

CHRISTIE'S

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6 PORTRAITS OF OTTOMAN SULTANS TO BE OFFERED

The fruits of an imperial initiative to create a definitive portrayal of the **House of Osman**



From left to right: Sultan Orhan, Sultan Bayezid I, Isa Celebi, Sultan Mehmed I, Sultan Selim I and Sultan Selim II, dating circa 1600 | estimate: GBP 800,000-1,200,000

London – The Art of the Islamic & Indian Worlds live auction on 28 October 2021 will offer a series of six portraits of Ottoman sultans, covering 250 years of history, from 1326, when Orhan became Sultan until Selim II, who passed away in 1574. The original series counted 14 portraits of which only one full set has survived and is today property of the Wittelsbach family and on exhibition in Würzburg.

The series of six paintings to be auctioned is the second largest set in existence – dating from circa 1600 and derives from the original set produced in Venice in 1579, at the instigation not, as one might presume, of a European patron, but of the Ottoman Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha (1506-1579).

On 28 June 1578 Sokollu Mehmed Pasha asked Venice's resident ambassador in Istanbul, Niccolò Barbarigo, for portraits of Ottoman sultans he heard were in Venice. Barbarigo demurred: he had no knowledge of a set of painted portraits. The Grand Vizier persisted and in November 1578 the Venetian Senate finally commissioned duplicates of these portraits, writing in January 1579 that they were being prepared, and confirming in September that they had been shipped. The paintings must have arrived in Istanbul in late September.

The 1570s was the decade when Veronese served as the Serenissima's official painter, receiving a host of commissions including monumental canvases for the administrative chambers of the Palazzo Ducale. He was the Venetian authorities' obvious candidate to fulfil the Ottomans' seemingly surprising request for a set of portraits of their own sultans.

These Sultan portraits exemplify some principal characteristics of Veronese's style: the three-quarter bust format which gives the pose dynamism and immediacy by showing more of the figure's face and tilting the head. And the textiles are given texture with the most luminous of colours, and the designs particularly of the gold and silver textiles are highly reminiscent of those used elsewhere by Veronese. Above all, each painting exhibits a characterisation and individuality that distinguish these paintings from any other Ottoman imperial portraits, reflecting Veronese's well-known gift for imbuing life and vivacity to his figures.



From left to right: Sultan Orhan, Sultan Bayezid I, Isa Celebi, Sultan Mehmed I, Sultan Selim I and Sultan Selim II

While Veronese is likely to have designed or given guidance on the design of the series, there are no surviving portraits from any of the known sets that can be attributed to his hand. There are remains of two, possibly three early sets in the Topkapı Palace Museum that on the creation of the museum in 1924 were found in the Imperial Treasury or in the Queen Mother's apartments, suggesting some of them may belong to the paintings sent in 1579.

It also strongly suggests that the two German sets – one in Munich and one from Landshut - derived from two slightly different models. In all likelihood one or both of those models was in Venice, and the German sets were produced there. A record of the 1579 commission was surely kept in Venice, and the majority of paintings in both sets are on a twill canvas, the weave favoured in 16th-century Venice. Two or more artists were involved in each of the two German sets: in the present set the portrait of Mehmed I was indisputably painted by a different hand from the other sultans.

The present set can be traced back to the collection of Count Gustav Adelman von Adelmansfelden (1858–1938), and was kept in castle Berg in Bavaria, until 1935.



It is not recorded how the Adelmänn's acquired the paintings, but the family had connections with the Ottomans. Konrad von Adelmänn published a tract on the Ottoman army in Augsburg in 1525. Gifts were the oil that greased the wheels of diplomacy in the medieval and early modern eras, and the Ottomans made numerous demands to the Venetians. But Sokollu Mehmed's request was no ordinary demand for items of fashion or curiosity or for portraits of past sultans. The Ottoman interest here was not in the paintings as an expression of Venetian art, but as visual documentation, for Sokollu Mehmed's request – which was the ultimate genesis of the present paintings – was part of a successful imperial initiative to create a definitive portrayal of the House of Osman (estimate GBP 800,000-1,200,000).

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