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BOOK REVIEWS



CORPUS-TREASURY: SULTAN'S JEWELERS IN THE OTTOMAN PALACE

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**SULTAN'S JEWELERS IN THE OTTOMAN
PALACE 1853–1871.**

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470 p.*

The history of jewelry and silversmithing in the Ottoman Empire from the XVII to the XX centuries is closely connected to the activities of renowned Armenian jewelers and silversmiths in the Western Armenian community. Their number exceeded 1,000. For several centuries, they dominated these fields within the empire, leaving behind numerous famous families and names, while maintaining control over the country's market and mint. Information about Armenian jewelers has been documented by notable travelers and historians of the time, such as Evliya Çelebi (XVII century). Today, there are several studies on the subject, including the highly esteemed works of Karo Kürkman, Arsen Yarman, Hovsep Tokat, and Vahe Shatvoryan, published in luxurious editions in various languages.

The article is dedicated to a specific field, which is the history of the sultanate government and the sultans' personal treasuries and mints.

The well-known names in this multifaceted sphere existed for several generations, passing down the peculiarities, secrets, and artistic nuances of the craft and art, as well as the positions and titles of those who led the artisan production.

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It was accepted that the boys of the family, who were not yet adults, should first try their hand at jewelry making, if they were not gifted, then other professions were chosen for them.

Armenian jewelers were renowned throughout the entire Ottoman Empire. Jewelry-making and silversmithing were among the monopolies of Western Armenians. They were present in every possible marketplace across neighborhoods in the cities. They formed various artisan unions, where they often made up the majority, constituting more than half of the masters. As a result, they controlled almost all of the caravanserais and marketplaces in the cities. The famous "Gold Market" (Kuyumcu Çarşısı) owed much of its reputation and charm to Armenians.

Jewelry has included about 20 independent crafts, without which it is impossible to imagine this sector. Specialized professions included diamond cutters, stone setters, engravers, inlayers (mihlayıcı), polishers, sculptors, masters of stones, enamel, and polishing, silver thread makers, gilders, casters, watch case repairers, melters and rollers, dust collectors, alloy sellers (müpahacı), box makers, calligraphic engravers, seal-making masters, polishers of colored gemstones, and more. This field was also renowned for its innovations and discoveries, making it one of the most unique and distinguished fields of its time. Later, when they left the empire, they carried their craft to new settlements, preserving its finest qualities.

A group of Armenian jewelers from the Ottoman Empire served in the sultan's court for centuries alongside representatives of other fields. They earned special respect, titles, medals, and high ranks, gaining recognition on the international stage. Many of them became amiras in the palace, in honor of their crafts and, subsequently, to their native people. Their works adorned the royal courts of European countries and later became part of museum collections, where they remain objects of admiration to this day. Many of these renowned jewelers continued their work during the republican era, managing to escape falling victim to the Armenian Genocide.

Among jewelers, renowned specialist groups included gem dealers, watchmakers, and goldsmiths. They represented globally recognized brands of wristwatches, table clocks, alarm clocks, and musical clocks throughout the empire, such as Longines, Imhof, Omega, K. Serkisoff, Recta, Yunghans, Arlon,

Vacheron-Constantin, Hislon, International, Orator, Hamidiye, Movado, Revue, Nacar, Bulova, Lip, Valon, Zelma, Alpina, Minerva, and others.

Researchers of jewelry history have compiled lists of Armenian representatives for each field, categorized by their places of activity and narrow specializations. These lists include more than a thousand names.

One of the best compilers of such lists was Vahe Shatvoryan.¹ And the best researcher of the history of Ottoman jewelry and silversmithing is Karo Kürkman. His studies are primarily based on official documents, facts, and Ottoman sources.

In 2019, Karo Kürkman, one of the foremost and most recognized scholars of Ottoman Empire culture, published the highly valuable “Sultan’s Jewelers in the Ottoman Palace 1853–1871”, a luxurious corpus of documents consisting of 500 large-format pages.

This exceptional study was prompted by a fateful incident. Detailed handwritten original work lists of the Tüzyan family, the Armenian directors of the palace jewelry and mint for several generations, and the amirs, during the reigns of Sultans Mahmud VIII, Abdul Mejid, and Abdul Aziz, were found, whose main language was Armenian-script Turkish.

From time to time, renovation construction works have been carried out in Istanbul's palace and museum buildings. During one of these renovations, when a section of the walls of the Sultan’s Topkapi Palace was demolished, the Tüzyan family’s ledgers from the mint were discovered. These ledgers are not only valuable as historical archival manuscripts but also crucial for studying the social-economic, political, and newly developing diplomatic relations of the Ottoman Empire.

In honor of the supervisor of the construction works, Timuçin Ginkiyok Bey, he handed over these manuscripts to the prominent Turkish culture scholar and art historian, Karo Kürkman. The ledgers have largely remained in good condition, and the material is readable. The book includes facsimiles confirming the descriptions of this discovery, as well as photographs taken by Karo Kürkman.

The book is written based on the files containing these handwritten documents, which are not only lists of various works, orders, items, jewelry, and luxury household objects made for the Sultan’s palace, the Sultan, and his close ones, but also include balance sheets, contracts, price lists, and detailed accounts

¹ V. Shatvoryan. Outline of the History of Turkish-Armenian Jewelry. Constantinople, Shoghakat Magazine, 1974–76 combined issue.

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of the values of precious metals and stones used. The language is Armenian-script Turkish, and the numbers are in Ottoman Turkish.

This is a story of a specific historical period of the Ottoman Empire, and also a mirror of the country's diplomacy, insofar as some of the works were created as gifts for foreign royal houses and prominent figures, or by their orders. These balance sheets and the numerous lists based on them serve as a clear reflection of the country's socio-economic situation and relations.

The book begins with a chapter dedicated to one of the most prominent names in Ottoman jewelry, Amir Poghoss Çelebi Tüz, the chief jeweler of the Sultan's palace. The chapter includes the portrait of the Amir, a document confirming his position as court jeweler with the Sultan's seal, a catalog of Ottoman insignia created by the Amir, and designs of high-ranking medals and diamond-studded insignia authored by other members of the Tüzyan family, all of which make a strong impression of refined taste and great craftsmanship.

The main content of the corpus refers to the years 1853–1871. The main "heroes" of the book are the members of the glorious Tüzyan dynasty. A separate chapter is dedicated to each of them, which not only presents the main stories of their works but also the state of jewelry craftsmanship during each ruler's reign, details about jewelry unions of the time, and their detailed lists based on locations, markets, and specialized fields, noting their titles as "masters".

Each page of the book represents a document. They depict the branches of the Sultan's jewelry and mint manufacturing establishments in various parts of the empire, listing the annual production, the names of each center's responsible leader, the duration of their military service (also with the Hijri date), their rank (mostly marshals), their position at the palace (viziers, etc.), their position in the ministries of foreign affairs and finance, the circumstances of the city's governor or mayor, and the income generated during their tenure. The abundance of high-ranking officials in this list highlights the Sultanate's extremely meticulous interest, control, strictness, demands, and attention towards this sector. After all, the personal treasuries of the government, the sultan, and the valide sultan (the sultan's mother) were closely tied to the finances of the jewelry and mint departments. It is also known that the sultan's personal treasury was entrusted to the management of Armenians for many years. The most famous among them was Pasha Hakob Gazazyan, who reached the rank of vizier (1833–1891). He served as

the treasurer of Sultan Abdulhamid II's treasury for many years and is known for **introducing the use of "checks" as a substitute for money** in Turkey.

The detailed tables, lists, and reports (mostly written in Armenian-script Turkish by the Tüzyan family and Armenian officials) that make up a quarter of the corpus published by Karo Kürkman are impressive for their professional level and answer many questions.

The corpus is rich in images of officials, governors, military commanders, and Armenian bankers from the imperial palace's jewelry house, as well as various ornaments and objects belonging to the sultans, their wives, concubines, princes, and princesses, who are depicted wearing jewelry. Some of these items are accompanied by original Armenian-script Turkish descriptions, followed by their translations, with detailed descriptions and values provided for each piece. In the captions of many of the photographs, it is noted that they belong to the author's personal archive, Karo Kürkman. When portraits of the Tüzyan family are featured, their signatures, primarily in Ottoman Turkish, as well as Armenian monograms, are provided alongside their works.

When it comes to the photographs and descriptions of produced and commissioned gold and silver luxury items and jewelry, the descriptions typically start with details about the diamonds, including their color, size, manufacturing dates, and so on. A large number of photographs of the sultan and his close ones' personal belongings are included, which inspire admiration and offer insights into their lifestyle – seals, cigarette holders of various sizes, hand mirrors and table mirrors, whose reverse sides still amaze with their beauty, theatrical opera glasses, coins, medals, gold and silver evening bags made from woven threads, wallets, fans, diamond-encrusted jewelry with Ottoman inscriptions on some of them, jewelry boxes adorned with paintings of sultans and scenic views of Istanbul, sometimes with diamond-encrusted frames, cigarette cases, luxurious small knives with their sheaths, an ivory necklace designated for a princess alongside her portrait, new medals and the officials – both Armenian and Turkish – who received them, and a wide array of horse accessories, from saddles and bridles to decorative horse items. The tableware of stunning beauty, which is invariably paired with silver or gold, is a significant part. Weapons, ornate and adorned with jewels and various colored precious stones, also stand out. These pieces are typically accompanied by photographs of the owners of the items – golden and jeweled garments, brushes, shaving knives, and weapons. These

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photographs are important as they reveal which Turkish or foreign insignia these individuals were awarded. In general, there is a specific number of photographs of items from private collections, and those housed in museums. Some of these are works that were later sold at auctions, and their descriptions are included in the corpus. Here, we see not only items related to the imperial palace. They relate to items of the Armenian (and also Catholic) Church and its members, as well as various objects that are part of the liturgical practices of the church, including vestments of spiritual leaders made of gold or silver thread, relic boxes, rings, crosses, scepters, ceremonial items, church literature, manuscript bindings, luxurious boxes, and more. Many of these items also feature ivory components. The abundance of diamonds, emeralds, agates, topazes, and other precious stones is astonishing. It seems as though the treasure vaults were inexhaustible.

Over time, the emblems, orders, and medals underwent changes. Each new sultan and master jeweler began to produce their own distinctive orders. The different ranks of these orders have not lost their value, also serving as precious gemstones and gold jewelry.

In the corpus, we typically see photographs of various pieces of jewelry, accompanied by handwritten copies of their "passports" in Armenian-script and Ottoman Turkish, followed by their Turkish translation. The composition is detailed to the finest degree, much like a prescription for a particular medicine – what it is, who it is for, or who commissioned it. If it is the work of a renowned artisan, such as Sepuh Manasi's intricate carvings on a jewelry box, the artisan's name is mentioned along with the material used. For example, in the case of pilaf spoons, it is noted that small water turtles, either whole or half, were used for the polished bone parts, or jade stones were employed for the spoon handles. The number of diamonds and other precious stones, the measurements of gold and silver, and the dimensions and quantity of key materials, such as carats and grams, are also provided.

A particularly distinguished group items consists of weapons made with the most luxurious and abundant precious stones, such as daggers, sabres, guns, rare items crafted for horse-drawn carriages or riders, including saddle blankets, cloaks, horse head decorations, seat embellishments, blinders, and other parts of museum-worthy artifacts. Another unique group includes crowns, orders, coins, medals, breastplates, or embellishments on head wraps and turbans. There are also unimaginably large diamonds, rubies, emeralds, hyacinths, and calligraphic

monograms engraved on gold, pennants with engravings of Istanbul scenes, suras, breastplates, festive clothes, bags, wonderful seals, medals for various wars and battles, compasses with amazing small colored inscriptions, pipes, etc. It is particularly fascinating when the author has searched for and found out for whom these jewels were made, and we can see them on the clothes of their owners in oil paintings by either foreign or local artists. Of great interest are the miniature items depicting individual state officials – marshals, pashas, princes, princesses, foreign generals, and royal figures. There are also portraits of Armenian patriarchs adorned with the highest honors. The inscriptions made from precious stones, mainly diamonds, are the result of great craftsmanship. Abundant use was made of mother-of-pearl, pearls, amber, and small cases crafted from water turtles, measuring 3–6 cm in diameter.

The next group consists of household items such as furniture, cabinets, tables, armchairs, chairs, personal luxury objects, book and gift box cases, combs, hairpins, and clasps, chandeliers, individual pins, gem-encrusted buttons, scissors, knives, various precious stone medallions, rings or hair accessories with velvet or leather gold-embroidered boxes, or silver-threaded epaulets, woven bags, purses, tablecloths, everyday or festive tableware for special occasions, with individual pieces for receptions, ranging from candleholders to the last knife, fork, and spoon, as well as a collection of cups and plates, special cups, coffee pots, teapots, bells, serving trays, syrups and rosewater vessels, bottles, fruit bowls, and candy crystal and silver dishes decorated with precious stones.

An important part of the “passport” is the inscriptions about belonging to a particular museum, person or being part of “private” collections, which must also have been the result of an extensive research. It should also be noted that the tableware for sultans, pashas, and wealthy families was also ordered from foreign countries, including famous French, English, and Chinese factories, although the products from Kütahya were also sold at similarly high prices. Sometimes, these were enhanced with the patron’s monograms or views of Istanbul. Multi-colored enamel and ivory were abundantly used.

The book includes a separate chapter dedicated to room items. These are personal belongings that belong to the study or desk area, such as table and wall clocks, some of which are musical and play melodies, inkstands, cases for eyeglasses and cigarettes, seal rings, mirrors, jewelry boxes, brushes, and other similar objects.

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Crowns were also ordered from the Sultan's jewelry shop, including those specially made for religious leaders, with images of apostles or gold embroidery, with crosses, censers, staffs and other ceremonial items.

Naturally, most of the paintings and photographs presented in the Corpus, depict sultans, Turkish pashas, foreign rulers and military leaders who visited the palace and received personal gifts from it. The book also includes numerous portraits of Armenian amiras, pashas, and notable religious leaders adorned with sultanic orders, jewelry, and gifts they had received.

The most remarkable pieces are the jewelry.

In the 470-page volume, the grandeur of an entire era of the sultanic palace is vividly displayed through its jewelry, coins minted by the treasury, orders and decorations, and exquisite items produced by the palace's workshop. All of this emerged during a period when their creation was overseen by Armenian master jewelers, along with the Armenian stewards of the royal treasury, mint, and the personal treasuries of the sultan and the mother sultan.

And the glory of all this was due to the grace of several generations of Armenian masters. Of course, the most famous was the activity of several generations of goldsmiths of the Tüzyan amirs. Sadly, their story came to a tragic and sorrowful end.


The book concludes with yet another extensive section: a glossary of terms and specific words used throughout. It includes the original Armenian-script Turkish, its Latin transliteration, and translations into both Turkish and English.

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