



Woven

TREASURE

Made during the Ottoman Empire and formerly owned by an Egyptian socialite, this silk panel set a new world record at auction. **CELIA RUFY** takes a closer look

Some textiles are so rare that years pass without a single example of remarkable quality coming up for sale at auction. Not so for Sotheby's Arts of the Islamic World sale, held on 26th April this year, where a red-and-gold framed panel of Ottoman silk dating from around 1600 was the standout lot (above). In exceptional condition, it is the kind of piece that tops every textile lover's wish list. To highlight its significance, the panel was given a key spot in the sale. 'It was decided to put up the panel as Lot 139 to open the afternoon session at 2.30pm,' explains Alexandra Roy of Sotheby's. 'That way, everyone would know when to be in the room and ready for the sale to begin.'

The panel was listed by Sotheby's as a voided silk-velvet *çatma* – a term

that describes a velvet weave that leaves areas free of pile around the woven silk pattern, here brocaded with silver-gilt thread. To specialists, this panel was like gold dust. 'Few textiles with this combination of date, quality, pattern and provenance ever come up for sale now, and panels like this are something every museum curator wants but can't find,' explains Esther Fitzgerald, specialist dealer in rare textiles. 'It belongs to a world of culture that embellished everything, yet a panel of this quality easily associates with the Modernist view as well.'

Alexandria's grande dame

Provenance is particularly significant when a textile is as remarkable as this one, and it helped that in its recent history it belonged to Alexandrian ➤

OUR EXPERTS



Stephanie Douglas
Stephanie is specialist director in Tapestry, Rugs and Carpets at Sotheby's



Esther Fitzgerald
Specialist collector and dealer in rare textiles covering a time span of 2,000 years



Alexandra Roy
Alexandra joined Sotheby's in 2011 and is the Middle East specialist deputy director



LEFT A living area in the Benaki Salvago home, where you can see the carnation *çatma* displayed in the top-right corner
 ABOVE Dating from the early 17th century, this large Ottoman voided panel is made of crimson silk velvet. It features carnations, a favourite Ottoman motif, often spread out like a fan with serrated edges. Its estimate was £40,000-£60,000, and it sold for £416,750 in the Sotheby's sale



socialite Argine Benaki Salvago, having been purchased by her family in the late 1800s. 'Textiles of this quality were at first reserved for the imperial elite,' explains Roy, 'but began to come onto the open market as the Ottoman Empire declined, which gave the opportunity for wealthy families to acquire them.'

Argine was born into one such family in 1883. The Benakis were among a number of wealthy Greeks based in Alexandria, Egypt, trading the region's fine cotton. The city was a cosmopolitan centre of arts and business, and Argine's beauty and charisma made her a central figure in 1930s high life. Her marriage to Michael Salvago, scion of another cotton family, further enhanced her glamorous lifestyle.

She continued the tradition in these families of curating art and textiles. Surviving photographs of the Benaki Salvago home show important collections of ceramics, glass and jewellery as well as textiles – several of which ended up in the Sotheby's sale. 'The textiles in this collection are in such good condition now,' explains Sotheby's Stephanie Douglas, 'because they were well looked after. They were kept flat, framed like ➤

SYMBOLS IN THE SILK

The pattern on this panel has a rich heritage

Çintamani is the name given to the abstract decorative motifs – the trio of dots and wavy lines – on this record-breaking panel. It is a Sanskrit word meaning ‘auspicious jewel’ and these motifs are considered by some to have their origins in the Buddhist imagery of Central Asia, representing pearls and flames. Other sources refer to them as leopard spots and tiger stripes, an idea that could originate from the depictions of heroes in Persian manuscripts – they were often clothed in leopard skins, represented by dotted patterns. *Çintamani* motifs were found in furnishings and clothing, sometimes vastly scaled up, and were believed to protect the wearer and deliver physical and spiritual potency.

It is thought the imagery travelled to western Europe from Asia along the Silk Road and *çintamani* dots are found on Etruscan pottery and jewellery in northern Italy as early as the 3rd century BC. They also appear in Christian manuscripts, including on the Virgin’s cloak in the 9th-century *Book of Kells* (as pictured below) where the dots may have been symbols of the Trinity.



As early as the 15th century, Bursa had been the production centre for luxury textiles

pictures and hung on the walls in dimly lit rooms.’

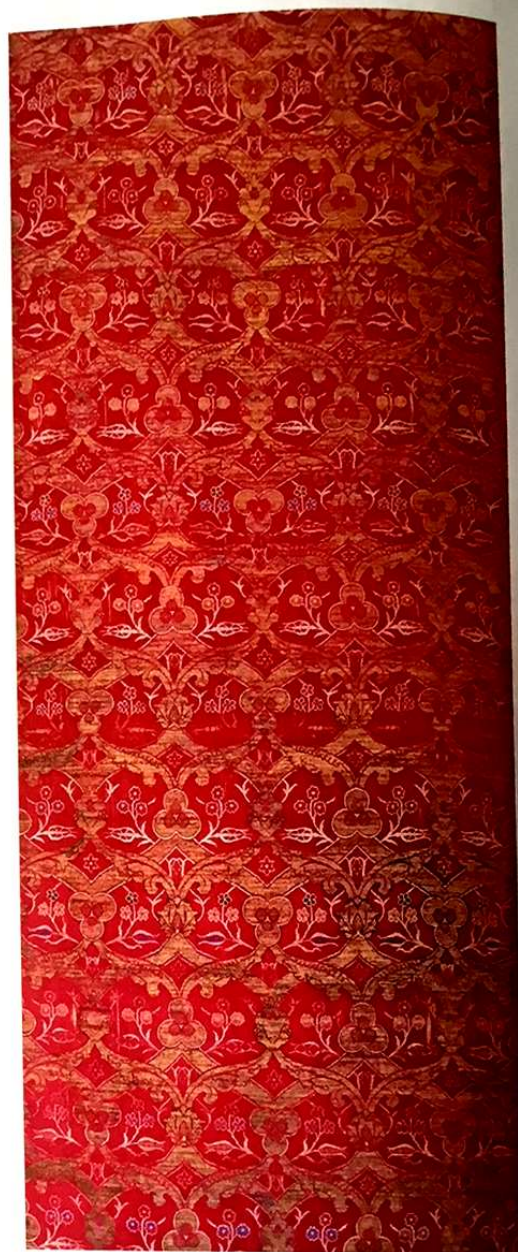
This record-breaking panel was probably designed in Constantinople (now Istanbul) and sent south to the weaving workshops in Bursa. As early as the 15th century, Bursa had been the production centre for luxury textiles. These workshops were subject to the Ottoman court, which controlled all aspects of production. A set of regulations formulated in 1502 covered every stage in the silk-weaving process, from the quality of the yarn, to the techniques used to dye it. The gold and silver yarn would have required an official seal before it could be used, and even the pressing of the cloth after it came off the loom was under state control. This was also the case for its measurement and the permission required before it could be offered for sale.

Ottoman origins

The Ottomans were well known for their skill in weaving silk and velvet – for the quality of design and richness of colour. The deep crimson on this panel, known as *guvezi*, was a favoured hue. Though panels like this were hugely expensive at the time, they were in demand in the imperial palace for divans or hangings, and also for export. Such was their status, silk-velvet textiles were frequently chosen as gifts for visiting ambassadors and other dignitaries. It is said to be why *çatma* cushions are well represented in European and American museums.

The complete set of panels from Argine’s collection had been displayed at Sotheby’s before the sale, and the bidders and other interested parties had been in to see them, among them Fitzgerald. She had first seen the star panel in the 1980s and succumbed to its magic then. ‘If I had even a fragment of a textile of this design and quality I would be giddy with excitement,’ she exclaims.

On auction day, ‘there was such a buzz when the panel was put up,’ says Douglas, ‘with interest from museum curators around the world – most can only display scraps of a textile like this. But collectors came in force as well because it’s so rare to have a surviving piece of this size. This is a quintessential Ottoman design that works equally well in a contemporary setting.’



ABOVE The design on this long silk hanging, made around 1600, includes the three-ball *çintamani* motif where the lattice intersects. It sold for £236,750, far exceeding its highest estimate of £60,000

As the bidding sailed past its estimates, the room held its collective breath, but not for long as the price rose so quickly, bidders soon fell away. Its sale price of £1,076,750 to an anonymous private buyer is the highest-ever recorded for an Ottoman textile at auction, reaching more than three-and-a-half times its estimate. The excitement was felt well beyond the salesroom too. ‘I’d been out of range on the day of the sale,’ says Fitzgerald, ‘but as soon as I got in rang Sotheby’s to see how much the price had reached.’ It was no surprise to find