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Part One: Conserving the Treasured Wall Fabrics of the Turkish Ballroom 2002-2007



Julia at work in 2004

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Part one

In 2002 the Turkish government launched the renovation of the 1606 23rd Street, NW mansion; every detail both structural and decorative. It took four years. I served on a team consisting of an architect, engineer, designer, curator, conservators and appraisers evaluating the ballroom wall hangings. The main question was how much life remains? Could they be aesthetically and structurally restored to validate the

cost of conservation? Discussions included possible replacement with reproduction weavings from high scale design houses, to simulate the overall look but not historic techniques. Another option considered was having new 'embroideries' produced in Turkey. (Could that even be done?) Concerns about the structural integrity of the walls to prevent future damage were hammered out. Since the entire mansion was going to have a grand face lift, these textiles had to meet the same aesthetic bar. Otherwise, the inclination was for retirement and replacement with in a newer look, a 'proven' longer term wall treatment.

Nearly 100 years in situ had severely damaged the 515 square feet of wall fabrics. Visible from the floor, about 25% of the fabrics were in severe condition - badly stained, disintegrating, falling apart, and truly disfigured. Huge black stains around window frames marked where the silks were completely rotted. From a cursory examination on ladders, it was evident that the silks and backing fabrics were dry rotted, huge holes proliferated, the stains and encrustations had deteriorated the multiple layers of fabric in areas, the roof and window leaks had leached lime and plaster into the fabric - in short it was going to be a huge challenge!



Detail of stains

As a conservator, I truly valued the historic importance of the fabrics. If they were retired, they would never be seen again. It was a long shot that money would be spent to reproduce them accurately. And while not fully proven, I believe they are original to the house and date to circa 1880-1900. In fact, the wall fabrics have not been definitively dated. (No written records were found.) One appraiser in 2002 concluded that they were a mid-century Ottoman style of embroidery and wall covering. While we can conclude that they were installed in situ circa 1914, they could have been cannibalized and cut from earlier 19th century wall coverings from Turkey. Since architect George Totten had lived and worked in Turkey, it is not inconceivable that he purchased these specifically for the ballroom. They are an extraordinary complex technique of appliqué of silk sateen cutouts (think Matisse) on top of contrasting silk sateen ground, with each large motif outlined with a cording that was stitched and glued on. The pattern, an architectural niche containing a tall bulbous 'vase' shapes, alternates the red and gold silk, so the eye moves along as if following a series of decorative windows. Within each 'vase' or 'tree of life' elaborate floral bouquets are embroidered in blues, pinks, yellows and reds. More than 12 genus correct floral bouquets were identified throughout the fabrics. In spite of the blackened stains, holes and losses, the fabrics were definitely worth preserving.



Inserting silk panels

It was also evident that the wall fabrics had previous repairs and restorations. There were many fine elegant stitch repairs, that may date back to the 1800s, depending on the original date of the fabrics. Coarser darnings and glue repairs were obviously later. Laid over most of the panels, and stitched

like large billowing pillow-cases, was a dark brown silk crepe line (sheer silk) that was hanging in crispy tatters. This campaign was probably executed in the 1960s or early 1970s, in an effort to hold in place all the falling bits. This technique of 'overlay' is still employed by textile conservators. In fact, it was employed in the new 2003 treatment, but with a different material. Silk crepe line is very fragile and usually more short-lived than the artifact. Most 30 year old crepe line treatments have failed, unless they have not been exposed. Unfortunately, no previous treatment documents were available from the Embassy or other partners. My work was entirely deductive.

In the initial stages of conservation research, we took down one smaller panel for examination and analysis. This permitted deconstruction and analysis of the entire construction, techniques and fabrics/materials.



De-installing panels in 2003

Some of the panels were hung with curtain rings at 6" intervals. This is similar to the technique used to hang large architectural banners in Turkey and frequently used to hang large textiles and tapestries until the 1970s (until Velcro came onto the market). Traditionally a string was woven through the rings so that the long hangings could be unfurled and hooked up easily. Construction and historic research revealed that the wall coverings are surely related and descended from an earlier Ottoman style of architectural tent hanging. Professor Dr. Nurhan Atasoy has published extensively on Ottoman Imperial Tents. While these hangings are surely not 16th - 18th century, they derive from the tradition of the interior tent decoration, in both design and construction.

Tents were used for military campaigns, state ceremonies, outings, personal ceremonies, daily housing, and of course by tribal groups. The Ottoman army had extensive tents, elaborately decorated to project power, prestige and comfort. The walls of the tents were formed by rectangular textile panels sewn together, and the number of panels depended on the size of the tent. They were used to recreate tiled panels in a room or pavilion. (Atasoy) Depending on rank, the tent had various degrees of decoration. Some were richly encrusted, with silks, and sparkling threads and embossed leather.

Atasoy, Nurhan. "Otag-I Humanyan: The Ottoman Imperial Tent Complex, Aygaz", Istanbul, 2000.

Atasoy, Nurhan. "The Ottoman Tent", www.turkishculture.org

Part two of this series will resume tomorrow on this blog.

Julia M. Brennan graduated from ARCA's International Art Crime Studies program in 2009.

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