mind weavers, dyers, designers, and needleworkers. It is small wonder, then, that travelers, jurists, rulers, and historians in the Islamic world and elsewhere were preoccupied with textiles.

But textiles, and historical textiles especially, are less preoccupying in the twenty-first century. While silks, cottons, linen, and wool feature in social and economic history, art history, studies of palace life, and the history of commerce, they are rarely a main topic. A main objective of this book is to correct asymmetries in scholarship by addressing textiles on their own terms, as primary elements in the artistic, social, economic, political, and even religious histories of the Ottoman Empire and the world around it. I argue for their primacy as objects in their own right and insist that they are the material

manifestations of the circumstances in which they were made, responding directly and indirectly to changes in materials and technologies and to phenomena related to art and style.

This book aims to be a comprehensive, though not complete, history of Ottoman textiles, discussing the years between about 1400 and 1800. The four-century span allows for a wider perspective, and one that explicitly balances the much-fêted Ottoman relationship with Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with its equally important links to Iran and India, while also discussing ongoing trade with Syria, Egypt, and eastern Europe. It also adds to the material under study, looking at a broader range of textile types. Along with brocades and velvets, weavers made plain silks, silk and cotton blends, luxury mohair, and fine and coarse woolens, and even their own versions of brightly printed chintz. Fabrics might substitute for one another and might be made in higher and lower qualities. Rather than isolating luxury production from all other weaving, the book shows how textile types were interrelated and how they responded to one another and to arts in other media, whether made nearby or at great distances.

I also argue that the close study of the textiles—their formal and material components—provides in many cases the only evidence for decisions made by the artisans and workers whose labor produced both costly satins and humble plain weaves. In a broader view, analysis of a textile's structure and materials can show how weaving practices and their technologies changed or stalled, or how specific expertise or materials in fact determined the nature of colorways, formats, and motifs, which are often understood only as aspects of visual culture. This is important because it necessarily complicates arguments about shifts in style. In the history of Islamic art, such changes are usually thought to be imposed solely from above. Using evidence gleaned from close looking, I argue that this is not always true.

The book also introduces the practice of social history and material culture to paradigms used in global studies and investigates how the migration of artisans, forcible or willing, allowed for the transfers of technology that in turn impacted the making of textiles. I argue that textile-making in and around the Ottoman capital of Bursa and in other centers did not evolve along neat linear trajectories but rather surged at irregular intervals, encouraged by the importation of different kinds of knowledge, by occasional imperial sponsorship, and by artisan innovation.

The book makes several distinct but related contributions to the fields of art history and Islamic studies. The first is the treatment of fabrics, and especially silk fabric, as objects of art and craft as well as key components of trade. Part of this exchange is exemplified in textile terminologies in Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Greek, Italian, and other languages which are for the first time investigated in depth here. In contrast to the written record, any object's physical nature is the best, and sometimes the only, evidence for its making. Formal and technical analysis of extant objects also informs larger discussions about economics, trade, and fashion. In a similar vein, the book honors the outsize role of weaving in the economic and social life of the Ottoman Empire. In doing so, it

takes on major themes beyond the topic itself, including the nature of skilled labor, the characteristics of craft production and regulation in an Islamic economy, and the implications of imitation, emulation, and mass production for the discipline of art history.

Appreciating the nature of their making, however, is only part of understanding textiles and their histories as objects, because both their materiality and functions render them an extraordinary medium. They are haptic and somatic, and operated differently on the bodies and in the hands of their owners than did other types of objects. Ranging in texture from stiff and scratchy to filmy and transparent, textiles rely on the sensory perception of touch as well as on sight to create their effects (and affects). In the twenty-first century, with visual media ascendant, this reality is difficult to reconstruct. But it is a worthwhile endeavor because it poses new questions about how we might understand expressivity in objects often thought to be merely utilitarian. Equally important are the lives and afterlives of textiles. No other type of craft was made to be used in so many different ways and in tandem with so many other kinds of objects. Some were woven to permit or even encourage alteration. Many, including examples in this book, were cut and sewn several times over their lives, which often radically redefined their uses and meanings.

CORRECTING THE RECORD

In the history of the fifteenth century and later, textiles from the greater Islamic world have a bad reputation. Descending from the dizzying heights of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—when they were traded to China and Europe, where they were hoarded in cathedral treasuries and remote monasteries and clothed the bodies of kings, emperors, and popes—they were surpassed in beauty and technical virtuosity by the textiles of Venice and Genoa, then Lyon, Kashan, Ahmedabad, and finally Suzhou and Spitalfields. By the nineteenth century, textiles and other crafts from the Islamic lands were considered bazaar goods interesting only as curiosities and souvenirs. They compared unfavorably to objects from other parts of the world and to the industrially produced ceramics, metal, glass, and textiles that would transform consumption and the world economy in the modern period. In the era of world's expositions, most textiles from Ottoman Anatolia, as from elsewhere in the Islamic world, were considered the shriveled fruit of a weak branch. This dominating paradigm was applied indiscriminately and retrospectively. Eventually, even Ottoman weaving of the late fifteenth century came to be seen as derivative and even decadent.

The perspective outlined above is now correctly acknowledged as teleological, but Ottoman textiles and their scholars nonetheless suffer from an inferiority complex. The surplus of surviving objects, many of them in poor condition and some of them of mediocre quality, is partly responsible. Ottoman textiles are not rarities and for this reason cannot be treasured like scraps from Egypt, the pre-Columbian Americas, or Bronze Age China. Their numbers seem more overwhelming yet in contrast with the paucity of extant examples from early modern South Asia and greater Persia. Quantities of