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The Collections of the 'Azm Palace in Damascus:

Men's costume and embroidery

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From the outside the 'Azm Palace is almost indiscernible amongst a maze of souqs, restaurants, offices and homes in the old city in Damascus. Much more than a building, it is an icon of the political and cultural heritage of the Syrian people. Constructed in 1749 by As'ad Pasha Al 'Azm, the Syrian governor appointed by the Ottoman court, the palace took three years to build, and occupied the majority of the craftsmen from the guilds in Damascus and the united provinces of Sidon, Tripoli and Hama. The palace itself is a juxtaposition of the traditional oriental customs and the pervasive influence of the west via the Ottoman authorities. Though the building has changed hands throughout the centuries, it became a holding of the Syrian government in 1953 and now houses the National Museum of Arts and Crafts which showcases, amongst treasures in brass, wood and glass, a vast collection of Middle Eastern textiles.¹

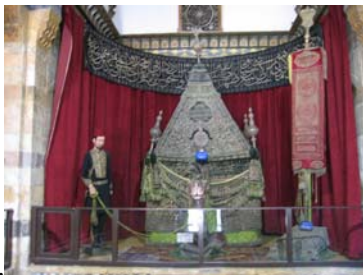
Current scholarship in the arts and crafts of the Middle East is scant. Studies on textiles from the region are usually confined to the woven silks and tapestries created in Turkey, ignoring the work done in the southern Arabian provinces. Outside of the collections at the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul and tapestries in the permanent collections of European museums, little is known about the scope of Middle Eastern textiles. The collections in the 'Azm palace represent collections from modern tribal costume to the styles of the imperial period during which the palace was constructed. Unfortunately, even in Damascus there is little information about the original textiles and their manufacture. Museums such as the 'Azm offer little explanation and what exists is in a mixture of Arabic, French and English. The long-term goal of this project and mentor are to collect the information necessary to educate museum patrons, most of whom are local Syrians, as to what exactly is on display in the palace. The work of the first trip was primarily to catalogue the collections, review the information about the collections which exists at the museum, and to photograph the display space so that more information can be gathered about the history of the works at the museum.

My research focused on the men's costuming in the collection of the 'Azm palace. A room labeled "the *haji* room" by museum staff displays some of the finest gold embroidery in the museum (fig.1). Among these pieces is a western military-type men's suit in black, embroidered with gold thread probably from the early 19th century (fig. 2, 5). Alongside the suit are also displayed two banners and baldachin that were part of the departure ceremonies (fig. 3, 4, 6). The style of the suit and the embroidery on the banners and baldachin are all closely related and reflect the western influence of the Ottoman court as well as traditional Syrian-Arab styles related to the holy rite of the *haji*. Despite his preference for the European style of dress and decoration, the governor's position also demanded piety and respect for Islamic traditionalism. Pilgrims amassed in Damascus before embarking on a dangerous journey to Mecca, thus it was the governor of Damascus' duty as a deputy of the Ottoman sultan to insure safe passage to

¹ Francois Daulte, "Le palais Azem a Damas," *L'Oeil* 337 (1983): 62.

Mecca. Banners and the baldachin, or *mahmal*, announced the approach and arrival of the Ottoman pilgrims to Mecca and were created in the finest courtly style, gold embroidery on velvet. The ‘Azms saw the already strenuous journey become a treacherous ordeal as the Wahabist sects controlling the religious sites in the Saudi Arabian desert began to refuse the entrance into the holy sites. For a few years the *hajj* from Damascus was stopped all together, and then only allowed without the *mahmal*, the symbol of the Ottoman Empire and the Syrian governors.² To the ‘Azms the ceremonial embroidery for the *hajj* was a symbol of their current political power, their traditional Islamic roots and the possibility of westernization.

No one knows for certain the political origin of the ‘Azm family, but it is highly likely that they originally came to power as members of the military. Positions in the infantry allowed for a great deal of upward mobility, especially for provincial subjects not directly connected to the ruling Ottoman classes. However, once the ‘Azms, native Syrians, obtained their positions within the Ottoman regime, their loyalties aligned with those of the imperial court. Their taste in art, architecture and appearance were westernized, reflecting the close ties the Ottomans maintained with the European mainland. With their military heritage, the family created a satellite court in Damascus which, though it reflected the interests of the Ottomans, was nearly independent politically, economically and militarily. The construction of the ‘Azm Palace by As’ad Pasha Al ‘Azm marked the height of the Syrian autonomy and may have even been seen as a threat by the Ottoman Sultan. In 1757 Sultan Mustafa made the decision to execute As’ad Pasha, despite the fact that the governor had enjoyed fourteen years of uninterrupted prosperity. The ‘Azm’s maintained a delicate relationship with the Ottomans, dependant upon these “patrons” to maintain power, they were also anxious to prove their independence. Echoes of this conflict are evident in the textiles, and the palace, they created.



1.



2.



3.



4.

Fig. 1. The main display of the *hajj* room in the ‘Azm Palace.

Fig. 2. The Governor’s military costume worn in during the ceremonial procession from the city.

Fig. 3. The Baldachino or mahmal which lead the *hajj*.

Fig. 4. Ottoman-style banner announcing the approach of the pilgrims.



5.



6.

Fig. 5. Detail of the cuff of the military *hajj* uniform of the Damascene governor.

Fig. 6. Detail of the mahmal.

² Dick Douwes. *The Ottomans in Syria: A History of Justice and Oppression* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 100-101.