

EINLEITUNG / INTRODUCTION

Roxana Coman

Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS), The Netherlands
roxana.coman@rocketmail.com

The concept for this thematic edition emerged organically from the *Artefacts and Identities* lecture series I organized in November 2022 at the Orient-Institut Istanbul. The series aimed to examine in greater depth the dynamics of antiquities, private collections, museums, (Self)Orientalist discourses, within the complex framework of the late 19th-century Ottoman Empire and the newly formed nation-states of Turkey, Romania, and Greece. Additionally, the support I received during my fellowship (2024–2025) at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg ‘inherit. heritage in transformation,’ Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, funded by the Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space, was instrumental in developing a conceptual framework for critically engaging with emergent heritage and collecting practices in the late Ottoman Empire and its successor states. I am deeply grateful to the contributing authors, Ayşe Aldemir, Nilay Özlü, Beyza Uzun, Makbule Merve Uca, and Zeynep Simavi, whose stimulating papers not only enriched my understanding, but also significantly advanced research on heritage and museum studies in the late Ottoman Empire and its successor states.

This thematic edition seeks to address a gap in the scholarship by integrating case studies from Ottoman to post-Ottoman Romania into the broader framework of heritage and history of collections studies. It also aims to contribute to existing research by highlighting case studies from the late Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey that have received comparatively little attention. While the new nation-states employed heritage and artefacts as tools of nation-building, the Ottoman Empire sought to reinforce its imperial identity through Westernizing and modernizing instruments such as archaeology, private collections, and museums.

This historical landscape brought together a range of actors, local and foreign, imperial and national, in contexts further nuanced by the case studies in this volume. Our approach traces not only the material and intellectual transfers within the Ottoman Empire, but also the evolving meanings assigned to objects as they were transformed into artefacts. The studies investigate the agency of collectors and museum directors in selecting specific items, the (re)contextualization of these objects in display, and the ways in which individual, collective, gendered, national, and imperial identities shaped the content of both private and public collections.

Another focal point is the interconnectedness of institutional models and collecting practices. For example, the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) was a source of inspiration for both Osman Hamdi Bey and Antonis Benaki, while Sadberk Koç decided to create her own private museum after visiting the Benaki Museum. Finally, this edition brings together researchers and museum professionals to foster dialogue between these two complementary fields of expertise.

Among the common themes explored in these articles are: the interplay between collecting and heritage practices and the development of object taxonomies of Islamic

art; the shift from the Orientalist umbrella term 'Oriental' to more specific categories such as Persian, Arab, Turkish, and Ottoman; Europe as a civilizational model for both the imperial capital of Constantinople and provincial regions such as the Danubian Principalities; and the influence of Beaux-Arts principles (e.g., object type, material) on classificatory systems.

Building on Tülay Artan's work on the pre-modern collecting practices of the members of the imperial family,¹ Ayşe Aldemir's article offers much-needed nuance to the context surrounding the imperial collections, particularly the connection between Islamic calligraphy as part of the sultan's education and the private library as a form of collection. Approaching calligraphy as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, bridging architecture with the dual roles of sultans as both calligraphers and collectors, Aldemir foregrounds a pre-Tanzimat understanding of collecting practices in the Ottoman Empire. She examines conventional cataloguing practices, particularly under Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–1839), who systematically recorded *levhas* and other works of calligraphy produced by earlier sultans. This practice, observed mainly from the 19th century onwards, appears to have originated in his personal decision to view a *levha* created by his grandfather, Sultan Ahmed III (r. 1703–1730). Successive sultans expanded these inventories, reflecting an ongoing institutionalization of cataloguing. Aldemir also explores the deep connections between sultanic calligraphic production and Ottoman concepts of power, where authority was seen as something to be both inherited and cultivated through training. Her analysis further addresses the interplay between communication and the display of sultanic power within sacred spaces, such as mosques, and the centrality of calligraphy in the Ottoman world. The display of sultanic calligraphic panels, often outside the imperial capital of Constantinople, was a deliberate projection of authority, offering a distinct perspective on the concept of exhibiting artefacts.

Beyza Uzun's article opens a discussion on the relationship between the meaning of Islamic art and its valuation within Eurocentric heritage frameworks. In conversation with Aldemir's contribution to this issue and Artan's earlier work on pre-modern collectors, Uzun's approach underscores the importance of redefining what constitutes a collection, what qualifies as collecting practice, and what it means for an object to be considered part of a museum, beyond Eurocentric parameters. Focusing on the European antiquities race, especially the pursuit of Roman and Greek artefacts within the Ottoman Empire's territories, Uzun highlights the negotiation over the value of Islamic objects, shaped both by external pressures and by the political Islam promoted in the late Ottoman Empire under Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909).² Engaging with concepts of authenticity and the politics of defining heritage, she critiques Western-centered museology. She also situates the valuation of Islamic art within broader heritage chronologies: compared to the millennia-old antiquities of Mesopotamia, Islamic artefacts were often deemed of lesser significance. Drawing on heritage laws, taxonomies (such as object inventories and classifications within the Imperial

1 Artan 2011.

2 Eldem 2025.

Museum), the agency of key heritage actors, and contemporary travel literature, Uzun maps the fluid meanings and values attached to heritage and the ways in which Ottoman identity(ies) became entwined with it.

Building on the collecting practices discussed in Aldemir's article and the institutional history examined by Uzun, Nilay Özlü turns to the transformation of Topkapı Sarayı from an Ottoman imperial residence into a museum, with a particular focus on three pavilions: the Fatih Pavilion, the Çinili Köşk, and the Privy Chamber. Bringing together the performative and symbolic functions of these spaces, Özlü introduces the concept of 'proto-museal institutions' to highlight the dynamic processes of heritage-making in the Ottoman Empire. She interprets the accumulation of objects in the Fatih Pavilion as potentially constituting a 'private Wunderkammer of Mehmed II' (r. 1444–1446, 1451–1481), but stresses that Ottoman imperial collecting strategies were distinct in that many objects retained ceremonial or practical functions, often used by successive rulers. The sacred relics collection, for instance, was closely tied to the empire's territorial expansion and to the transfer of the emblems of the Caliphate to the Ottoman dynasty. Özlü traces the changing contexts in which these objects were engaged: from being part of the Sultan's living quarters, to relocation into a dedicated site for worship and political display, to their inclusion in public processions from the newer palaces of Dolmabahçe or Yıldız back to the ancestral seat of Topkapı.

Her paper provides the crucial link between pre-Westernization collecting practices, deeply intertwined with political representation and dynastic legitimacy, and the transformation of spaces like the Çinili Köşk into sites for experimenting with Western display standards and taxonomies. This process involved archaeologists such as Philipp Anton Dethier and Salomon Reinach. As Özlü observes, 'these three collections manifested diverse narratives, they were open to distinct audiences, and each adopted different display strategies, communicating distinct discourses of power, tradition, heritage, and modernity.'

Filling a gap in the study of private collectors during the late Ottoman Empire to early Republican transitional period, and especially focusing on women collectors, Merve Uca's article brings to light previously unpublished and little-known materials about the collecting practices of Sadberk Koç. Uca deftly addresses the political backdrop that shaped both Sadberk Koç's life and her choice of objects, highlighting the expected social roles for women at the time. Political scientist Gizem Zencirci has argued that Sadberk Hanım's husband, Vehbi Koç, played a crucial role in how private foundations came to be seen as partners of the state: 'During the 1960s, vakıfs were expected to support the state's pursuit of economic development by focusing their philanthropic investments on domains such as health, education, and cultural arts.'³

Engaging with this particular private collection also provides a valuable opportunity to explore the reference institutions that shaped public and private heritage initiatives in the late Ottoman Empire and early Republican era. For example, the South Kensington Museum served as a model for both Osman Hamdi Bey, who envisioned an

3 Zencirci 2015, 543.

arts and crafts museum for Islamic artefacts, and Antonis Benakis, the founder of the Benaki Museum. The Benaki Museum, in turn, became a revelation for Sadberk Koç during her travels, particularly because of its Ottoman-era textiles and metalwork, many of which can be traced back to the Asia Minor population exchange. Uca's approach to collecting practices is sensitive not only to these institutional influences but also to the complex relationship between Sadberk's agency as a woman in this transitional period and the contents of her collection. The Sadberk Hanim Museum explores how objects marked different rites of passage in a woman's life, such as items associated with marriage ceremonies, ritual visits to the hammam, or the circumcision of sons.

Similarly, the private collection of Dimitrie Papazoglu, a figure often regarded as a dilettante in Romanian scholarship and marginal in international academia, presents another case study of private and public entanglement in heritage practices. Additionally, Papazoglu is among the few private collectors to include Islamic and Ottoman era objects among Greek and Roman antiquities, in a collection assembled within the complex transitional period of the Danubian Principalities to a nation state. The complexity of his heritage strategies included the publication of a catalogue of his collection. Papazoglu intended for the catalogue to serve as a tool for knowledge production, and of self-branding as a man of heritage. Consequently, the catalogue facilitates an improved understanding of the agency of a collector in a region that was actively in the process of gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire, in collecting Islamic and Ottoman era objects. To what extent can Papazoglu's collecting practices be seen through Yannis Hamilakis's concept of indigenous archaeologies, given that his (self)identities operated on an inter-imperial level with shifting allegiances? What does it mean that Papazoglu categorized Islamic and Ottoman artefacts as 'Oriental rarities,' and what does this reveal about art historiographical discourses on Islamic art? Dimitrie Papazoglu emerges as a fascinating case study of transitional, inter-imperial, and Westernizing practices in collecting and heritage institutionalization, especially in the marginalized region of Southeast Europe under Ottoman rule.

The interplay between artefacts and the politics of heritage as a tool of soft power is especially significant in the complex context of early Republican Turkey, as the United States assumed a role in 'civilizing' the Middle East. Zeynep Simavi's article, focusing on the 1950s, weaves together cultural diplomacy, knowledge production, and exhibition history to unravel how Ottoman and Turkish art was displayed, categorized, and sometimes reclassified. Simavi highlights the crucial dynamics between the establishment of Islamic art area studies at universities like the University of Michigan (where Mehmet Ağa Oğlu taught in 1935), Princeton, and Harvard, and the history of exhibiting Islamic art in the U.S., what she terms 'the groundwork for Islamic art history.' She shows how these narratives shaped taxonomies that distinguished Ottoman-era art from Republican and even pre-Ottoman (Selçuk) artefacts.

Through detailed analyses of two case-study exhibitions, the 1954 show at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, which complemented a course at Harvard, and a planned traveling exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Simavi reveals a significant nexus in heritage politics surrounding the collection and display of Islamic art. Moreover, drawing on previously unknown archival materials, the article makes a major contribution

to understanding the circulation and politics of Islamic art heritage, including how loan policies, tied to cultural diplomacy and political contexts, led to delays or even cancellations of exhibitions (see also the Bulgarian traveling project for the Louvre, cancelled in 2020).

This special edition aims to further the scholarship on the variety of heritage practices emerging in late Ottoman Empire and its successor states by focusing on the particularities of case studies. This approach could prove productive in understanding the object and building biographies by situating them in the complex transitional contexts they emerge in, in tandem with the agency of the persons involved in their collection, curation, display, research. Moreover, it engages with how heritage practices are embedded in processes of art historiographical discourse and how they shape and are shaped by institutional structures.

Bibliography

Artan, Tülay. 2011. '18th century Ottoman princesses as collectors: Chinese and European porcelains in the Topkapı Palace Museum'. *Ars Orientalis (Globalizing Cultures: Art and Mobility in the Eighteenth Century)*. 39. 113–146.

Eldem, Edhem. 2025. 'The Ottoman Empire and Turkey Facing the West'. *The Ottoman Empire and Turkey Facing the West*. Transl. Liz Libbrecht, Collège de France. URL: <https://doi.org/10.4000/142kh> (last accessed 25 July 2025).

Zencirci, Gizem. 2015. 'From Property to Civil Society: the Historical Transformation of Vakif's in Modern Turkey (1923–2013)'. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 47. 533–554.