



TOPKAPI PALACE

TOPKAPI PALACE AND ITS PERSIAN HOLDINGS. The Topkapı Palace, which was known as the *Yeni Saray* (New Palace) until the 19th century, served the Ottoman sultans for almost 380 years as the imperial residence and center of command. The New Palace was built by the order of Sultan Mehmet II (Moḥammad II, r. 1444-46 and 1451-81), who had conquered Constantinople in 1453, in a district named Zeytinlik. It was located on the first of the seven hills of the city, where a Byzantine church had previously stood. Although there is no record of the precise date when the construction began, it is generally believed that the building work had commenced around 1462.

The Topkapı complex consists of several buildings, including the imperial treasury, the main arsenal, administrative offices, hospitals, schools, and garden and beachfront kiosks, aligned on four main courts that extend out north-northeast and north-northwest towards the Marmara Sea. With the addition of new divisions, the complex continued its expansion well into the mid-19th century on a site of about 700 square meters and retained its fortress-like appearance.

As the sultans' interest in a Westernized lifestyle deepened during the second half of the 19th century, and they moved into new palaces that were designed according to Western architectural concepts. The Dolmabahçe Palace, built on the shores of the Bosphorus by Sultan Abdülmecid I ('Abd-al-Majid I, r. 1839-61), became the new imperial residence after its completion and was succeeded by others, such as the Beylerbeyi and Yıldız Palaces.



Although deserted by the sultans, the Topkapı Palace was still a residence for many administrative staff members. Necessary renovations and maintenance were done on a regular basis. The “HolyRelics” room, where the Prophet Moḥammad’s personal belongings were kept, was under the personal care of the Imperial family.

The first exhibition in the history of the Topkapı Palace took place during the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz (‘Abd-al-‘Aziz, r. 1861-76). Selected pieces from the Imperial Treasury (*Enderun Hazinesi*) were displayed to an elite group including foreign ambassadors and respected members of local society. The palace became the first national museum of modern Turkey on 9 October 1924.

The vast majority of the objects in the Topkapı, which are either on display or in storage, had originally been in the palace before it was converted into a museum. Only a few pieces were later added to the collection, by acquisition or through donations. Artifacts from the Imperial Treasury constitute the most striking pieces in the Topkapı collection. During the reign of the sultans, the treasury was located in the basement and on the upper floors of the Fatih Kiosk and adjacent buildings in the northeast section of the third court. Centuries later, collections from the Imperial Treasury are exhibited to visitors in the very same premises.

It was a custom for a new sultan to visit the Imperial Treasury after his enthronement (Ottoman Turk. *cülûs* / Ar. *julus*). Some sultans greatly admired the treasury’s magnificent pieces and visited them often. Besides housing magnificent artifacts, the treasury was also used as the sultans’ personal vault.

Documents from the imperial archives reveal that an inventory of priceless artifacts such as Qur’āns, weapons, watches, Chinese porcelain ware, rugs, and fabrics was being carried out in a systematic fashion. Although the documents do not note the origins of these artifacts, historians today are able to obtain clues from the brief notes or inscriptions written on some of these documents.

Persian holdings in the Topkapı collection. Diplomatic gifts sent by the Safavid shahs and their families to the Ottoman sultans comprise the primary examples of Persian artifacts in the Topkapı Treasury. In addition to diplomatic gifts (see [GIFT GIVING iv. IN THE SAFAVID PERIOD](#) and [v. IN THE QAJAR PERIOD](#)), a particular practice (*mühellafat/mok-allafāt*) in Ottoman law is another important reason for the existence of Persian artifacts in the



Topkapı Palace. According to this practice, the treasury was permitted to confiscate the personal property of the members of the administrative and military staff who lost their lives serving on the frontiers, including the Persian border. Moreover, it is assumed that spoils captured by the Ottomans from the Persian army, as happened in 1514 during the [Battle of Çālderān](#) also contributed greatly to this treasure. Another source must have been the local tribal princes who emigrated from Persia to the Ottoman Empire for political reasons. These princes are thought to have brought priceless manuscripts and other treasures that they could carry with themselves.

Among other riches that add to the value of the Topkapı Treasury are the artifacts brought from the Prophet Moḥammad's tomb (*ravza-i mütahhar/rowza-ye moṭahhar*) in Medina. These objects, which had originally been donated to the tomb by the Ottoman sultans, were under serious threat of plunder during World War I. In an attempt to save them from such a fate, Fahreddin (Faḳ-r-al-Din) Pasha, a high-ranking Ottoman military figure in the Hejaz, sent these treasures back to the Palace.

Old manuscripts, especially 16th-century books and documents, contain detailed lists of the gifts sent from Persia to the Ottoman Palace. Such an example can be seen in a book named *The History of the Zigetvar Campaign* (which took place in 1566), written in 1569 by an Ottoman historian, Feridun Ahmed (Aḥmad) [Beg](#) (d. 1583). The final chapter of the book describes the admittance of the Safavid envoy Šāhḡoli to the court of Sultan Selim II (Salim II, r. 1566-74) in Edirne in 1568. The purpose of this visit was to present Shah T'ahmāsp's gifts to the Sultan to congratulate him on his accession to the throne. The envoy was also depicted as being in the presence of the Sultan in one of the book's miniature illustrations.

As an eyewitness to this event, Feridun Ahmed Beg carefully lists [Shah Ṭahmāsp I's](#) (r. 1524-76) gifts to the Sultan but separates a particular book from the others. This invaluable manuscript, which contains 259 miniature illustrations and had precious gems embedded in both covers, was a special copy of the classic *Šāh-nāma* of [Ferdowsi](#). Until very recently, this copy was also known as the Houghton *Šāh-nāma* (see T'AHMĀSBI ŠĀH-NĀMA, forthcoming online).

In 1576, this time to celebrate Sultan Murad (Morād) III's (r. 1574-95) accession, Tokmak Han (Toḡmaq Khan), another envoy of Shah T'ahmāsp, arrived in Istanbul. He brought with him gilded copies of the Qur'ān, a *Šāh-*



nāma, weapons, rugs, and precious stones. The most significant of all, however, was an astonishing imperial tent decorated with jewels. A miniature found in the first volume of *Şehinşahname/Şāhanşāh-nāma*, dated 1581, depicts vividly the ceremony and the construction of the tent (Istanbul University Library, no. F1404). Unfortunately, this magnificent piece of art has not survived.

Six years later, the Safavid ambassador Ebrāhim Khan, representing Moḥammad Ḳodābanda (r. 1578-87, d. 1595 or 1596), was present at the circumcision ceremony of Prince Mehmet (Moḥammad), the young heir of Sultan Murad III. Ebrāhim Khan presented gifts both to the Sultan and the young heir. There were also gifts for the Sultan's mother and the Imperial Harem. Mustafa Âli (Moştafā 'Âli, d. 1600) a well-known bureaucrat and historian of the time, listed those gifts with care: gilded Qur'ān (*müzehhep/modahhab*, *mürassa/moraşsa*), and manuscripts of the *Şāh-nāma* and a *Ḳamsa* of Neẓāmi, both decorated by famous Persian artists. Other gifts were Chinese porcelains (*fağfuri*), bolts of silk and velvet, curtains with colorful designs, silk rugs, and two chests filled with natural aquamarine. The reception of the ambassador by the Sultan is illustrated in the second volume of *Şehinşahname*, dated between 1592 and 1597 (Topkapı Saray Museum [TSM], no.B200).

In 1590, the heir to the Safavid throne, Ḥ aydar Mirzā, the son of Ḥ amza Mirzā (on whom see *EI2*, III, p. 157), was sent to the Ottoman palace for a long stay. This act was a sign of goodwill from the Persians in order to emphasize the peace between the two countries. The ten-year-old prince brought valuable books and several other gifts to Murad III. This scene was also depicted in various miniatures painted by Ottoman artists of the late 16th century (TSM, no. R. 1296, fol.46a; New York MET, 45-174-75). These examples demonstrate that there had been a constant flow of diplomatic presents from the Safavids to the Topkapı as tokens of peace. However, this flow was reciprocal, as valuable presents were sent from the Ottoman Sultans to the Safavid Shahs in return.

Today, manuscripts displayed in the New Library in the third court of the Palace constitute the majority of the Persian holdings in the Topkapı. It is quite possible that these manuscripts were kept in the basement depository of the Imperial Treasury until the 18th century. In 1719, when Sultan Ahmed III (Aḥmad III, r. 1703-30) built a library in the third court, he transferred some of those books from the basement to his library in order to have them preserved



under better conditions. In 1740, Sultan Maḥmud I's (Maḥmud I, r. 1730-54) library next to the Hagia Sophia was also filled with the books from the basement of the treasury. Those books were transferred to the Süleymaniye Library in the 1970s. Another library decorated with books from the Topkapı Treasury was built by Sultan Abdülhamid II ('Abd-al-Ḥ amid II, r. 1876-1909) in the Yıldız Palace. Today, the holdings of that library are contained in the library of Istanbul University. As a result, it can be inferred that many of the valuable Persian manuscripts displayed in several libraries outside the Topkapı Museum had originally belonged in the Topkapı Treasury.

Turkish, Persian, and Arabic manuscripts in the Topkapı collection have been cataloged in their entirety and published by F. E. Karatay. Albums (*moraqqa*), however, have been catalogued, but not yet published. Most of the studies and publications on the Persian holdings in the Topkapı Museum focus closely on the manuscript collection. These manuscripts, especially the ones with miniatures, have also been studied in a number of doctoral theses.

In the Topkapı Palace Library, it is possible to find manuscripts written by Ottoman calligraphers in the Persian language. There are also manuscripts written in Turkish and Arabic that are the work of Persian calligraphers and artists working at the Safavid court.

Among all the Persian manuscripts in the library, illuminated Qur'āns and manuscripts with miniatures attract much attention for their artistic quality. The manuscripts in this collection contain not only wonderful miniature artworks but also masterpieces of rich Persian literature. Some examples of these books in the Topkapı Library are: 70 separate copies of Neẓāmī's *Ḳamsa* (among them, the copy that was finished in the time of [Shah Esmā'il I](#) [r. 1501-24] is the most distinguished); 47 copies of Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma*; thirty-three copies of Jāmi's works such as *Haft Owrang*, *Ḳamsa*, and *Yusof o Zoleyḳ-ā*; 16 copies of Amir Ḳosrow Dehlavi's poems; eight copies of 'Ali Šir Navā'i's writings; 19 copies of Sa'di works; 13 copies of Hafez's divan; 12 copies of *'Ajā'eb al-maḳ-luqāt* and 8 copies of *Qeşaş al-anbiyā*. Two other masterpieces, *Jāme' al-tawāriḳ*– and *Kolliyāt-e Ḥāfeẓ-e Abru* (d. 1430), containing miniatures that depict historical events should also be mentioned.

Forty-nine of the albums in the library contain Persian, Indian, and Ottoman miniatures, *qalam-siāhi* illustrations, European engravings, and examples of Arabic calligraphy and gilding. Some of these albums, such as H.2151, H.2152, H.2154, H.2161, H.2166, and B411 were entirely produced in Persia. One of



them (H.2161) has the name Ḥasan on its lacquered cover as the name of the artist who did the binding. On another (H.2151), an artist named Moẓaffar 'Ali is credited with gilding and decorations.

In the foreword to an album (H.2154) dedicated to the Safavid prince [Bahrām Mirzā](#) (1517-49), we find an account of the great manuscript artists of the Islamic world, narrated brilliantly by a Safavid writer named [Dust-Moḥammad](#). Similarly, two other albums (H.2153, H.2160) are collections of elegant miniatures and calligraphies of manuscript artists from the Il-khanid, Jalayerid, and Turkmen periods. Another important document for art historians is found in the famous Fatih (Fāteḥ) Album (H.2153; fol.98). This document gives information about the Herat school of miniature painting, which operated under the patronage of the Timurid prince [Bāysonḡor](#) (d. 1433). In some of the albums, such as (H.2155, H.2165, H.2168), examples of Ottoman and Persian miniatures and calligraphy can be seen. Designs for such albums were made in Istanbul, in the second half of the 16th and throughout the 18th centuries.

In addition to the books, an important part of the Persian manuscript collection in the Topkapı consists of Qur'āns. These Qur'āns were produced by the combined efforts of famous calligraphers (*k-aṭṭāṭ*), master gilders (*moḍahheb*), and gifted bookbinders (*mojalled*). One of these Qur'āns (H.S.25) was copied by the calligrapher Shah Maḥmud Nišāpuri in May 1538 and gilded by Ḥasan Baḡdādi in 1562. The original cover of the Qur'ān, which is believed to have been decorated with jewels, was replaced with a simpler Turkish version. The majority of the remaining Qur'āns, such as E.H.152 and E.H.66, were probably copied in Khorasan by calligraphers from Tabriz and Herat, between 1560 and 1585. Before the Topkapı Palace was converted into a museum, these Qur'āns had been stored in the Treasury's *Emanet Hazinesi* department. The Qur'āns mentioned above are similar in dimensions. Their inscriptions also resemble each other and their gilding was done with the same technique.

Among the splendid Qur'āns from Persia in the Topkapı, two of the larger ones (E.H.48 and E.H.67), gilded by Moḥammad b. Tāj-al-Din Širāzi in the second half of the 16th century, fascinate visitors. Other Qur'āns, also produced by talented hands in the same period, are displayed not only at the Topkapı Museum but also at the Istanbul Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, the Istanbul Museum of Archaeology, the Istanbul Süleymaniye Library, and the Ankara Vakıflar Archives. The Qur'āns displayed at the Archives were



gathered from mosques located in various cities for better preservation. All these examples demonstrate that in the second half of the 16th century there was an abundant production of richly adorned manuscripts in Herat and Shiraz. These manuscripts were frequently sent as gifts to the Ottoman court or to be sold in Ottoman Turkey.

The 19th-century Qur'āns from Persia displayed in the Topkapı Museum were brought to the Palace from the Prophet Moḥammad's tomb in Medina during World War I. These magnificent Qur'āns (M.83 and M.93) were originally donated to the tomb by Persian nobles of the Qajar era. In addition to these Qur'āns, artifacts such as the lacquer pencil box (No. CY.503) and a 19th-century oil painting of [Fath-'Ali Shah](#) (r. 1797-1834) with his retinue (17/343) are other pieces from the Qajar era.

Not all of the documents in the Topkapı archives related to Persia have yet been fully classified and published. A few of those that have been published concern the artists from Khorasan and Tabriz who were brought to the Ottoman Empire after the Battle of Čālderān. A document (D.10734), dated 1514, lists the personal assets of various distinguished Persians at Shah Esmā'il's *Hašt Behešt* palace in Tabriz. An undated document (D.9784), describes in detail the crafts, names, and the number of artists brought from Tabriz. Another, written January 1526 (D.9613-I) also lists the names of the miniaturists (*naqqāš*) who were exiles from Tabriz and also notes that some of the forefathers of the miniaturists had been exiles from Persia.

Shah T'ahmāsp's letter of greeting (E.3161) that was presented to Sultan Murad III by the envoy Tokmak Hanon May 1576 also exists in the Topkapı archives. The rolled letter pertaining to Sultan Murad III's accession measures 28×200 cm. The prose sections of the letter were written in *divāni-ye jali* and the verse sections in *ta'liq* script (see [CALLIGRAPHY](#)). Qur'ān verses on the letter are gilded and written in *nask-i* script (*ibid.*). On the reverse of the letter is Shah T'ahmāsp's seal.

Another document (D.636) concerns Shah Esmā'il's wife, Tājli Khanom, who was captured in the Battle of Čālderān by Mesih (Masiḥ) Bey, the governor of Vidin. It is understood from the document that there had been an official investigation regarding the whereabouts of Tājli Khanom personal jewelry and her precious silk garments.

In the Topkapı archives one document stands out above all others in terms of



beauty and elegance. This is a letter (E.9469/2) sent by Sultan Maḥmud I to Nāder Shah (r. 1736-47). The letter, which is in fact a peace treaty between the Ottoman Empire and Persia, measures 79×460 cm and is written in the *ta'liq* and *divāni* scripts. The edges of the document were adorned by an 18th-century Ottoman artist. However, upon Nāder Shah's sudden death, the Sultan's letter and gifts were called back to Istanbul while half way to Persia. The dazzling 'Topkapı dagger' (2/160), which is displayed in the treasury section of Topkapı Museum, was also among the Sultan's gifts to the Shah. In all likelihood the Indian throne (2/735) displayed in the same section of the museum was a gift from Nāder Shah to Sultan Maḥmud I.

Today, the finest examples of Persian artifacts in the Topkapı collection are displayed in the museum's Treasury section. These selected pieces have also been published in various catalogues. One of the artifacts displayed in the Treasury section is a sandalwood chest (2/1846), which constitutes the finest example of Timurid woodcarving. The exterior of the box is decorated with flowers, vines, and dragons, and the interior is covered with red silk with flower motifs. The inscription on the cover bears the name "Oloḡ Beg" (perhaps the eponymous Timurid ruler, r. 1447-49). Therefore, it is strongly possible that this box was produced in Central Asia, probably in Samarqand, between 1420 and 1449.

In the same section, Shah Esmā'il's belt (2/1842) of steel and gold with human, animal, and vine motifs, can be seen. On one of the sections of this belt, the shah is depicted on his horse, holding a falcon. The inscription on the belt includes Shah Esmā'il's name and the date 1507. Additionally, an armband (2/1843), made by the master Anwār-Allah and a pitcher (2/1844) made from Herat stone, decorated with gilded arabesque motifs and inscriptions, also belonged to the Shah. It is assumed that these personal artifacts were captured during the battle of Čalderān in 1514, at which the Shah and his army were defeated by the Ottomans.

Another masterpiece produced by 16th-century Tabriz goldsmiths is a zinc bowl (2/2869) lined with silver. The interior of the bowl was worked with aquamarines, emeralds, and rubies. On the exterior, amazing figures of nymphs, animals, and flowers accompany a king drinking from a cup. A zinc pitcher (2/2854), made with similar technique, materials, and motifs is also displayed in the same section. Two other zinc pitchers (2/2875 and 2/2877), distinctive with their swelling bodies and long necks, were depicted in miniatures of the Shah T'ahmāsp era.

Two of the “sun-and-lion” (*šir o k-oršid*) medals (2/1383, 2/1384) displayed in the treasury were sent to Sultan Abdülhamid II (‘Abd-al-Ḥamid II, r. 1876-1909) from Persia. Both of the star-shaped medals bear large diamonds. The figures of the lion and sun in the center were done with the enamel technique.

There is a group of undated Qur’āns in the Treasury that were produced by less talented artists but which still carry precious gemstones on their covers. The inside covers were decorated in gold, using a special technique called *ṭalā-kāri*.

Miniatures (TSM.B200, fol.36b-37a) which depict the circumcision ceremony of Sultan Murad III’s heir Mehmet (Moḥammad [III], r. 1595-1603) in 1582 show the Persian envoy Ebrāhim Khan presenting Shah T’ahmāsp’s gifts to the young man. Details in these miniatures clearly describe three Qur’ān with jeweled covers. Based on this evidence, it can be assumed that some of these particular Qur’ān (2/2129, 2/2901, 2/2132, 2/2898) in the Topkapı Treasury were dated prior to 1582.

A gold chess set (2/1366-68) and an ivory chessboard (2/1377) can be dated to the 16th century or the early Safavid era. Other artifacts from the same era are an elegant writing utensil set (*davāt*, see [DAWĀT](#)) (2/3081) and an ivory box decorated with vines (2/1850).

Although Persian fabrics were in great demand and very popular in the Topkapı harem, they constitute only a minor portion of the Persian collection in the museum. It would be reasonable to attribute this to the perishable nature of textile products. A piece of Persian fabric (13/20) displayed in the textile section of the museum was used in Sultan Mehmet II’s furred caftan. The fabric, woven of black and yellow thread and decorated with flowers and leaves, is dated to the late 15th century or the [Āq Qoyunlu](#) era. Another interesting piece is a velvet cloth (13/1697) decorated with scenes from *Leyli o Majnun*. It is understood that other small pieces of fabric were recycled and used as accessories (13/833, 13/1913, 24/1727).

A group of Persian rugs, still preserved in the textile section of the museum, are of Isfahan, Hamadan, and Kerman origin and date from the 19th century. They were acquired by the museum through a donation in 1980.

In the weaponry section are a variety of Persian weapons such as helmets, axes, bows, war clubs, maces, rifles, shields, and armor. Among all the Persian



collections at the Topkapı Museum, the weaponry collection comes second after the manuscripts in terms of quantity. Pieces in the weaponry section have not been studied and cataloged thoroughly. They represent fine examples of Persian metalwork from the 16th to the 19th centuries. The sharp edges of the Persian spears (*'alam*, see ['ALAM VA 'ALĀMAT](#)) (1/651, 1/664, 1/676) were designed after palm leaves and decorated with the names of Allāh, Moḥammad, and 'Ali. Helmets, which constitute a significant part of the Persian weaponry section, are engraved with figures of fighting soldiers, animals of prey, and inscriptions written in *nasta'liq* script. Some of them, such as one that belonged to Shah T'ahmāsp (1/897), were gilded. The steel swords (1/2529, 1/2530) cast by the renowned ironsmith Asad-Allah Eşfahāni in the late 16th century, are the most spectacular swords of the collection. Another striking piece is a suit of body armor (1/893) dated 1738/39, made up of 4 pieces and decorated with flower and animal motifs. Aside from these magnificent weapons of war, the collection holds 200 individual Persian bows, each engraved with flower and animal motifs. This alone is solid testimony to the magnitude and richness of the Persian weaponry collection at the Topkapı Museum.

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See also the [Topkapi Palace Museum website](#).

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