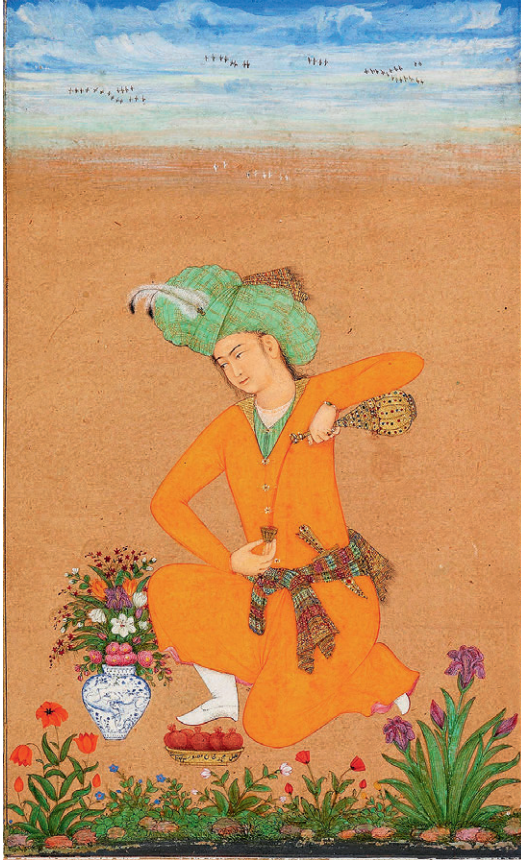


Where Have All the Tulips Gone?



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¹ Muhammad Khan, A Prince pouring wine (The variety of flowers on display includes tulips on the left as well as their bulbs), miniature painting, 1633–1634, British Library, Manuscript Collection, Dara Shikoh Album, Add.Or.3129, f. 21v. © The British Library Board, public domain.

Far, far away... One of the most interesting living objects that crossed the Mediterranean world on sometimes long and enchanted paths is the tulip, or “*lale*” as it was called in Turkish and Persian. The *lale* was as much a political emblem of the Ottoman expansion towards the East as it was an emblem of knowledge and cultural appropriation on the Habsburg-Dutch side, until it finally entered history as a symbol of economic greed and early capitalist failure. Thus, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the tulip returned to the same sultan’s court in Constantinople that had once conquered it, stylizing it into a symbol of domination that has come down to the present-day material culture and symbolic order. To this day, tulip-centred celebrations are present in different cultures and lands, including Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, the Netherlands and the USA. The focus of this paper’s reflections is what in psychology is sometimes called *Gestaltwandel*, that is, the striking transformation in form (*Gestalt*) that allows us, according to this essay’s main argument, to speak of elemental hybridization in the sense of change. In the Ottoman Empire of the eighteenth century, the *lale* became not only a marker of political disputes over perceived extravagance and power struggles but a field of debates in knowledge history and botany, which basically resulted in its triplication into the historical Persian tulip, the European tulip and the Ottoman tulip, each with its own, decidedly distinct form, which nevertheless cannot be thought of independently from the others. This connectedness (according to linguist Benjamin Whorf) is the subject of this article, which uses visual evidence of material culture to pose the question of cultural entanglement and distortion.

The *lale* enjoyed a relatively untroubled existence in medieval Persia, especially in the areas that were successively incorporated into the Ottoman Empire as vassals or subjugated as tribute kingdoms from the fourteenth century onwards. Interestingly, the *lale* was one of the many flowers (including daffodils and hyacinths in particular) that increasingly became a symbol of the overall success of Ottoman expansion.

Some historians have linked this to the idea that the term “*lale*” contains all the letters that are also contained in the word Allah, which initially made it interesting for artists and craftsmen (i.e., in music, poetry, carpets, paintings). This cultural significance was then accompanied by political appropriation during the expansion. Obviously, the *lale* played a central role in the context of designing the gardens of the Topkapı Palace (built after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, starting in 1465). This floral symbol of the success of the expansion became a symbol of the strategy of taking over and reappropriating cultural symbols. This is evidenced both in material culture (such as the caftans of the sultans and their families, carpets, carvings and ceramics) and in the living plants and garden design. The tulips in these gardens continued to closely resemble the Persian models. They were usually monochromatic, had rather open petals and the preferred colour was red, as shown in a beautiful miniature painting in the *Dara Shikoh* album (Fig. 1). Salzmann writes: “The tulip expressed renewal and peace, as well as spiritual turmoil and mythical intoxication, earthly power and self-negation. The tulip’s red petals and black stamen served as visual metaphor for the flame, the self-immolation of the seeker in the fire of the divine source, as well as the wine goblet of mystical intoxication.” Alongside the political symbolism, the additional religious meaning quite naturally emerges as an indicator of the establishment of a presumably “purified” Ottoman Islam, centred on Islam from Constantinople and withdrawn from Sufi contexts, throughout the Ottoman Empire (as represented, for example, by thirteenth-century poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, 1207–1273). Even though the *lale* continued to bloom alongside many other flowers in the Topkapı gardens, this particular flower acquired a largely independent element of meaning via its singular association with symbols of rulership and power.

Habsburg envoy Augier Ghislain de Busbecq approached the matter quite differently. In *Four Letters from Turkey*, he described the experiences and observations of his legation journey from 1554–1562. Already in his first letter, which was initially published in

Paris in 1581 and much later became known as the “Tulip Letter”, he recalled the “beauty and richness of colour” of the tulip, which he had probably encountered in the Macedonian part of the Ottoman Empire that had been annexed shortly before. This was presumably his first encounter with the tulip, and he took the opportunity to send some bulbs to the Viennese court of Ferdinand I. Unfortunately, the date of this consignment remains uncertain. The addressee of this consignment, Viennese court gardener and botanist Carolus Clusius (also known as Charles de l’Écluse), took these bulbs (or their descendants) with him to Leiden in 1575, where he founded the earliest botanical garden in the Netherlands as newly appointed professor of botany. The first radical change in the shape of the tulip can be attributed to the successful breeding of Clusius and his colleagues. The Persian-Ottoman *lale* morphed into the Dutch tulip, and the foundation was laid for the famous “Tulip Craze” and for the first stock market bubble to burst (albeit unintentionally).

Around the same time, in 1545, a young doctor from Leipzig, Johannes Kentmann, travelled to Italy for educational purposes. In Padua, he visited the oldest botanical garden and sketched, among other things, a flower hitherto unknown to him, the tulip. After his return in 1550, by now a city doctor in Meissen, he gave one of his drawing sheets to Johann Herwarth from Augsburg. Herwarth, who had made his fortune in the silver and cotton trade, had a private garden which he cultivated for scientific, aesthetic and botanical purposes. On the occasion of the *Reichstag* in Augsburg in 1559, Ferdinand I, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Johannes Herwarth and a certain Conrad Gessner, city physician and botanist in Zurich, met upon the request of the emperor. It was to Ferdinand I and Conrad Gessner, who had already published the four-volume work *Historia Animalium*, that Herwarth presented Kentmann’s drawing. Most probably though, Kentmann had already paid a visit to the admired Gessner upon his return. Gessner subsequently described the tulip drawn by Kentmann and transferred by Gessner as a garden tulip and a narcissus depicted in his posthumously

published work *Historia plantarum* as a *Tulipa moro*. This version of a tulip clearly resembles neither the Persian *lale* nor the Dutch tulip of the sixteenth century. It is quite obviously a hybrid variant not necessarily based on eyewitness testimony. Presumably, he had seen variants of both plants in Herwarth's garden (Fig. 2).

Upon this encounter in 1559 in Augsburg, the tulip had become an object that attracted various interests: botanical, medical and, embodied in the figure of Ferdinand I, political, albeit in close connection with expanding the scholarly horizon as a characteristic of social reputation in the wider context of early modern colonialism. Thus, the tulip was not only in motion itself, but it quite obviously moved several people too, physically but above all intellectually and, it may be assumed, emotionally. Tulips can thus be understood as “affecting presences” in Robert Plant Armstrong's sense of the term. Interestingly, the tulip underwent massive changes in its shape (*Gestalt*), in its various habitats and, linked to the respective interests and potential manners of understanding and relatedness, in the context of its presence. Thus, the tulip can be understood in its relation to thought, culture, aesthetic and, likewise, economic exploitability. Furthermore, as this paper argues, it should be understood as extremely mobile in space and form (*Gestalt*), in particular, because this process of change is a crucial feature of entangled early modern history. In this regard, I think it is initially irrelevant whether this process is called *hybridization* or *creolization* or, along the lines of Homi Bhabha, as creating a *third space*. The crucial point is that as an object and subject of material culture, as an “affecting presence” in motion, the tulip underwent an inner and outer change of *Gestalt*, and that, in this capacity, it is representative of the many artefacts, representatives, objects and substances of material culture that were set in motion in the context of early modern globalizing practices. But this also means that this change of form and essence needs to be contextualized in each case, in order to come to an understanding about the circulatory character of the “foreign” (in the sense of the externalized “other”) as part of our own history.



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² Tulipa moro, drawing and watercolour, sheet 220 r, in Conrad Gessner, *Historia Plantarum*, ca. 1555–1565, MS 2386. © Erlangen University Library, public domain.

³ Pieter Cos, Viseroij tulip, gouache, in the *Verzameling van een meenigte tulipaenen, naar het leven geteekend met hunne naamen, en swaarte der bollen, zoo als die publicq verkogt zijn* manuscript catalogue, Haarlem, 1637. Origin of the reproduction: Image Collections, Wageningen University & Research, R393F07. © Wageningen University & Research Library, Special Collections.

⁴ 'Nahl-i-Erguvan' (Flower of the Judas tree), watercolour and bodycolour, Turkish Tulip Album, Istanbul, ca. 1725, in M. Ugur Derman (ed.), *The Tulip in the 18th Century*, Istanbul: Kubbealti Nesriyati, 2006. Reproduced with kind permission of Kubbealti Nesriyati and the Turkish Cultural Foundation.

One reason for the massive popularity of the tulip at European courts was certainly its origin in the Ottoman Empire, in combination with successful rebreeding, which could be described as “political-aesthetic appropriation”. Although relatively easy to propagate, tulip cultivation carried some risks – in particular, it was never clear which tulip would actually develop from a bulb. Thus, tulips became an object of prestige, increasingly firmly entrenched in court gardening (like in the sultan’s court) and a speculative object, especially in the Netherlands. Significantly, the lack of certainty in predicting a tulip’s shape and colour in particular became a game owing to its impressive diversity. This found expression in numerous so-called “tulip books”, according to which tulip bulbs were soon traded (Fig. 3). Between the years 1633 and 1637, speculative trade sold options on bulbs as well as options on options (“*windhandel*”), the peak of which has gone down in the history books as “Tulip Mania”. Some historians like to point out that this was the first stock market bubble, the bursting of which plunged hundreds of thousands into poverty. However, the Dutch government put an end to this speculative trade with a decree that set the last round to zero and declared it invalid. The economic consequences were limited, but these four years dominate the perception of the tulip, especially in popular accounts.

By the seventeenth century, tulips had found their place in print stores and bookstores, as well as in the gardens and courts of Europe. In 1636, the Margrave of Baden-Durlach listed 4,796 tulip bulbs to his name. Likewise, in the Dutch Golden Age, the tulip became a metaphor for Dutchness and, as can be seen in paintings, Dutch colonial lifestyle, imported for example to the colonies of Batavia and Cape Town, but also to Nieuw Amsterdam (today Manhattan/New York). As Pavord writes: “A thin, tenuous line marked the advance of the tulip in the New World, where it was unknown in the wild. ... Adrian van Donck, who settled in New Amsterdam in 1642 described the European [*sic!*] flowers that bravely colonized the settlers’ gardens”. At least one of the Dutch East India Company’s vessels was named *Tulp*. Louis XIV had the Versailles garden

planted with tulips, daffodils and hyacinths, and many other examples could be cited too. The tulip existed in manifold versions, a variety of shades and colour refractions. The tulip of Kentmann/Herwarth/Gessner, however, had completely disappeared from the pictorial programmes of flower depiction. When Gessner's *Historia Plantarum* was published in 1751, "his" tulip had become alien to botanists and the publishers of tulip books – a predecessor of today's coffee table books. This might also be why traces of the tulip from the perspective of knowledge history in Europe have almost totally disappeared from historiography, and the dominant narrative focuses on the four years of the Tulip Craze. Furthermore, it has also been almost completely forgotten that botanists continued to study the tulip in the eighteenth century, in the Ottoman Empire as well as in European territories. The tulip continued to pose riddles to them, and one question that sparked discussion was its scent. In 1899 Hermann zu Solms-Laubach mentions, with recourse to Gessner, that in the sixteenth century there were (still) tulips that "emitted a delicate fragrance". This is interesting insofar as at that time Busbecq had emphasized odourlessness as a characteristic of the tulip, but Gessner had found that the tulip in Herwarth's garden was slightly fragrant. Solms-Laubach's treatise was a reaction to an older publication by Heinrich Friedrich von Diez, who translated two tulip writings from the Ottoman language in 1811. One of the translated writings was by an Ottoman botanist and garden master, who referred to himself as Lalézari, literally meaning a "tulip expert". Lalézari was chief gardener under Sultan Ahmed II. Diez had become interested in his writings, published in 1722, when, as Prussia's envoy in Constantinople, he had become acquainted with new species of tulips recently bred in the sultan's palace garden.

The comparison clearly shows that the new Ottoman tulips had a different shape, which visually bore little resemblance to the Persian type and no resemblance at all to the Dutch-European varieties (*Fig. 4*). And yet it was this relationship that interested Diez. From Lalézari's texts, he concluded that European scholars had

taken Ottoman advice on care and cultivation as well as the rules on aesthetics and the nomenclature of the varieties. According to Diez, the only differences were in taste. The Ottomans liked pointed tulips, while in Europe the rounded varieties were preferred. Diez's writing can certainly be understood as meaning that he regretted this. The new shape (*Gestalt*) of tulips was the trademark of Ahmed III, who ruled from 1703–1736, a period also known as the *Lale devri* (tulip epoch). He reportedly bought innumerable tulip bulbs, partially imported from the Netherlands. Whether this exaggerated love of tulips actually cost him his regency and his life in the end must remain open.

The visual representations of the tulip, embedded in the contexts of interpretation and meaning, reveal its significance in a transculturally entangled history. The figure of thought of the circularity of the “foreign” (in the sense of the “other”) contains two dimensions. The first dimension takes up the insight that the global history of the early modern period consisted of many processes of cultural exchange which did not follow a single direction. The second dimension concerns the insight that cultural exchange processes turn the “known” into the “foreign” and vice versa, thereby creating something new. While this process of hybridization or creolization is imponderable, it makes terms like “known” and “foreign”, “own” and “other”, appear obsolete as analytical categories. The change in the shape of signifiers such as the tulip was carried out and negotiated by actors with different scopes and contexts of knowledge. When these encountered each other, they could produce misunderstandings or a lack of understanding, or even silence. Historians are not exempt from this. An actor-centred transcultural historiography can be benefited by integrating these supposed “empty spaces” into historical analysis. The tulip and its rich visual representations over space and time only reveal their respective significance against the background of the flower's essential polyvalence.

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