

FROM BYZANTINE
CONSTANTINOPLE
to OTTOMAN
KOSTANTINIYYE:
CREATION of a
COSMOPOLITAN
CAPITAL and VISUAL
CULTURE UNDER
SULTAN MEHMED II

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THE conquest of Constantinople engendered Mehmed II's lifelong ambition to revive the ruinous city's ancient status as the prosperous capital of a world empire. This essay interprets the sultan's negotiation of the western and eastern cultural horizons of his rapidly expanding domains through visual cosmopolitanism, a process of "creative translation" and fusion that contributed to the construction of a multifaceted imperial identity. Mehmed II engaged with diverse artistic traditions in refashioning his public persona and self-image upon the reconstructed stage of his new capital, which continued to be called Kostantiniyye (Constantinopolis), alongside its popular name, Istanbul (from the Greek *eis tin polin*, meaning "to the city").¹ Strategically situated at the juncture of two continents (Asia, Europe) and two seas (Black Sea, Mediterranean), this was the ideal center for an emerging empire that combined Perso-Islamic, Turco-Mongol, and Roman-Byzantine traditions of universal sovereignty.

The artistic patronage of Mehmed II (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) was shaped not only by his personal tastes but also by the *Rûmî* (Eastern Roman) geopolitical and cultural identity he was forging for his empire, a polity mediating between multiple worlds at the crossroads of Europe and Asia."² By systematically promoting *kuls* (converted Christian-born slave servants) to the highest posts of his increasingly centralized state, the sultan created a polyglot ruling elite no longer dominated by the Muslim-born Çandarlı family of grand viziers. His viziers and grand viziers were predominantly *kuls* not entirely "foreign" to his non-Muslim subjects and European visitors to his court: the aristocratic Byzantino-Serbian Mahmud Paşa Angeloviç, whose Christian brother was a courtier of the Serbian Despot; the Greek Rum Mehmed Paşa, who married a Turkic princess from the Anatolian Seljuk dynasty terminated by Mehmed II; and two descendants of the Byzantine Palaiologan dynasty, Has Murad Paşa and his brother Mesih Paşa. The sultan's governors included such renegades as the Italo-Greek İskender Bey: born from a Levantine Genoese father and a Greek mother from Trebizond, he was married to the daughter of a Genoese merchant from Pera (the Genoese colony of Constantinople), where his brother continued to live as a Christian merchant dressed "*all'Italiana*." Mehmed II's intimates included sons of defeated rulers, among whom his Italian courtier Angiolello (attached to the imperial court between 1474 and 1481) counts the princes of Trebizond, the Morea, Bosnia, and Wallachia. His Christian stepmother, Mara Brankoviç (a Serbian princess whose sibling was the sister-in-law of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III), served as one of his intermediaries in western diplomatic relations.³ Artistic exchanges with the Latin West were often negotiated through reciprocal gift-bearing

embassies and the international networks of Greek humanists and Italian merchant-bankers affiliated with the Ottoman court. Moreover, the tribute-paying city-state of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) was an “open window to the West,” supplying books, objects, and “images” ordered for the sultan and his intimates.⁴

The deliberate cultivation of heterogenous visual traditions resonated with the cosmopolitan ethos of Kostantiniyye-Istanbul, a “site of encounter” repopulated with a multiethnic and multiconfessional community to promote economic growth, international trade, and diplomacy. Towards the end of Mehmed II’s reign, Angiolello describes the revitalized cosmopolis featuring mosques, churches, and synagogues as an aggregate of quarters resettled by deported “peoples conducted from different lands,” each with their own “languages, costumes, and customs” (fig. 1). In this multinational microcosm of empire, the Italianate or “Frankish” (*firengî*) manner was just one of several visual languages that were deployed individually and merged synthetically in a celebration of “intentional hybridity,” a literary term defined by Bakhtin as the conscious fusion of different languages and styles, set against each other dialogically.⁵

The sultan’s architectural commissions selectively integrated Byzantine, Italian Renaissance, and Timurid-Turkmen elements into the Ottoman tradition as an expression of multifaceted cultural self-identification. His particular responsiveness to the combined classical heritage of Byzantium and the Latin West was part of an imperial project

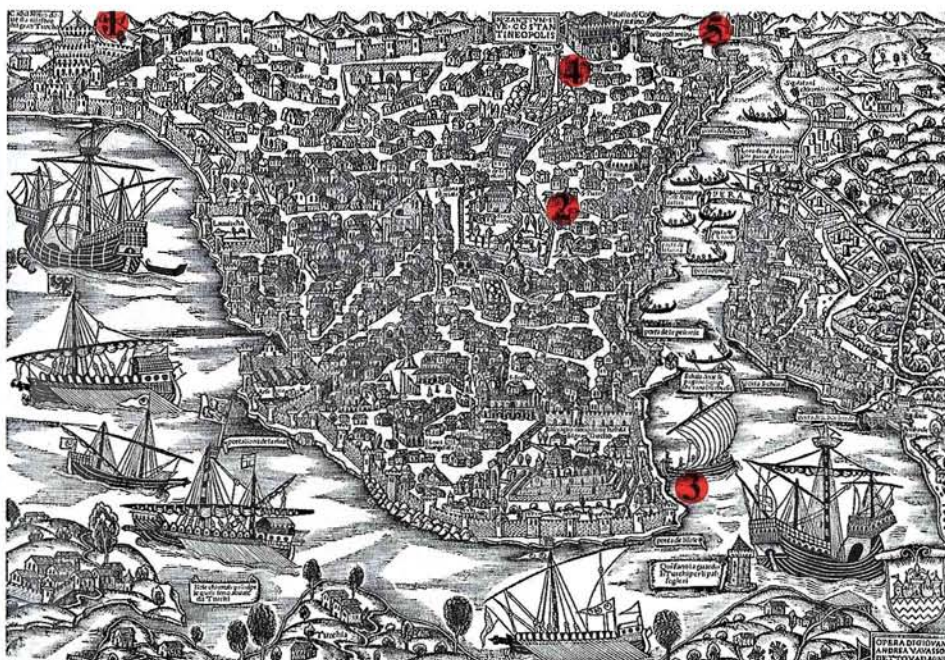


Fig. 1 Giovanni Andrea Vavassore, View of Istanbul (ca. 1479), labeled “Byzantium sive Constantineopolis,” woodcut printed in Venice around 1520 or 1530

Germanisches Nationalmuseum
Nürnberg, Germany

(1. Yedikule Fortress, 2. Old Palace, 3. New Palace (now Topkapı Palace), 4. Mosque Complex of Mehmed II, 5. Shrine Complex of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari)

Taken from Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 83, pic. 58

through which he sought to articulate his global vision. Mehmed II was the only Muslim ruler of his time to adopt a western pictorial language for self-representation and, by implication, for the representation of Ottoman dynastic identity. As we shall see, his naturalistic oil-painted and medallion portraits appropriated two media recently invented in the Latin West. Moreover, his court painter, Sinan Bey, was trained by a European master in portraiture, a genre for which there was no Ottoman tradition. Having “grown up” in Mehmed II’s court, he was either sent abroad for training or tutored in the sultan’s palace by his master, called Maestro Pavli (probably the painter-medalist Paolo da Ragusa).⁶ Enjoying “favor and influence” with the person of the sultan, Sinan Bey mediated with his own pupils the visual cultures of East and West by creatively translating the Italianate manner to the indigenous medium of miniature painting on paper. In fact, because he could so easily navigate between both cultures, he was sent as ambassador to Venice in 1480, during Gentile Bellini’s tenure as Venetian “cultural ambassador” at the Ottoman court. The position of Sinan Bey as the sultan’s interpreter (*turzman del gran signor*) implies his linguistic fluency in Italian, which must have paralleled his skills in visual translation.⁷

Mehmed II’s artistic horizons also extended to the visual culture of Timurid-Turkmen courts in the East. Originating from Iran or Central Asia, the sultan’s court painter Baba Nakkaş was a royal “intimate” who had joined the Naqshbandi order of dervishes before leaving his homeland. Together with his pupils, this artist indigenized the so-called international Timurid-Turkmen style that would permeate Ottoman art and architectural ornament well into the sixteenth century. It was the sultan’s own initiative to give young slave-servant trainees to Baba Nakkaş in order to “acclimatize the elegant Persianate mode of design (*qalem-i ‘Acem*) in the clime of *Rûm* (Ottoman lands),” an initiative that parallels the schooling of Sinan Bey by a master of Italian painting.⁸

Unlike contemporary Muslim rulers, Mehmed II insistently (though not always successfully) invited artists and architects from Italian city-states (e.g., Rimini, Naples, Florence, Venice) through diplomatic channels that publicized his western cultural orientation abroad. His patronage of Italian artists was partly an extension of his foreign diplomatic relations, a very special kind of gift exchange meant to promote intercultural bonding and political alliance formation. The global ambitions that colored the sultan’s geopolitical vision are best exemplified by the transfer of the Ottoman capital from Edirne to Istanbul. The Greek chronicle of his reign by Kritoboulos (*Historia*, ca. 1467) explains that this strategic move, made in 1459 to control both land and sea from Istanbul, was inspired by the histories of ancient kings

to whom naval operations “brought the most fame.” Soon after the fall of Constantinople, Italian sources reported that the young conqueror, who was being tutored by a reader in Arabic and two Italian readers in Greek and Latin, boasted that Alexander had marched from Macedonia to Asia with a smaller army than his own. Now he was marching from East to West, whereas formerly the “Occidentals had advanced into the Orient.” He had Arrian’s life of Alexander (the *Anabasis*) read to him daily because he wanted to “be proclaimed sovereign of all the world and all the people; that is, a second Alexander.” A Greek manuscript of this text, copied at the sultan’s scriptorium in the 1460s, still survives at the Topkapı Palace Library.⁹ Kritoboulos similarly portrays the sultan as a neo-Alexander reversing the course of history by taking revenge of the East on the West. The author explains that he wrote his chronicle to immortalize the fame of Mehmed’s heroic deeds, so that Greek-speaking subjects and all philhellenic “Western nations” would know that his accomplishments are “in no way inferior to those of Alexander the Macedonian.” Likewise, a posthumous Turkish chronicle of the sultan’s reign by Tursun Bey (ca. 1490–95), cites in its first line a Qur’anic reference to Alexander (18:83), the role model for the divinely sanctioned Ottoman “world emperor” (*pâdişâh-ı cihân, sâhib-qırân*).¹⁰

Mehmed II’s two principal architectural commissions in Istanbul shed light on the evolution of his ecumenical imperial imagination: his mosque complex and the Topkapı Palace (fig. 2, 3). According to Kritoboulos, these grand edifices were part of the ruler’s “plan to make the City in every way the best supplied and strongest city, as it used to be long ago, in power and wealth, glory, learning, and trades, and in all the professions.” Meant to “vie with the greatest and

Fig. 2 Aerial photo of Sultan Mehmed II’s complex in Istanbul, with its mosque rebuilt after an 18th-century earthquake

Fig. 3 Aerial photo of the Topkapı Palace (formerly New Palace) in Istanbul, with the Hagia Sophia mosque in the distant background



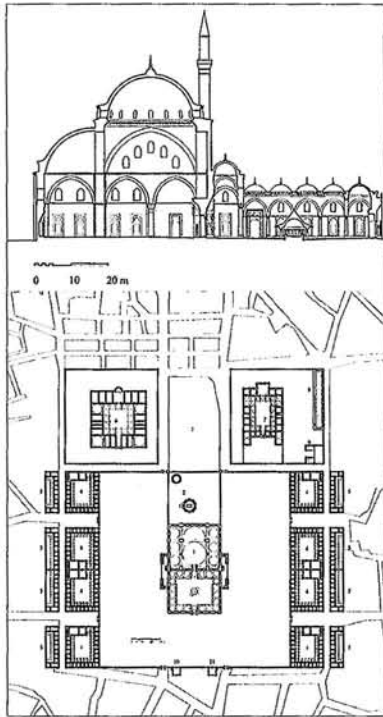


Fig. 4 Reconstruction plan of the mosque complex of Mehmed II in Istanbul and hypothetical cross-section of the original mosque [Zeynep Yürekli çizimi, Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 85, şekil. 59-60]

best of the past,” their construction was initiated in 1459, when the sultan also ordered his grandees to build their own public and private monuments “to adorn and embellish the city” (fig. 1).¹¹ Constituting the religious and secular foci of his centralized administration, Mehmed’s twin complexes signalled the symbolic refounding of Constantinople, whose conquest by the sultan is emphatically stressed in their foundation inscriptions discussed below. Tursun Bey highlights the paradisiacal iconography of both complexes, which turned the new capital into an earthly paradise, each featuring flourishing gardens (a metaphor for the prosperous state in court poetry), supplied with water from the renovated Valens aqueduct. By engaging in a pointed dialogue with the city’s antiquities, these monumental complexes echoed the uses of the past in Renaissance Italy. They incorporated the Roman-Byzantine past into an Ottoman present that supersedes but still lays claim to it. Mehmed’s complementary complexes positioned themselves within the context of world history by embracing the imperial idea embodied in the conquered city itself, rather than in the person of the defeated Palaiologan emperor. Simultaneously completed in 1478, both monuments asserted the sultan’s claim to the title “Emperor of Constantinople,” which was being contested in the West and within his own empire (by groups marginalized in the new imperial regime).¹²

The centerpiece of the socio-religious complex was called the New Mosque, in contrast to the old one that the sultan had built outside the city walls (fig. 4). The former complex, constructed on the site of the miraculously “discovered” tomb of Abû Ayyûb al-Ansârî (a companion of the Prophet martyred in an unsuccessful siege of Constantinople), reconsecrated the city with the memories of a distant Islamic past

(fig. 5, 1[5]). The New Mosque, which replaced the demolished Church of the Holy Apostles (founded by Constantine the Great and rebuilt by Justinian I), attempted to bridge the past with the Ottoman present through a stylistic fusion of ancient and contemporary features evoking a powerful sense of place (*genius loci*). According to Tursun Bey, the “great mosque based on the plan of Hagia Sophia (*Ayasofya kârnâmesi resminde*),” not only encompassed all the arts of the latter, but “in addition attained a fresh new idiom (*nev‘-i şîve-i tâze*) and unequalled beauty in accordance with the practices of the moderns (*tasarrûfât-ı müte’akhhirîn*).” The mosque is thus perceived as a contemporary response to its sixth-century model, owing its superiority to a novel synthesis of elements that subsume the combined legacies of the city’s old and new visual orders



through the aesthetics of fusion. The cross-reference to Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya), converted without a name change into the premier imperial mosque of Kostantiniyye in 1453, articulated a diachronic architectural evolution embodying a sense of historical destiny. The unprecedented symmetrical layout of the grand complex, reverberating with Italian Renaissance notions of ideal planning, trumpeted the “modernism” of Mehmed’s “New Rome.”¹³ The selective translation of ancient Roman-Byzantine and contemporary Italian design concepts into predominantly Ottoman architectural forms, decorated in a regional variant of the Timurid-Turkmen mode, underscored the heterogeneous affiliations of the new “Constantinopolitan” aesthetic.

The mosque’s Arabic foundation inscription, dated 867–75 (1463–70), proclaims the prestige of the sultan’s conquest of Constantinople, an “unrivalled” city that former Muslim rulers failed to conquer. Another panel quotes the Prophet’s hadith predicting the city’s preordained Islamic destiny: “They will certainly conquer Kostantiniyye. Hail to the prince and the army to whom this is granted!” The foundation inscription fully delineates the sultan’s dynastic genealogy, prays for the perpetuity of his progeny, and identifies the complex as a center for the restoration of “knowledge and learning (*‘ilm wa ‘irfân*).” With its record number of eight madrasas (called *Semânîyye* after the “eight paradises”), the complex resurrected the memory of the former patriarchal university within the grounds of the Holy Apostles, dedicated to the study of the trivium and quadrivium, which had long ceased to function. It is not a coincidence, then, that the early-sixteenth-century visitor Spandugino perceived the sultan’s colleges as institutions for teaching the “seven liberal arts.” The imperial mausoleum enshrining the bodies of the city’s Christian founder, Constantine, and his descendants, in turn, gave way to that of its Muslim founder, the new Ottoman “Emperor of Constantinople.”¹⁴

The Topkapı Palace, adjacent to Hagia Sophia and the evocative ruins of Constantine’s Great Palace abutting the Hippodrome, took over the terraced site of the ancient acropolis of Byzantium. These meaningful juxtapositions are highlighted on an “updated” version of the Buondelmonti map in Düsseldorf, datable to the early 1480s, which labels the site of the New Palace as “Bizantion” (fig. 3, 6). The ancient identity of the site is also recognized by Kritoboulos, who says that the sultan ordered in

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Fig. 5 Cristoforo Buondelmonti
View of “Constantinopolis”
Liber Insularum Archipelagi
Early 1480s

Ink drawing

Ms. G 13, fol. 54r

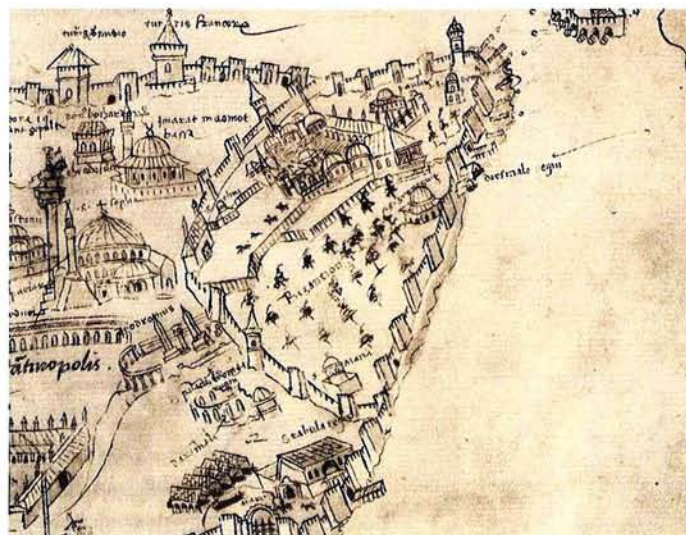
Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek

Düsseldorf, Germany

[After Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 92,
fig. 72]

Fig. 6 Cristoforo Buondelmonti

Detail, showing the New Palace (now
Topkapı Palace) adjacent to the ruins of
the Byzantine Great Palace, labeled
“palaciu[m] [imperatoris] ruptu[m],”
Hagia Sophia, and the Hippodrome
[After Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 83,
fig. 58]



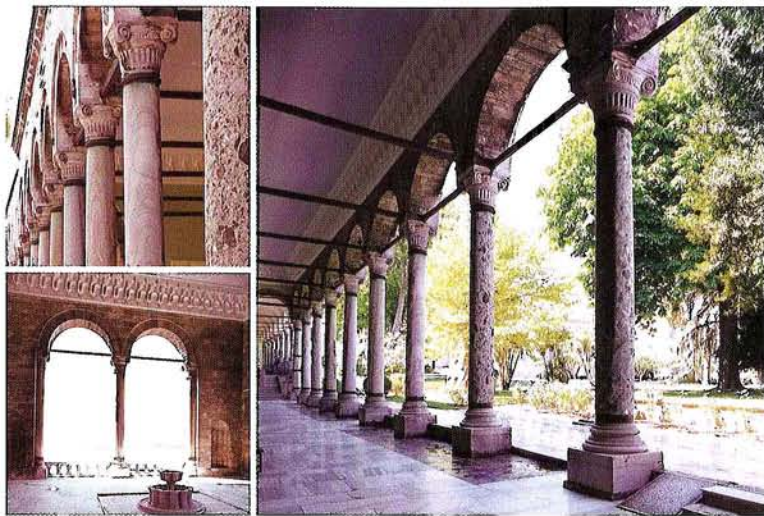


Fig. 7 Courtyard and loggia arcades of the Inner Treasury at the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul

1459 “the erection of a palace on the point of old Byzantium which stretches out into the sea—a palace that should outshine all and be more marvelous than the preceding palaces in looks, size, cost, and gracefulness.” The New Palace supplanted the old one built for Mehmed II at the city’s center, which no longer fulfilled his standard of magnificence (figs. 1[2,3]). Its three courtyards crowning the uppermost terrace of the acropolis were fronted by an *all’antica* hanging garden raised on vaulted substructures, providing expansive vistas for the sultan’s gaze at the conjunction of continents and seas (fig. 3). The completion

of the palace complex is marked by an Arabic inscription on the Imperial Gate of its fortified outer walls, dated 883 (1478), which glorifies the ruler as “the Sultan of the Two Continents and the Two Seas, the Shadow of God in this World and the Next, the Favorite of God on the Eastern and Western Horizons, the Conqueror of Constantinople, the Father of Conquest, Sultan Mehmed Khan.” The monumental view-commanding royal structures punctuating the two corners of the residential third court are prominently depicted on the Düsseldorf view (fig. 6). According to Kritoboulos, they were built “with a view to variety, beauty, size, [and] magnificence.” At one corner is the multi-domed Privy Chamber, whose typically Ottoman arcades feature pointed arches supported on columns with *muqarnas* capitals. By contrast, the Inner Treasury at the opposite corner displayed a combination of Ottoman, Byzantine, and Italian Renaissance elements. Its Italianate features include round arches and composite Ionic capitals, seen on the arcades of its courtyard façade and spectacular open loggia (fig. 7). They are complemented by Ottoman arches (pointed and “Bursa-type”) used on portals and niches. The ceiling of the courtyard arcade, featuring a *muqarnas* frieze, was once decorated with Byzantinizing figural mosaics. The diversity of visual languages fused in this edifice matched Mehmed’s equally diverse “universal” treasury collection, which was housed in it, along with his Byzantine relics and multilingual library.¹⁵

According to Angiolello, the sultan was particularly delighted by paintings and gardens. At the terraced outer garden of the Topkapı Palace, he mentions now-lost Byzantine chapels (*chiesiole*) adapted to new functions, which are seen on the Düsseldorf view (fig. 6).¹⁶ The still-standing “Column of the Goths” in the same garden (fig. 3) was

accompanied by such antiquities as imperial sarcophagi and baptismal fonts reused as fountain basins. This monumental column was a counterpart to Theodosios I's spiral column within the outer garden of Mehmed's Old Palace (fig. 1[2]). Its Latin inscription commemorates an emperor's victory over the Goths and a late Byzantine chronicle reports that it was originally surmounted by a statue of Byzas (founder of ancient Byzantium). As a trophy of Mehmed's own triumph over the Byzantine Empire, this column must have been a potent reminder of the ancient pedigree of his palace's site. The connection with Byzas is, in fact, recognized in a Persian adaptation of the Greek *History of Constantinople and Hagia Sophia* (the *Diegesis*) made for Mehmed II in 1480: it mentions, on the New Palace's site, a citadel built by Byzas, which the Byzantine emperor Constantine had conquered by force. The sultan's interest in the ancient history of Constantinople is also hinted at by a Greek manuscript of the *Diegesis*, copied in 1474 and preserved at the Topkapı Palace Library.¹⁷

The Vavassore map published in early-sixteenth-century Venice is a bird's-eye view depicting Mehmed II's new capital (fig. 1). Its label, "Byzantium or Constantinople" (*Byzantium sive Costantineopolis*), highlights the vanquished city's imperial identity that made "Byzantium" and "Constantinople" (i.e., Kostantiniyye) synonymous. This map is based on a lost original that could only have been made with the permission of the sultan, renowned for his enthusiasm for cartography.¹⁸ When the original map was created, such naturalistic "city portraits" were still a rarity. The Vavassore print projects a cosmopolitan image of the renovated metropolis as a thriving hub of international trade and diplomacy, thronging with ships that carry banners featuring crescents, the cross, the Holy Roman Emperor's double-headed eagle, and the lion of St. Mark (navigating under their own flag was a privilege granted to Venetian ships with the peace treaty of 1479). This previously unnoted detail suggests that the map may have been designed later that year, when ambassadors of the Venetian Signoria and Emperor Frederick III were present in Istanbul. The Vavassore map's Italian legends identifying antiquities, churches, and Mehmed II's major architectural commissions accentuate royal interventions in the cityscape: the most impressive "collective" creation of the sultan, further elaborated upon by his successors. The city's famous skyline, which would subsequently achieve iconic status, was naturalistically "portrayed" in Melchior Lorichs's panoramic view of 1559, which is full of references to Vavassore's print. Again labeled "Byzantium or Constantinople," this panorama is a cumulative visual record of the *renovatio urbis* initiated under Mehmed II, which culminated in Sinan's Istanbul. It too populates the city's

Cat. 299 Portrait of Mehmed II
School of Gentile Bellini
Early 16th century
Museum of Islamic Arts
Doha, Qatar



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Cat. 307 Medallion Portrait of Sultan
Mehmed II
Gentile Bellini
c. 1480
Oxford Ashmolean Museum
Oxford, UK

Cat. 308 Medallion portrait of Sultan
Mehmed II
Bertoldo di Giovanni
c. 1480
Oxford Ashmolean Museum, HCR Oxford, UK

Cat. 309 Medallion portrait of Sultan
Mehmed II
Costanzo da Ferrara
1481
Oxford Ashmolean Museum
Oxford, UK

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Fig. 8 Gentile Bellini
Portrait of Mehmed II
1480
The National Gallery
London, UK

bustling harbor with ships, including those of Sultan Suleyman and of ambassadors from the Venetian Republic, the Holy Roman Emperor, and also the Safavid Shah (cat. no. 468).¹⁹

On the Vavassore map's representation of the "New Palace (*seraglio nuovo*)" one can identify the three pavilions (*palazzi*) described by Angiolello as being grouped within the outer garden "about a stone's throw distant from one another" and built in "diverse modes (*diversi modi*)" (fig. 1[3]). The first pavilion in the "Persian manner (*alla persiana*)" was constructed in "the mode of the Karamanid lands (*al modo del paese Caraman*)," the second one was in the "Turkish manner (*alla turchesca*)," and the third in the "Greek manner (*alla greca*)." The use of diverse modes is also specified by Tursun Bey, who only mentions two of the pavilions in the outer garden, one of them built in "the manner of Persian kings (*tavr-ı ekâsire*)" and the other "in the Ottoman manner (*tavr-ı 'osmânî*)." He adds that the towers of the fortress surrounding the palace garden were constructed in the "Turkish (*türkî*)" and "Frankish (*firengî*)" manners, thereby testifying to an acute stylistic self-consciousness. Of these pavilions, only the Persianate Çinili Köşk, completed in 877 (1472), survives. It embodies the Timurid-Turkmen style embraced by the Karamanid principality of central Anatolia, recently eliminated by Mehmed II. As architectural representations of major kingdoms united by the sultan (Ottoman, Byzantine, and Karamanid), these pavilions expressed the universalism of his vision of empire with their stylistic pluralism.²⁰

Gentile Bellini, who resided in Istanbul between 1479 and 1481 with his two Venetian assistants, is said to have decorated some halls of the Topkapı Palace. Only a few of the works created by Italian artists in those years have survived (cat. no. 299). They include Mehmed II's medallic and painted portraits, which proclaim imperial status and territorial dominion as does the Topkapı Palace (cat. no. 307, 308, 309, fig. 8). In fact, bringing together diverse elements of his patronage discussed so far, these portraits can be read as carefully crafted examples of Renaissance self-fashioning. It was after 1477 that the sultan issued a dynastic law code redefining his public image in court ceremonies with a new





Cat. 314 Coin of Mehmed II
1477-78
Yapı Kredi Vedat Nedim Tör Museum
Istanbul, Turkey



Cat. 272 Medal of the Emperor
John VIII Palaiologos
Engraved by Pisanello
Ferrara, 1438
The Hellenic Ministry of Culture
Numismatic Museum
Athens, Greece

emphasis on majestic imperial seclusion.²¹ The refashioning of imperial identity at the zenith of his power coincided with the completion of the Topkapı Palace in 1478, the same year that the endowments of his mosque complex were furnished with sizable commercial establishments. His augmented prestige was also expressed by the unprecedented minting of gold coins from 882 (1477–78) onwards, called “sultanic” (*sultânî*), whose Arabic inscriptions extol him as the “Issuer of gold coins, the Lord of Power and Victory on the Lands and the Seas” (cat. no. 314).²²

Mehmed II’s western artistic horizons, expanding along with the aggrandization of his imperial claims and the growth of his European territories, culminated in the celebrated visits of Costanzo da Ferrara and Gentile Bellini during the last years of his reign. The Latin-inscribed portraits of the sultan by these artists advertise his status as emperor both visually and verbally. His previous medallic portraits from the 1460s also featured Latin inscriptions, the lingua franca of the Latin West, rather than Greek inscriptions as seen on Pisanello’s medal of the Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaiologos (cat. no. 272). Those early medals are inscribed with translations of the young sultan’s relatively modest titulature, whereas later examples exalt him as “emperor.” One of them is an undated (ca. 1478) medal signed by Costanzo, a follower of Pisanello. The equestrian image on its reverse, echoing classical Greco-Roman imperial iconography, is often compared with that of the penultimate Byzantine emperor on Pisanello’s medal. Costanzo’s unusually large bronze medal was reworked with new inscriptions in its second version, bearing the date 1481 (cat. no. 309). The modified inscription on its reverse reads: “Equestrian image of Mehmed, Emperor of Asia and Greece, on campaign.” This inscription conforms to the sultan’s upgraded titulature in his official correspondence with Italy in 1480–81, now naming him “Emperor of all Asia and Greece” (cat. no. 309). The medal’s obverse identifies him as “Sultan Mehmed, descendant of Osman, Emperor of Byzantium (i.e., Constantinople).” This reference to the ruler as *Bizantii Imperatoris* is missing from the earlier medal, which names him “Ottoman Sultan Mehmed, Emperor of the Turks (*Turcorum Imperator*).”²³

The modified medal is assumed to have been cast in Italy, after Mehmed II’s death on 3 May 1481. Its proud declaration of the sultan’s dominion over Greece and Asia as “Emperor of Byzantium (i.e., Constantinople)” seems, however, more likely an Ottoman intervention than a western initiative (cat. no. 309). The medal’s updated titles accord with the conquest of the formerly Byzantine colony of Otranto in the summer of 1480, believed to have been encouraged by the sultan’s new Venetian and Florentine allies opposed to King Ferrante of Naples. It was

even reported that the Venetian *bailo* in Istanbul, Giovanni Battista Gritti, had affirmed Mehmed's right as "Emperor of Constantinople (*Imperatore di Costantinopoli*)" to reclaim Otranto, Taranto, and Brindisi.²⁴

Two other portrait medals of Mehmed II, signed by Bertoldo di Giovanni and Gentile Bellini, are datable to around 1480 (cat. no. 308, 307).²⁵ The Bertoldo medal is thought to have been a gift of Lorenzo de' Medici, thanking the sultan for handing over in 1479 the leading rebel of the Pazzi conspiracy, who had escaped from Florence to Pera. Deriving from Bellini's medal or a drawing prepared in Istanbul, its reverse depicts three captive crowned maidens, exhibited on a triumphal chariot (decorated with the Siege Perilous, a device of the king of Naples) led by Mars. The maidens—labeled Greece, Trebizond, and Asia—imply that the three unidentified heraldic crowns on Bellini's medal represent the same conquered kingdoms. The sultan's representation on the Bertoldo medal as victorious Roman emperor presupposes his appreciation of and acquaintance with *all'antica* imagery. The medal's two reclining figures, personifying Sea and Land, acknowledge his self-image as ruler of the seas and continents. Its obverse identifies him as "Mehmed, Emperor of Asia and Trebizond and Great[er] Greece." Bellini's medal is less specific, naming the ruler as "Great Sultan Mehmed, Emperor." The reference on Bertoldo's medal to "Great[er] Greece" has convincingly been interpreted as an endorsement of the sultan's claim to the former Byzantine colonies of Southern Italy. The conquest of Otranto was also a step towards realizing his grandiose project of reviving the Roman Empire through the reunification of Rome and Constantinople.

Bellini's triple crowns are repeated on his painted portrait of Mehmed II (fig. 8). An aura of gentle refinement characterizes this oil painting on canvas, portraying its sitter in three-quarter view, venerably framed by an *all'antica* arch. The damaged Latin inscriptions on the parapet give the completion date of 25 November 1480, several months after the fall of Otranto. Bellini has portrayed the ceremonially aloof ruler as remarkably unthreatening in his contemplative gaze. This idealized portrait created in a context of peace by the "official painter" of Venice (now a tributary state), pays homage to the sultan as universal monarch, who is identified by the no-longer legible inscription as "Victor over Land and Sea and Sovereign of the World."²⁶

Portable copies of Mehmed II's naturalistic canvas and medallic portraits, unprecedented in the Islamic artistic tradition, disseminated his imperial image in the West both during and after his lifetime. Besides foreign courts in Europe, the potential audiences for these Italianate



portraits may have included his own “Frankish” subjects and vassals, polyglot courtiers, and the Italian merchant-bankers of Pera and other Ottoman emporia. Reproduced in posthumous casts, the sultan’s portrait medals immortalized his fame, helping to improve his negative image abroad and integrate him into the Western European circle of kingship. By positioning Mehmed II within the matrix of “Western civilization,” his Latin-inscribed portraits contested the presumption that artistic innovations associated with the humanist project of recovering Roman antiquity were the exclusive preserve of courts in Christian Europe. As the true inheritor of Byzantium/Constantinople, the turbaned sultan in Ottoman costume could assert that he had an equal, if not greater, claim to the classical Greco-Roman heritage shared by Christendom and Islamdom. His patronage of Italianate art crossed presumed cultural boundaries, opening a permeable space “in between” for the construction and negotiation of identity from a position of power. The sultan’s mimesis of Italian Renaissance portraiture, then, carried the potential to subvert binaries of cultural difference reinforced by humanist discourses on “the Turk”: human versus inhuman, civilized versus barbarian, Western versus Eastern, and European versus Asian. Perhaps Mehmed was once again emulating in reverse Alexander the Great, whose adoption of eastern cultural practices is interpreted in Arrian’s *Anabasis* as a “policy” of mediation, aimed to diminish the Macedonian conqueror’s foreignness in the expanding Asian frontiers of his empire.²⁸

While the sultan’s portraits in the *firengî* manner are comparable to his palace pavilions, which deployed diverse visual modes, his miniature portraits on paper, fusing Italianate and Persianate elements, can be likened to the synthetic architecture of his mosque complex and Inner Treasury. These overlooked parallels across different media signal the deliberate cultivation of a cosmopolitan visual culture and “intentional hybridity.” The coexistence of multiple artistic languages echoes the polyglot character of chancellery documents, written in Ottoman Turkish, Uighur, Arabic, Persian, Greek, and Latin. The fusion of eastern and western representational modes, on the other hand, suggests an attempt to forge a distinctive Ottoman (*Rûmî*) pictorial manner.

The sultan’s few surviving portraits by his court painters translate the naturalistic models of Italian masters into the indigenous medium of miniature painting on paper, thereby domesticating and naturalizing their foreignness. One such example of visual translation, involving a transfer of medium, is the *Bust Portrait of Mehmed II*, with its Byzantinizing gold background (fig. 9). Attributed to the leading portrait painter Sinan Bey, it is a close copy of either Costanzo’s medal or a lost painting by him. Another portrait ascribed to this artist’s pupil, Şiblizade

Opposite page
Fig 9 Sinan Bey (attr.)
Bust Portrait of Mehmed II
Topkapı Palace Library
Istanbul, Turkey



Fig. 10 Şiblizade Ahmed (attr.)
Mehmed II Smelling a Rose
Ca. 1480-81
Topkapı Palace Library
Istanbul, Turkey

Ahmed of Bursa, is *Mehmed II Smelling a Rose*, which transforms Bellini's painted bust portrait into a full-length seated royal image in the late-Timurid manner (fig. 10).²⁹ By cross-fertilizing eastern and western elements, it negotiates the sultan's identity as a culturally refined Turco-Muslim ruler, gently smelling a rose. This portrait exemplifies the experimentation with an Ottoman (*Rûmî*) pictorial manner that injects a higher dose of naturalism into the newly emerging Persianate tradition of individualized portraiture, shared by the court cultures of the Turkic rulers of Istanbul, Tabriz, and Herat.²⁹

The aesthetics of fusion fostered in Mehmed II's scriptorium can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the self-avowed cultural in-betweenness and liminality of the lands of *Rûm*, testifying to the exploration of affinities between the multiple worlds that converged in his new capital. Despite their foreignness to the Persianate painting tradition, bust-length and half-length miniature portraits were subsequently assimilated into the sixteenth-century Ottoman artistic repertoire. The synthetic idiom inaugurated by Mehmed II's pioneering mosque complex also left a lasting imprint on the dynastic architectural style developed by his successors and codified in the Süleymaniye complex, built in the 1550s by Sinan for Sultan Süleyman.³⁰ Unlike the synthetic idioms in architecture and miniature painting, however, the Italianate manner of portraiture enjoyed only a short life. The few sultanic portrait medals with Latin inscriptions that represent Selim I and Süleyman I are the last examples of their kind, and it is unclear who commissioned them.³¹

Artistic interactions with Italy were reinvigorated during the tenure of Süleyman's grand vizier İbrahim Paşa (g.v. 1525–36), who was born in Parga in Venetian territory and whose chief adviser-creditor was the well-connected Pera merchant Alvise Gritti (an illegitimate son of the reigning doge of Venice, Andrea Gritti). The households of both İbrahim and Alvise boasted kinship ties with personages who had enjoyed positions of power under Mehmed II, ties through which the cosmopolitanism of the Ottoman court was readapted to changing cultural politics. İbrahim Paşa had been raised as a household slave by a daughter of İskender Bey (later Paşa, d. 1503), the above-mentioned Pera-born, Italo-Greek governor of Mehmed II who eventually rose to the vizierate. İbrahim Paşa married a granddaughter of the late İskender Paşa and possibly met Alvise Gritti through that family's Pera networks. Likewise, the doge's "bastard" son inherited the connections of his father, who as a merchant-diplomat had lived many years in Pera, where his great-uncle (the aforementioned Giovanni Battista Gritti) served as Venetian *bailo* under Mehmed II.³²

The intensified artistic dialogue with European courts during İbrahim Paşa's grand vizierate was once again propelled by his royal master's aspiration for universal sovereignty. Styling himself as the new Ottoman Alexander (and the Second Solomon), the young Suleyman who ruled over vastly expanded territories shared his great-grandfather Mehmed II's dream of restoring the Roman Empire. His Venetian-made tiara-like helmet with four superimposed crowns symbolized universal dominion over the "four corners" of the earth. It was claimed to be a "trophy of Alexander the Great," the enduring role model of both Suleyman and Mehmed II. The new synthesis of a "classical" canon in the arts and architecture subsequently promoted at Suleyman's court signaled a relative hardening of East-West territorial and cultural boundaries.³³ Nevertheless, an official historian writing in the 1590s would still praise among the Ottoman dynasty's superior attributes the cosmopolitanism of its capital: no other state possessed a capital like Istanbul, assembling such a diverse collection of communities, combining various religions and peoples. Moreover, no other city could claim its unrivaled fame and its unique location at the "confluence of two seas" where international ships "crisscrossing the straits of the Black Sea and Mediterranean" cont of belonging to both the East and the West (cat. no. 319).³⁴ ❖



Cat. 319 Map of Istanbul and sultans' portraits

Anonymous (after the original by Vavassore)

17th century

Topkapı Palace Museum
Istanbul, Turkey



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