

Two Ottoman Spoons

Luise Mahler

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Professor Ülkü Ü. Bates and Stefano Carboni, Curator and Chief Administrator of the Islamic Art Department, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

One of the most curious objects to incorporate fragments of Islamic culture in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York today is an Ottoman coin spoon [Fig. 1], which was manufactured in Istanbul some time during the second half of the nineteenth century. In and of themselves, coin spoons from this period are fairly common. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine a precise provenance for these implements. For example, while most coins show a date, “designs and ideas flowed freely from one country to another” according to Rainwater and Felger.¹ In the case of the Metropolitan’s Ottoman coin spoon, the former owner declared the piece to be Swedish and from the eighteenth century. However, current scholars now consider this attribution random, and likely due to the recent decollation of coin spoons in general.² Fortunately, another Ottoman spoon in the collection of the Metropolitan—one which does not incorporate a coin but rather carries French-style ornamentation—is helpful in determining the function and distribution of the Ottoman coin spoon.

In 1897, the wife of the renowned American art dealer Samuel Putnam Avery, Mary Ann Ogden, donated both spoons together with two hundred and ninety eight others to the Metropolitan. Shortly after the collection was obtained, the museum published a corresponding catalogue in which the authors, John Henry Buck and Mrs. S. P. Avery, proposed a broad classification for the objects, based upon their supposed geographical and chronological origin [Fig. 2].³ According to the catalogue, the collection was gathered between 1867 and 1890 from a variety of sources, including *bric-à-brac* shops, the universal

¹ Rainwater, Dorothy T. and Donna H. Felger. *A collector’s guide to spoons around the world* (Hanover, Pennsylvania: Everybodys Press, 1976), p. vii.

² See catalogue entries in Rainwater and Felger 1976, and Bosco, Paul J. *The Marcia Ann & Dennis Forgue Collection of Coin Spoons, Monday, Nov. 20* (New York: Auction 22 Paul J. Bosco Manhattan Art & Antiques Center, 2000). The auction catalogue highlights a continuing appreciation for coin spoons although the peak around 1900 has long passed.

³ Avery, Mary A. Ogden and John Henry Buck. *Catalogue of the Collection of Spoons made by Mrs. S. P. Avery 1867-1890* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1908).

exhibitions in Paris and Vienna, and auction sales of private collections in several European cities.⁴ It is known that Mrs. S. P. Avery also accompanied her husband on his annual summer art-buying trips to Europe in 1871, 1876, and 1882. While Mr. Avery's diaries do not disclose any purchase of spoons, they do reveal that "the curiosities and decorative objects drew as many clients as the paintings"⁵ to his art dealing business. To be sure, collector's items such as spoons traveled easily, and universal exhibitions fascinated millions in the second half of the nineteenth century. Consequently, the art of collecting souvenirs flourished and became a respected niche in the arts-and-antiques market.⁶

Having the dimensions of a small coffee spoon, the delicately proportioned Ottoman coin spoon weighs much more than it looks.⁷ This is because the object is comprised of two solid parts: the bowl and the handle. The bowl is molded from an Ottoman coin, which has been soldered straight onto a slender, twisted stem. This thin stem (or handle) widens towards its subtle baluster top, and conversely narrows towards its circular, concave receptacle. Additionally, the stem is slightly bent near the bowl, but this is probably the result of damage rather than an intentional element of the design. The baluster top (or finial) is crowned with a small round pit like the dot of the letter *I*. Spoons incorporating a baluster top were first introduced in 1560, but only examples from later periods have twisted stems and most of these have fig-shaped as opposed to circular bowls.⁸ Rainwater and Felger propose that these

⁴ Avery and Buck, 1908, p. 23.

⁵ Beaufort, Madeleine Fidell. "Introduction" In *Letters & Sketches: addressed to Samuel Putnam Avery, 1884-1899* by Ignacio Léon y Escosura; compiled, edited, and transcribed from manuscript by Madeleine Fidell Beaufort, Richard P. Welcher, and Jeanne K. Welcher (Ann Arbor: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 2004), p. xx.

⁶ Bosco, 2000, p. 2.

⁷ This spoon is number 205 of the Avery collection.

⁸ Rainwater and Felger, 1976, p. 11.

baluster-top spoons may have been salt spoons, which were used as early as the eighteenth century and whose rounder bowls were often made from antique coins.⁹

Because the coins used for these spoons were heated and bulged over a wooden mold to shape the circular bowl, their calligraphic inscriptions normally become numismatically irrecoverable. The text on both sides of the Ottoman coin spoon, however, is clearly legible. This strongly suggests that the craftsman handled the object with care, as he wanted to ensure that the calligraphy could be read and identified as Ottoman. The coin, from which the bowl of the spoon is made, was struck in the nineteenth year (A.H. 1242; A.D. 1827) of the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (r. A.H. 1223-1254; A.D. 1808/09-1839) in Konstantaniye (Istanbul) and is referred to as *Çifte Zolta* or *2-Zolta*. The numismatic scholar Cüneyt Ölçer clarifies that throughout the Byzantine Empire “coins bore the name Konstantaniye,” whereas “the name Istanbul was used on Ottoman coins only during the times of Mustafa III (r. A.H. 1171-1187; A.D. 1757-1773) and Selim III (r. A.H. 1204-1222; A.D. 1789-1807).”¹⁰ The *Çifte Zolta* or *2-Zolta* was minted in the third year of Mahmud II’s reign and again from the sixteenth year onwards, at which time their silver content was raised to sixty per cent.¹¹

When compared to the original design of the coinage described above, the spoon’s *Zolta* shows no later alterations such as additional mounts. The slight bend inwards at about ten degrees to the left on the front and at about ten degrees to the right on the back of the spoon’s bowl is a result of the metal being cut while bulged; physically, a break in the surface allowed the *Zolta* to be heated and shaped without collapsing. During the last step of the process, the ends of the cut were hammered on top of each other so that a small ridge of one-

⁹ Ibid. p. 91.

¹⁰ Ölçer, Cüneyt. *Sultan Mahmud II Zamanında Darp Edilen Osmanlı Madeni Paraları, Yenilik Basimevi* (Istanbul: 1970), p. 144, footnote 3.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 138.

millimeter thick silver accumulated [Fig. 3]. The entire spoon exhibits silver tarnishing, especially the inside of the bowl where black spots are visible [Fig.3]. Jem Sultan points out that the coinage produced during the reign of Mahmud II became dull throughout the years due to silver wash and the impurity of the silver then in use.¹² The tarnished silver of the Ottoman coin spoon displays a slightly golden, brass-like shimmer, which appears evenly across the surface. It is nonetheless challenging to differentiate between the overall tarnishing and the luster of the parcel-gilt.

Because the greatest number of coins were issued during the reign of Mahmud II, it is at this time that one finds the broadest variety in calligraphy and ornamental design.¹³ According to art historians Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, Mahmud II's "epigraphic coin remained characteristic of virtually all Islamic coinage to modern times."¹⁴ The Arabic inscriptions on the *Zolta* are in *thuluth* script and run along both sides of the central part of the coin in almost straight lines [Fig. 4]. Four ornamental bands, including the scalloped rim, encircle the inscriptions. The most central band has a geometric and vegetal design, which is pursued by a band with a flowing star-shaped design common to Islamic metalwork. Furthermore, this band is separated from the rim with a plain circular line. While the Ottoman coin spoon's bowl still exhibits all of the above characteristics, the *Zolta*'s obverse and reverse sides are flipped. This is likely the case because the maker intended first and foremost for the beholder to read the praise of the Ottoman dynasty on the coin's reverse:

¹² Sultan, Jem. *Coins of the Ottoman Empire and The Turkish Republic*, Vol. 1 (Thousand Oaks, California: B & R Publishers, 1977), p. 300.

¹³ Ölçer, 1970, p. 131; Sultan, 1977, p. 300.

¹⁴ Blair, Sheila, and Jonathan Bloom. "Arts and Architecture." In *The Oxford History of Islam* ed. J. L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 223-24.

“The Sultan of the two lands
and the Ruler of the two seas
Sultan son of
the Sultan”

سلطان البرين
و خاقان البحرين
السلطان ابن ١٩
السلطان

It may have also been an aesthetic decision to flip the coin, since the appearance of the calligraphy on the reverse is more extraordinarily balanced than on the obverse. Taken together, the craftsman’s effort and the coin’s idiom suggest that the coin spoon was meant to commemorate the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923) first and foremost, while serving as a fashionable commodity. Had the principal goal been to celebrate Sultan Mahmud II, the craftsman could have chosen one of the many coins that carry the sultan’s *tughra* (or seal), or even the obverse of the *Zolta*, which mentions the sultan’s name in an honorable manner. In this case, however, the sultan’s name, and presumably the minting date A.H.1223 (A.D.1808/09) are revealed only if the Ottoman coin spoon is turned over:

“Sultan
Mahmud Son of Abdul-Hamid Khan
May his Reign Last, Minted in
Constantinople
1223”¹⁵

السلطان
محمود بن عبد الحميد خان
دام ملكه ضرب في
قسطنطينية
١٢٢٣

The small number ‘19’ on the left of the third line on the reverse becomes noteworthy because it indicates that the coin was minted not in A.H.1223 (A.D.1808/09), but in the nineteenth year of Mahmud II’s reign. The date A.H.1223 on the obverse of the *Zolta* refers merely to the regnal year the coin was issued.¹⁶

The most outstanding details of all are the foliated ornaments of the *thuluth* script that frame the *Zolta*’s inscriptions as seen in **Fig. 4**. This is because these ornaments feature

¹⁵ All translations from Arabic into English by Taoufiq Ben-Amor, Columbia University, New York.

¹⁶ Sultan, 1977, p. 302.

stylized flowers resembling the shape of tulips, which were especially admired during the Tulip Period identified with the reign of Sultan Ahmed III (r. A.H. 1115-1142/43; A.D.1703-1730). The fluid style of the *thuluth* script also allowed for parts of the calligraphic inscriptions to form embellished words. For example, the elongated line in the lower fraction of the *Zolta*'s obverse represents the preposition 'in' in Arabic. Thus, while the style of the *Zolta* supported the official character of the Ottoman coin spoon, the *thuluth* script's foliated ornaments and fluid design satisfied a prevailing aesthetic favored by the craftsman as well as the customer. Moreover, when chosen for the Ottoman coin spoon, the aesthetic value of the *Zolta* obviously surpassed its monetary value; alternatively, the coin could have been melted and re-molded into other kinds of precious metalwork.

While reminiscent of certain majestic glory, the Ottoman coin spoon's beauty is not flawless. The spoon's bowl has been attached to the twisted stem a bit off center so that the inscriptions of the coin seem to lift upwards to the right. Additionally, the only other inscribed section, a few *thuluth*-style letters on the baluster top, is illegible [Fig. 5]. Being that these illegible letters are identifiable as Arabic inscriptions, it is very plausible that someone who knew Arabic was the creator of this Ottoman coin spoon. As mentioned before, the former owner and donor, Mrs. S. P. Avery, believed that the spoon was Swedish. This may be because she bought the spoon when visiting the national section of Sweden in one of the universal exhibitions in Europe. Mrs. S. P. Avery may not have been aware that Sweden had diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire since the mid-seventeenth century, and that small objects could have traveled easily between the two nations. Nevertheless, due to the identification of the few illegible letters and the repetition of the *thuluth* script on the baluster

top, one is encouraged to assume that the Ottoman coin spoon was made in an Arab land or in what is now Turkey.

The pristine condition of the implement indicates that the Ottoman coin spoon was always treated with extreme care. The condition of the coin and the short period between the purchase of the Ottoman coin spoon and the coin's minting date also suggest that the implement was assembled shortly after the late 1820s. Furthermore, the inspection of different coin spoons from diverse places demonstrates that these implements were especially fashionable from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century.¹⁷ Still, considering that the minting date of the *Zolta* and the production date of the Ottoman coin spoon do not necessarily correspond makes it difficult to reach a definite estimation. While a recent auction catalogue points out that coin spoons "usually do not pre-date 1860,"¹⁸ Rainwater and Felger assert that such chronological classification appears hasty considering examples of spoons with coins dating back as early as 1740.¹⁹ To be sure, the amount of coin spoons preserved from the nineteenth century signals that they were *en vogue* around the world. Taking into account that the production of coin spoons was reasonably easy, one can only imagine how many of them were made during the period of roughly 200 years. The coins used would generally display some decoration and their shape was amenable to forming the bowl of a spoon, whether dished or molded. In sum, the design and preservation status of the Ottoman coin spoon leads one to propose that the implement mainly functioned as a collector's item or gift. Comparing it to the second Ottoman spoon in the Metropolitan's collection will further help illuminate its function and distribution.

¹⁷ See catalogue entries in Rainwater and Felger, 1976.

¹⁸ Bosco, 2000, p. 3.

¹⁹ See, for example, the Austrian coin spoon in Rainwater and Felger, 1976, p. 230.

Unlike the Ottoman coin spoon, the second spoon once part of Mrs. S. P. Avery's lavish collection incorporates French-style ornamentation [Fig. 6 and Fig. 7]. This silver spoon, number twenty-nine, is remarkable because of the sultan's *tughra* (or seal) stamped on the upper side of the handle, the small three-dimensional figures mounted on top of the flattened stem, and the ornamentation toward the tongue. The implement features a contemporary, rather common style, with a plain egg-shaped bowl that does not integrate a coin. The small figures are fashioned to resemble French symbols, including the Napoleonic eagle, which is imitated by a miniature statue of a bird with spread wings located at the end of the stem. As is known, the icon of an eagle was generally attached to the wooden staff that carried the regimental flag of General Napoleon Bonaparte in battle. A vegetal figure sitting closer toward the spoon's bowl also matches a French military symbol. Together with the eagle figure, this medal of honor refers to a foreign imperial style greatly admired by the Ottomans.

This spoon, manufactured in Ottoman Turkey in a Western European fashion, thus imported French imperial style to the tables of Ottoman households. It is known that beginning with the reform program of Mahmud II, rulers in the Ottoman Empire increasingly aspired to develop political and societal structures along European models, in particular the French. The imperial palace and Ottoman upper class were the first to perceive European fashion as something modern, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century elements of Western life-styles had entered a significant number of wealthy Ottoman households.²⁰ Mahmud II, for example, wore Western clothing and had his portrait displayed in

²⁰ Duben, Alan, and Cem Behar. *Istanbul households: Marriage, family and fertility 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 202.

governmental offices,²¹ and his successor Sultan Abdülmecid (r. A.H. 1255-1277/78; A.D. 1839-1861) already “spoke some French, played the piano, liked Western music and theatre and even read illustrated magazines in French.”²² However, the changes started by Mahmud II were aimed at establishing new societal structures rather than adopting already existing models.²³ That is to say, the transformation process that took place in the Ottoman Empire during this period was characterized by a synthesis of cultural modes and not by cut-and-paste actions.²⁴

It was also a common procedure among rulers to borrow regal symbols of established powers for their own imperial representations in order to claim either affinity with or supremacy over the other culture. During the nineteenth century, while European intellectual and upper class circles experienced a renewed appreciation for the Eastern lands, Ottoman imperial powers developed an admiration for Western ideas, witnessed the growth of a middle class, and experienced the beginning of mass production. Furthermore, it is remarkable that—of all other possible objects—spoons, in addition to functionality, were chosen on the basis of social status to represent an affiliation with particular imperial powers such as Napoleonic France. Two reasons seemed to have played a major role. First, spoons were the most common household implements in the traditional Ottoman home during this period.²⁵ Second, they also were objects that could have been acquired by virtually anybody. Silver spoons, however, were modest luxury items and, although not made of gold, one can assume that they were highly valued.

²¹ Ölçer, 1970, p. 135.

²² Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar qtd. in Duben and Behar, 1991, p. 202.

²³ Voll, John O. “Foundations for Renewal and Reform.” In *The Oxford History of Islam* ed. J. L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 526.

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 201-14.

²⁵ Duben and Behar, 1991, p. 206.

The juxtaposition of the Ottoman coin spoon and the spoon with French-style ornamentation makes for an interesting analysis. Even though these two spoons are very different in design, they circulated at roughly the same time in the Ottoman Empire. The French-style ornamentation featured in the second spoon was possibly used by Ottoman craftsmen as a symbol of fashion during a period of growing Westernization and European imperial domination in Islamic lands. It seems plausible to presume that, at a time when Western European table manners and dining habits were perceived as being *en vogue* in the Ottoman Empire, culinary implements adopted a French style. Given this, the Ottoman coin spoon is so fascinating precisely because it carried the art of calligraphy further westward, thus preserving a tradition from the Umayyad period (661–750), when the first Islamic coins were struck. These two spoons also symbolize a period of mutual cultural interest between Western and Islamic lands, even though they were made in the same place. Finally, it is significant to note that these two spoons, despite their aesthetic differences, circulated in the Ottoman Empire at the same time. While Western European and American collectors were primarily attracted by the aesthetics of the spoons, the wealthy local Ottoman was mostly concerned with the traditional meaning of the decorations and their commemorative value. Although relatively little scholarly work has been done on Ottoman spoon manufacturing in the nineteenth century, one may conclude that the use of a precious coin or extravagant decoration led art buyers from the West and East to appreciate the embellished spoons as exquisite versions of everyday utensils.

Nonetheless, the incorporation of foreign styles extends beyond Ottoman culinary utensils to include architecture, dress, and other artifacts of the period. A curious question to ask is whether the imperial ruler, who aspired to stately reforms along European models,

thought it would help if relevant symbols would be incorporated into the daily routine of his subjects. In other words, did an Ottoman spoon with French-style ornamentation function as a symbol to support the establishment of new societal structures along European ideals, or did a spoon fashioned with an older coin celebrate long-cherished traditions. The presentation of spoons as gifts has a long history, as does the use of coins and imperial ornamentation within jewelry.²⁶ In the case of the Metropolitan's coin spoon, the incorporated coin was put there for a special reason; the *Zolta* was issued by one of the predecessors to Ottoman modernization. Furthermore, the decision to flip the coin before it was attached to the spoon's stem leads one to believe that the spoon functioned to commemorate the Ottoman Empire in general rather than the particular reign of Mahmud II, as well as serve as a fashionable and collectable object. Interestingly, the second Ottoman spoon also references the empire through the combination of French-style ornamentation and the stamped *thugra*. Taken together, these two spoons, collected by Mrs. S. P. Avery, beautifully denote the exchange between the Western and Eastern lands during the period.

²⁶ Rainwater and Felger, 1976, p. 3.

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