

Béla Rakovszky and the Import of Islamic Arts in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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ABSTRACT

During the turn of the 20th century, many Western scholars were busy at strictly defining and categorising the essentials of Persian, Arab, and Turkish national arts in formal terms. Some of them regarded these taxonomical investigations as an academic pursuit; for others such studies held a practical significance. Amidst these debates the prospect of Austro-Hungarian expansion towards the Balkans offered new perspectives. Art historians, orientalist, collectors, and diplomats began to apply the newly-established scholarly categories of the Persian, Arab and Turkish “schools” to the theretofore largely invisible artistic traditions of the Balkan countries. In parallel with the debates regarding the arts of Asia, loads of modern Islamic, chiefly Persian and Central Asian, artworks were acquired by various museums in Vienna and Budapest, especially during the 1890s, to be redistributed into regional centres between Prague and Sarajevo. In addition to theorists and antiquarians, there were more practical-minded participants of this discourse who set out for collecting expeditions to Iran and Central Asia to provide samples for craftspeople in the Balkans and enhance their crafts according to predetermined recommendations. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Central Asian mission of Baron Béla Rakovszky deserves attention. Fragmentary as they are, memories of his expedition may add to our picture of early Persian art scholarship in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and, moreover, they may enrich our perceptions of the ideological uses of Islamic art in the historical context of South-East European colonialism. In addition to enquiries into the impact of this collecting tour, this essay will introduce some newly-emerged documents and objects which can help us viewing the expedition from a wider perspective.

KEYWORDS

Bosnia and Herzegovina; Central Asia; collecting; historiography; Iran; Persia; Rakovszky, Béla,

Scientific terms in the humanities, such as ‘Islamic art’, are increasingly viewed in reference to the scholarly milieus in which they were coined instead of the phenomena they ought to categorise. Once thought to be self-referential and circumscribed by solid-looking definitions, these terms are now on the way to disintegrate into the fluid concepts which in fact they always have been. Yet, in the absence of a better set of paradigms, they are still here to be applied; and it is under these considerations that Islamic art in Bosnia and Herzegovina is to be understood.

In the early years of Austro-Hungarian occupation and even at the time of the establishment of the Regional Museum of Sarajevo (1888), ‘Islamic art’ as a term was in its formative phase. Besides the then-current adjectives denoting the arts of Islam, including Muhammadan, Saracene, and Mauresque, the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish “schools” of art were also often referred to, usually very broadly and sometimes interchangeably. Despite the discrepancies, a general strive for a strict and formalised characterisation of the essentials of Persian, Arab, and Turkish national arts was observable in wider academic circles and in individual scholarly investigations alike. Some scholars regarded these taxonomical investigations as an academic pursuit; for others such studies held a practical significance. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire, these activities were epitomised by the “Orient oder Rom” debate, although the latter was merely the most resounding clash of a much more complicated dispute in which the different constituents of the Monarchy interpreted “East” and “West” in wholly different ways. Amidst these debates the prospect of Austro-Hungarian expansion towards Bosnia and Herzegovina offered new perspectives. Art historians, orientalists, collectors, and

diplomats began to apply the newly-established scholarly categories of the Persian, Arab and Turkish “schools”, as well as the emerging “Islamitic style”, to the theretofore largely invisible artistic traditions of the Balkan Muslims and aimed to situate them amidst these definitions. In parallel with the debates regarding the arts of Asia, loads of classical and modern Islamic, chiefly Persian and Central Asian, artworks were acquired by various museums in Vienna and Budapest, especially during the 1890s, to be redistributed into regional centres between Prague and Sarajevo. In addition to theorists and antiquarians, there were more practical-minded participants of this discourse who set out for collecting expeditions to Iran and Central Asia to provide samples for craftspeople in the Balkans and enhance their crafts according to predetermined recommendations. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Central Asian mission of Baron Béla Rakovszky (1860-1916, fig. 1) deserves particular attention. In spite of previous research undertaken by the present author, the day-to-day events of the expedition – including most crucially the mechanisms of selection, purchase, and shipment of objects – are still unclear.¹ Yet the material which Rakovszky transferred from Asia to the Regional Museum remains one of the largest single groups of Islamic artefacts ever to have entered Bosnia and Herzegovina, and perhaps the largest documented group of non-locally made Islamic art in the country, excluding manuscripts.

1 I am indebted to Marica Popić-Filipović for enabling my research at the Regional Museum, Sarajevo, back in 2009. For more thorough accounts of the current subject, see Iván Szántó: “Persian Art for the Balkans in Austro-Hungarian Cultural Policies”, in Yuka Kadoi and Iván Szántó (eds): *The Shaping of Persian Art. Collections and Interpretations of the Art of Islamic Iran and Central Asia*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 130-154; Iván Szántó: “Persian Metalwork in Bosnia: A Brief Introduction to the Objects and History of the Collection of the Regional Museum, Sarajevo”, in Ibolya Gerelyes and Maximilian Hartmuth (eds): *Ottoman Metalwork in the Balkans and Hungary*. Budapest: Hungarian National Museum, 2015, 191-202.

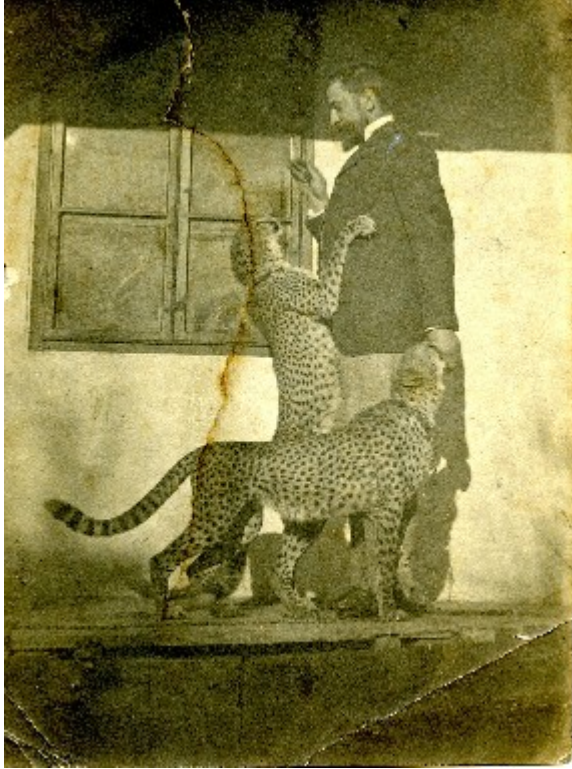


Fig. 1. Baron Béla Rakovszky in the company of his cheetahs. Hanság Museum, Mosonmagyaróvár, inv. no. 99.45.68.



Fig. 2. Fragment of a pile carpet, inscribed *numud tamam Mihdi az ruy-i niaz*, mid-17th century, Kirman, Eastern Iran, acquired by Béla Rakovszky in Mahan. Sarajevo, Regional Museum, inv. no. 1049. Photograph: Iván Szántó (2009).

Manuscripts, as well as ceramics, were not acquired by Rakovszky for Bosnia, who focused his attention on carpets and metalwork, the two branches of Islamic art which Austro-Hungarian economic strategists viewed as potential springboards for the industrial development of their new dominion. In addition to weaponry which was also respected by Bosnia's colonisers, even if only for reminding them of the failure of 'Oriental' warfare, carpets and metal crafts were singled out by the governor of Bosnia and the expedition's sponsor, Baron Benjámín Kállay (1839-1903), as having a potential for state investment. By far the best-known segment of the Rakovszky collection are the fragments of Safavid rugs (dated 1047/1637), collectively but erroneously known as "the" Sarajevo carpet, which the collector obtained after long and heavy

bargaining in the Shrine of Shah Ni‘matullah Vali in Mahan, Kirman Province (South-east Iran, fig. 2). They are the only artefacts in the Sarajevo collection the acquisition circumstances of which we know, thanks to Lieutenant Percy Sykes (1867-1945) and his sister, Ella (1863-1939, joining Percy in Kirman between 1894 and 1896), who mention their encounters with the Baron in 1895 in their respective books.² Percy and Ella Sykes, together with Rakovszky, enjoyed the hospitality of Prince Abd al-Husayn Mirza Farmanfarma (1857-1939), the enlightened and energetic governor of Kirman. Rakovszky himself unfortunately did not add much more information to the British accounts of his own sojourn, let alone the planned book about Central Asian horsemanship he enthusiastically described to the Sykes at one of the dinners in Kirman. His ambitious book plans never seem to have realised. Enjoying adventure rather than recording it, Rakovszky was not a prolific writer and the little that he had put to writing – apart from his diplomatic dispatches to Vienna – remained in his desk. All what Rakovszky published about his collecting expedition is an impressionistic description of his journey from Mashhad through the Tabas oasis towards Kirman, written for a popular illustrated magazine.³ The carpets were to be purchased after his arrival in Kirman, while some of the metal objects he may have already obtained in Central Asia and/or Tehran and shipped to the consulate, being simply too heavy for carrying them during the arduous journey across Eastern Iran. During the Tabas tour, according to Rakovszky, the only metal objects were the personal drinking vessels of the passengers. Nevertheless, Ella Sykes mentions that Rakovszky was seeking “antiquities” in Kirman besides carpets, so the South-east Iranian provenance of some of the metal vessels in Sarajevo cannot be excluded; in which case they were probably shipped to Tehran with Prince Farmanfarma’s logistic assistance. However, it seems that in Kirman Rakovszky focused his interest on carpets,

2 Ella C. Sykes: *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle*. London: A. D. Innes, 1898, 70, 83-4; Percy M. Sykes: *Ten Thousand Miles in Persia or Eight Years in Iran*. London: Scribner, 1902, 149.

3 Béla Rakovszky: “Utazás az iráni nagy sósivatagban”, *Vasárnapi Ujság*, 44/33 (1897), 585-586.

and the fact that this pursuit was shared by Farmanfarma and the Sykes may have caused as much headache for him as it was helpful. But while Prince Farmanfarma set to establish a modern carpet industry in his province and Percy Sykes launched a carpet sales network from Kirman to the British Indian outpost of Quetta, Rakovszky's goal was, at the behest of Kállay, the purchase of old, pre-industrial carpets, to provide an "authentic" source for the new Bosnian looms, in sharp contrast to Farmanfarma's workshops. It is unclear whether the Mahan fragments were the only carpets he obtained in Kirman, yet we know that after his death some Persian carpets were inventoried in his Paris apartment.⁴ Moreover, we know a photograph from his bequest which is preserved in the Hanság Museum, Mosonmagyaróvár, Hungary, depicting a textile hanging (fig. 3). Additionally, there is a Kirman carpet in the Bishop's Palace in Vác, Hungary, dated 1310/1892 (fig. 4).⁵



4 Szántó 2013, 144-145, fn. 61.

5 I express my gratitude for H. E. Miklós Beer, Bishop of Vác, H. E. Lajos Varga, Deputy Bishop of Vác, for allowing me to carry out research in the Episcopal Residence, as well as Professor Éva M. Jeremiás who has drawn my attention to the carpet.

Fig. 3. Photograph of a carpet from the bequest of Béla Rakovszky. Hanság Museum, Mosonmagyaróvár, inv. no. 99.45.15.



Fig. 4. Knotted carpet dated 1310/1892, inscribed *sifarish-i 'Abd al-Husayn Mirza Salar-lashkar Farmanfarma*, Kirman, Eastern Iran. Episcopal Residence, Vác. Photograph: Iván Szántó (2017).

At the present state, it cannot be decided whether this unpublished rug was given to Bishop Konstantin Schuster (1886-1899) by Rakovszky or if it would be acquired by a later prelate. As its inscription reveals, it was “ordered by General ‘Abd al-Husayn Mirza Farmanfarma” who governed Kirman between July 1892 and June 1896. During his governorship, Prince Farmanfarma actively sought to revive the once-famous carpet industry of Kirman – as exemplified by the Sarajevo fragments – but deviated from classical designs and dyes in favour

of modern imagery and synthetic colours. This was hardly the “genuine” Persian art in search of which Rakovszky ventured so far. The Vác carpet reproduces a relief in Persepolis showing the procession of a zebu and a camel with their drivers.⁶ The relief was made accessible by a steel engraving by Monnin which was made after a drawing by Vernier (1841). It is not unlike that the Prince presented this carpet to Rakovszky as a token of their joint vision of a modern carpet industry. However, even if this was the case, Farmanfarma’s pictorial carpets did not meet the tastes of European carpet firms which strongly rejected “Occidental” tendencies in the contemporary art production of Persia. Thus, the Vác carpet could not find its way to Sarajevo where a “purely oriental” carpet industry was envisioned. It should be noted that this is not Prince Farmanfarma’s only trace in Austria-Hungary, for there is a unique manuscript written about his journeys in Kirman and Baluchistan in 1894, months before the arrival of Rakovszky, preserved in the National Library of Austria in Vienna.⁷ This erudite account is much more than a travelogue, consisting accurate information about the agriculture and industry in and around the province entrusted on him; in other words, he wrote what Rakovszky left as an unfulfilled promise.⁸

If the Sykes siblings and Prince Farmanfarma were helped shaping Rakovszky’s carpet-collecting strategy, he relied on other models for the metal objects. A major inspiration might have been the Russia-based Swiss industrialist Henri Moser (1844-1923) who established his vast collection of Central Asian objects during his travels in the region in the 1870s and 80s.

Through the Transylvanian aristocrat husband of his sister, Moser became a close friend of

6 For other late Qajar carpets depicting the monuments of ancient Persia, see Christie’s, Sale 11939 (Oriental Rugs and Carpets, 18 October, 2016, London), lot 75.

7 [Iraj Afshar (ed.):] ‘Abd al-Husayn Mirza Farmanfarma: *Musafiratnama-yi Kirman va Baluchistan (buluk-gardishi bi muddat-i si mah)* : 21 Jumada al-Saniya ta 25 Ramazan 1311 Qamari: nuskha-yi khatti-i Mixt 853 dar Kitabkhana-yi Milli-yi Utrish, (*Ganjina-yi khatirat va sijfarnamaha-yi Irani*, 20). Tehran: Asatir, 1383/2004.

8 Mansoureh Ettehadiieh: *The Lion of Persia. A Political Biography of Prince Farmān-Farmā*. Cambridge, MA: Ty Aur Press, 2012, 7-8.

Kállay and an advocate of Austria-Hungary's Bosnian expansion.⁹ This connection entitled him to represent Bosnia and Herzegovina at the International Exhibition of Brussels in 1897, and even to partly design the Bosnian pavilion in an Islamic style. Having already amassed one of the largest private collections of Islamic antiquities in Europe, he may well have suggested to forge a link between the venerable artistic traditions of Central Asia and the modern crafts of the Habsburg Orient. Moreover, on a more practical note, his unparalleled local knowledge in terms of sales networks and art dealers may also have been invaluable for Rakovszky, who had not been an avid collector during his diplomatic tenure in Tehran, hence he relied on expert advice before his return to the region for a collecting expedition. The connection is less evident, although may have been equally strong, between the Rakovszky expedition and the Central Asian collecting tour of Fredrik Robert Martin (1868-1933). Before having become one of the founders of European scholarship about Persian miniature painting, Martin had already collected, exhibited, and published about Islamic metalwork.¹⁰ His journey to Russian Caucasia and Central Asia undertaken between 1894 and 1896 provided the basis of Martin's pioneering Stockholm exhibition of "picturesque Oriental" industrial arts (1897).¹¹ Accompanied by lavish catalogues and other publications, the exhibition featured prominently metal objects, which were collected at the same time and in the same places as Rakovszky. Although these collections are far larger than that of Rakovszky, what distinguishes Moser's and Martin's collecting from Rakovszky's is the unique triangularity of the latter. Whereas Moser and Martin enriched their private collections which they would later donate to public museums in their own countries, the project of Kállay and Rakovszky was financed from Vienna and Budapest, dispatched to Central Asia

9 Henri Moser: *L'Orient inédit: A travers la Bosnie et Herzegovine*. Paris, 1895; see also Erika Palenzona-Djalili: "Business, Diplomacy and Arts: Two Swiss Collectors of Persian Art", in Iván Szántó and Yuka Kadoi (eds): *The Reshaping of Persian Art*. Vienna: forthcoming.

10 E.g., Fredrik Robert Martin: "Orientalisk Konstindustri", *Ord och bild*, 7 (1897), 443-450.

11 See Håkan Wahlquist: "F. R. Martin. Orientalist, konstvetare, konstsamlare och konsthandlare", in Wilhelm Östberg (ed.): *Med världen i kappsäcken. Samlingarnas väg till Etnografiska museet*. Stockholm, 2002, 218-230.

and Iran, and supplied artworks to a third party, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through this project, the organisers aimed to integrate the newly-occupied Balkan lands into state economy while also keeping their – not physical but rather psychological – distance, and their outward attributes of a colony.

Rakovszky's Sarajevo holding also stands out with respect to its early date: preceded by a few notable collections of locally-collected metalworks, such as the abovementioned Moser collection, the Goupil collection in Paris, the Bobrinsky collection in St. Petersburg, or the Roinashvili collection in Tiflis, it was nevertheless formed before such important ensembles as the Sarre collection in Berlin, Friedrich Sarre (1865-1945) not having launched his first tour of Western Iran until 1897 and his Central Asian journey until 1898.



Fig. 5. Fredrik Robert Martin's collection of metalwork from Central Asia, Persia, and Egypt, Stockholm, 1897. After Wahlquist 2002, 227.



Fig. 6. Tinned copper cauldron acquired by Béla Rakovszky in 1895, possibly Eastern Iran. Sarajevo, Regional Museum, inv. no. 7201/III. Photograph: Iván Szántó, cf. Szántó 2015, fig. 1.

A typewritten document in German from the Rakovszky bequest in Mosonmagyaróvár (currently preserved in Győr), entitled “Benjamin von Kállay as the Creator of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Industrial Arts,” tells us about the motives which generated the expedition, and it is worth quoting in some detail.¹² The undated document may be datable to or around 1902, based on a reference to the twenty-year service of Kállay at the head of the Bosnian administration. Setting the keynote by considering local arts to have subsisted since Byzantine times as a pastiche (“Abklatsch”) of different styles, he goes on to attribute to the Ottoman occupation an input of “Islamic” motifs, further “corrupting” this already impure muddle. Only traditional arms production stood out of this supposed mediocrity. However, this all have changed under the

¹² Archives of Győr-Moson-Sopron County (Mosonmagyaróvár section, currently held in Győr), A22.

Kállay administration when a controlled import of European goods could commence. This made possible to not merely *reconstruct* Bosnian industrial arts using existing remnants, but painstakingly *recreate* it. Kállay “rightly recognised” the “prevalent Islamitic character” of local arts and decided to maintain and restore this character in its “purity”. To this end, he first established local workshops, and then, to supply and supervise the former, he also founded an authoritative arts and crafts bureau in Vienna, and initiated a campaign to bring the weapons-centred Bosnian industrial arts beyond its “half-barbarous” stage.¹³ At the same time, he summoned outstanding Viennese craftspeople to provide the bureau with high-quality prototypes. However, both Kállay and the wider audience soon realised something obvious that was difficult to put in words, namely that with all their “correctness” and mathematic perfection, these object “lacked soul”. Finally, in 1892, a display of the great Safavid carpets at the carpet exhibition in Vienna “hit a nail into his head”: this Persian style cannot be authentically reproduced by anyone but Persian artists. Therefore he quickly deployed a mission to Persia to engage such craftsmen and also to acquire, in large amounts if possible, antiquities from “Central Asia, Baluchistan, Kurdistan, Mesopotamia, Arabia, and Syria”. As a result of this expedition, “a rich collection of exemplary objects, including bronzes, etc., was obtained, and the Persian artist Mirza Muhammad ‘Ali Tabrizi employed in the workshop. The rugs which were acquired during the journey were donated to the weaving school of Sarajevo, while the vegetal dyes taken from Persia were subjected to chemical analysis.” The sample material, with the enormous variety of forms created by Persian artists, served as a model for Bosnian craftspeople, in both the metal and the textile workshops. When the products were exhibited, first at the Vienna bureau and the

13 For this office, see Diana Reynolds Cordileone: “Swords into Souvenirs: Bosnian Arts and Crafts under Habsburg Administration”, in Reinhard Johler, Christian Marchetti, and Monique Scheer (eds): *Doing Anthropology in Wartime and War Zones. World War I and the Cultural Sciences in Europe*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011, 169-188; Szántó 2013, 138-139.

Millennial Exhibition in Budapest (1896), and subsequently in major European cities, the audiences could hardly believe that the high-standard wares were made by Bosnians, were it not for a group of craftsmen invited by Kállay to manufacture the objects right on the spot, in front of the eyes of the visitors, using the Persian originals. Even the carpet dealers of the Istanbul bazar were impressed. Only the high prices were objected, but Kállay declared that in order to raise the standards above the usual mass production, the higher costs were an unavoidable necessity. This is just one of the results of Kállay's formidable activities which aims to "enlighten" the heterogeneous society of the "wildest Orient" where "fanaticism and anarchy" used to prevail, concludes the typewritten account.

As is well-known, the end of Austro-Hungarian rule a mere twenty years after this eulogy, buried these projects forever, although many of the workshops continued to produce under Yugoslav rule, too. Within the new, broader Southern Slav framework, the religious dimensions of arts and crafts were first downplayed, then – chiefly after the Second World War under the aegis of the non-aligned movement – utilised in the service of an internationalist cultural policy. Under these circumstances, the actual geographic origin of a given object lost its significance. A particularly good example for this approach is shown by Muhamed A. Karamehmedović's monograph on Bosnian-Herzegovinian metalwork.¹⁴ He distinguishes between Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim metalwork based on the confession of the metalworker and patron, and maintains that there was very little mutual influence between these schools until a growing "freedom of expression" began to assert itself among Bosnian-Herzegovinian craftspeople from the 18th century onwards. Formulating an essentialist view according to which there existed a paramount design culture throughout the lands of Islam, Karamehmedović does not mention Kállay, Rakovszky, and their expedition, yet he widely refers to the metal objects

14 Muhamed Karamehmedović: *Umjetnička obrada metala*. Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1980, passim.

which the mission brought to the Regional Museum. As a consequence, the provenance and general factual background of these objects have been obscured, their role limited to illustrate the formative power of Islamic art on the development of Mediaeval Islamic metal production in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This also means, however, that in one way the Kállay-Rakovszky project turned out to be more successful than its initiators would ever have dreamed: their late-19th-century imports from Persia and Central Asia were to retroactively influence Mediaeval Bosnian arts – at least this is what some 20th-century books wished their readers to believe.