



Embroidery for Ambassadors

• JEF TESKE •

For a long time the inhabitants of the Asian world were renowned in Western Europe for their fondness for colourful clothes. This fascination with Oriental dress is evident in a painting by Gerrit Berckheyde of 1672 in the Rijksmuseum collection (fig. 1). In front of the old town hall on the Dam in Amsterdam we see a crowd of well-dressed people, many of whom wear sober attire. Standing slightly apart from the large group are some exotic figures in unusual clothes. Berckheyde highlighted them by placing them in bright sunlight, making their colourful dress even more noticeable. Two of them wear conical headdresses with wide brims and coats down to their ankles. They are of Baltic origin. A third man wears a light yellow turban and a long robe of the same colour with a red caftan over it. No doubt he is an Oriental on a business trip to Amsterdam.

We encounter this admiration for Oriental dress much earlier in reports written by western travellers to the East. In the sixteenth century, for example, the Flemish Ogier van Boesbeeck published an account of his stay in Istanbul in four letters entitled *Legationis Turcicae epistolae quatuor*. As the envoy of the Habsburg ruler Ferdinand of Austria he had access to the court of Sultan Süleyman the Great or Magnificent. In his first letter, Van Boesbeeck

Fig. 1
Detail of GERRIT
ADRIAENSZ
BERCKHEYDE, *The
Town Hall on the Dam
in Amsterdam*, 1672.
Oil on canvas.
Amsterdam, Rijks-
museum, SK-A-34.

describes the crowd in one of the inner courtyards of the Topkapı Sarayı during an audience with the sultan, '...come and stand with me here and observe this huge crowd of turbaned heads, wrapped in many coils of pure white silk, dazzling clothes of all kinds and colours – everything shining gold, silver, purple, silk and satin... I have never seen anything I have enjoyed so much...'¹

In the same letter he also describes a much more modest example of Oriental fabric. Van Boesbeeck mentions that at his leaving audience he was given a missive from Süleyman to Ferdinand 'in a wrapper stitched with gold thread and sealed'.² In the diplomatic traffic between Ottoman Turkey and other states and within the Ottoman Empire itself it was usual for decrees to be illuminated with meticulously executed calligraphic ornamentation and handed over in embroidered letter cases. Other types of embroidered bags and purses were used for such things as keys, coins, tobacco and pocket watches. They were often attached to belts (fig. 2).³ The splendid case Van Boesbeeck received for Emperor Ferdinand was almost certainly a piece of Turkish embroidery. To this day there are a number of surviving examples of embroidered articles like this in museums and private collections.



This article discusses some embroidered Ottoman objects which are a direct result of, or are linked to, the trade and diplomatic relations between the West and the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Leather-Working and Needlework

Their originally nomadic way of life made the Turks and Turkmen highly adept at working with leather and fabrics. During their wandering existence on the Steppes of Asia in search of grazing land for their cattle they lived in movable encampments. They occupied themselves by working with leather and wool to make tents and tent interiors, carpets, clothes and such items as saddles, cases for bows and quivers for arrows. Although these nomadic peoples managed to survive in the Steppes with their adapted way of life, their surroundings could be exceedingly inhospitable, for example, in periods of extreme drought. This

ultimately led them to seek out more fertile areas in regions to the south and south-west. These regions were under Islamic control, and in time the Turkish and Turkmen tribes also converted to the new faith. As early as the eleventh century the Turkish Seljuks established a powerful sultanate in Anatolia, forcing the Byzantine troops to retreat still further. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, two new Turkmen nomadic groups assumed power: the Ottomans who initially had their powerbase in Western Anatolia but rapidly conquered a far larger territory, and the Aqqoyunlu (White Sheep), who ruled in Eastern Anatolia and large parts of Iraq and Iran.

An Iranian miniature dating from around 1480 gives a good idea of how people dressed in these Turkmen court circles (fig. 2). The clothes of the figures portrayed chiefly follow the Timurid fashion of Herat, in present-day Afghanistan, the leading cultural metropolis of Western Asia at that

Fig. 2
Throne Scene, Iran
(Tabriz?), c. 1470-90.
Opaque pigment, ink
and gold on paper,
39.2 x 61.4 cm.
Istanbul, Topkapı
Sarayı Museum, H2153.

time. Their brightly-coloured caftans fall to their leather footwear and are decorated with gold patterns, which may have been embroidered.

After the capture of Constantinople in 1453, Mehmed II the Conqueror (1432-1481) took various measures to promote the production of leather and textiles in his new capital in order to boost the economy. Three hundred and sixty tanneries were built outside the city walls. He also established the Sarachane district, where the end products were made into bags and clothing accessories, and into saddles and ornately-decorated cases for bows and arrows for the Ottoman court and the army, the largest customer.⁴ These luxury articles were part of the outward show of prominent people, and in the seventeenth century they made a great impression on the Western diplomatic representatives and merchants living in Pera. Even before the eighteenth-century craze for things Turkish, there was a steady export of

Turkish-made products like these to Western Europe. Europeans acquired them as souvenirs or gifts in the form of table mats, purses, wallets and letter cases, bags and saddles.

This is how these treasures ultimately ended up in the houses of wealthy and influential people in the West, like the surviving letter case of the renowned seventeenth-century English diarist Samuel Pepys (fig. 3).⁵ This rectangular wallet, 21.5 cm long and 11.5 cm high, is made of brown goatskin. On the front is a pattern of a twining tree branch and three large blossoms in the shape of a medallion, embroidered in silver thread. The owner's name, 'Sam.l Pepys Esq.', is embroidered under the flap and 'Constantinople 1687' has been stitched into the back of the case. The case may very well have been given to Pepys as a gift from a Turkish contact, because as Secretary of the Admiralty he was an influential man with international connections.



Fig. 3
Samuel Pepys's
Letter Case,
Istanbul, 1687.
Leather embroidered
with silver thread,
11.5 x 21.5 cm.
Northampton,
Museum of
Leathercraft.

Ottoman Letter Cases for Dutchmen

From 1612 onwards, when Cornelis Haga became the Republic's first representative in Istanbul, the Netherlands maintained diplomatic relationships with the Ottoman Empire, and from 1625 trade with the Ottoman Empire was exclusively controlled by the Department of Levantine Trade. We can find tangible evidence of Dutch-Ottoman relationships in the National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh, where there is a case that formerly belonged to the De Hochepped family (fig. 4). In the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries members of this family were directors of the Department of Levantine Trade. From 1687 onwards generations of them were consuls in Izmir, and in 1747 Elbert de Hochepped became ambassador of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands to the Sublime Porte.⁶ The measurements of the case are almost the same as Pepys's. It is made of leather covered with dark green silk velvet embroidered with silver thread. Silver and gold thread are made of a thin, flat ribbon of the precious metal wound round a core of silk thread. The pattern on the front of



Fig. 4
Jacobus Bisantius de Hochepped's Letter Case, Istanbul, 1697. Leather, velvet, silk, silver thread, 11 x 19.5 cm. Edinburgh, National Museum of Scotland, A.1983.1158 © The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland.

the case is the same as that on the outside of the flap: an undulating garland between three blossom palmettes. The owner's name 'Jacobus Bisantius De Hochepped' is embroidered in silver in elegant script under the flap. On the back of the case, in the same script, are the words 'Constantinopoli 1697'. The calligraphy is embellished with graceful curls on the letters *c*, *t* and *l*. The base of the letter *p* ends in an elaborately entwined figure-of-eight. In the light of Jacobus's middle name, we may assume that he grew up in Turkey.

There is a letter case similar in technique and quality to De Hochepped's

in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (fig. 5). In this example too, dark green silk velvet has been attached to the leather. In this one, however, a double-folded piece of supple leather has been sewn inside the case, dividing it into three compartments or sections. Each part of the ornament, including the letters, was individually cut from leather and sewn on to the velvet with silver and gold thread embroidery in satin stitch and stem stitch, creating a relief effect.⁷ There are curlicues and a figure-of-eight in the calligraphy with rows of knots in the curls. The spaces around

Fig. 5
Jacobus Onversaaght's
Letter Case,
Istanbul, 1704.
Leather, velvet,
silk, silver thread,
11 x 19.6 cm.
The Hague,
Gemeentemuseum,
10-33955.



them are filled with more knots and floral elements. The date is 1704. The design of this case is considerably more elaborate than De Hochepped's.

The pattern on the front is almost identical to that on De Hochepped's, except that a pinecone motif has been introduced in the heart of the six *hatayi* blossoms (fig. 5). In Ottoman Turkish *Hatai* is the word for China. It was used to describe plant motifs like the peony and the lotus, which came from China. They were particularly popular on clothes, caftans and carpets, and they also appear on Iznik pottery.⁸ They were transformed with great imagination into 'magic flowers'.

The name of the owner embroidered under the flap is 'Jacobus Onversaaght'. This name has yet to be found in sources relating to Levantine trade. Archive research has, though, revealed that in the second half of the seventeenth century a certain Jacobus Onversaegt, presumably a merchant, owned a house called De Vergulde Pauw on Keizerstraat in Amsterdam, near the Nieuwmarkt. Was this where Jacobus's interest in exotic embroidery began? This, after all, was a district full of draper's shops selling fabrics imported by the Dutch East India Company, such as the chintzes from Coromandel with their Turkish-influenced floral motifs.⁹

One last, stylistically similar document case with the name of a Dutch client can be found in the Rijksmuseum collection (fig. 6). This time the silk velvet of the base is crimson, and gold thread predominates in the embroidery. Some details were added in blue silk. Once again the owner's name – 'Francois Louis Vander Wiellen' – was embroidered under the flap; we know nothing further about him. The back, with the date of 1696, and the decoration on the front of the case and on the top of the flap, are broadly speaking the same as those on De Hochepped's and Onversaaght's cases, except that the edges of the *hatayi*

blossoms are serrated here instead of auricular.

A set decorative scheme had evidently developed for letter cases like these in seventeenth-century Turkey. We could call this the 'classical' style, but we should bear in mind that the Ottoman Turks themselves also used different motifs for their own wallets and cases. From the second half of the sixteenth century on, more symmetrical patterns were embroidered on velvet wallets, consisting primarily of Chinese cloud bands and Turkish *saz* leaves. These motifs were designed in the workshops and we also see them, for example, on the tiles manufactured in Iznik. However these covers were mainly intended for a Koran or parts of it.¹⁰

In the course of the eighteenth century the quality of Ottoman decorative art declined and at the same time western influence on arts and crafts grew – it is evident in the tile industry, in ceramics and metalwork, and in the production of letter cases.

Some decades later, the Dutch Republic's newly-appointed ambassador to the Sublime Porte, Cornelis Calkoen, ordered two cases, one in 1727 and one in 1728 (figs. 7 and 8). Although they still have floral decoration, it is striking that they do not resemble the examples in the 'classical' style in any way. The symmetry has become freer and less rigid, and the *hatayi* blossom style is a thing of the past. Far more shades of colour give the embroidery greater depth. The floral motifs are more natural. The calligraphy on the back leaves a lot to be desired. The word *Constantinopoli* looks rather like a hurriedly written signature. Nonetheless the ambassador was clearly satisfied with the quality, for he asked his secretary Benjamin Fagel, who went back to Amsterdam on a visit, to deliver some embroidered letter cases to his brother Pieter and his uncle Jan Six 'as presents'.¹¹

Fig. 6

Francois Louis Vander Wiellen's Letter Case, Istanbul, 1696. Velvet, chamois leather, gold and silver thread, silk, linen, 10.5 x 19.3 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, NG-1980-23.





Fig. 7
Cornelis Calkoen's
Letter Case,
Istanbul, 1727.
Leather, velvet,
embroidery,
11.5 x 20.5 cm.
Private collection
(The Netherlands).



Towards the end of the eighteenth century the flower patterns increasingly gave way to symmetrical line compositions and latticework, laurel wreaths and blazons of Western origin.¹² Embroidery was often replaced by a gilded imprint on the bare leather.

North Africa

Not all Dutch document cases came from Ottoman Turkey, however. The Rijksmuseum, for example, has two letter cases belonging to Michiel De Ruyter that were very probably made in Algeria (figs. 9 and 10).

Istanbul and Izmir were the most important destinations in the Ottoman Empire for Dutch diplomats and traders, but before they arrived there they had to get safely past the North-African coast, where the dreaded Barbary pirates had their home ports. The States-General sent special envoys to Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli on many occasions to make peace treaties and negotiate the purchasing of the freedom of Christian slaves. Michiel

de Ruyter also made several voyages to the Mediterranean to fight the pirates at sea and even sign treaties with them. In 1664, for the last time, De Ruyter departed on a diplomatic mission to Algiers with twelve warships because – as often happened – ceasefires had been violated. It proved a difficult mission. When the Dutch fleet arrived off the coast of Algiers, they found that the Algerians were not prepared to supply them with provisions and water. Worse still, they were holding the Dutch envoy there hostage. After talks lasting days, a delegate member of the States-General finally had to go ashore to negotiate with the ‘dishonourable Turkish scoundrels’.¹³ The Dutch envoy was eventually released and replaced by a new one. Johan de Witte, De Ruyter’s son-in-law, remained behind as the delegation’s counsel.¹⁴ De Ruyter may have ordered his letter cases in North Africa himself or received them as diplomatic gifts, but it is possible that he asked Johan to get them embroidered for him.

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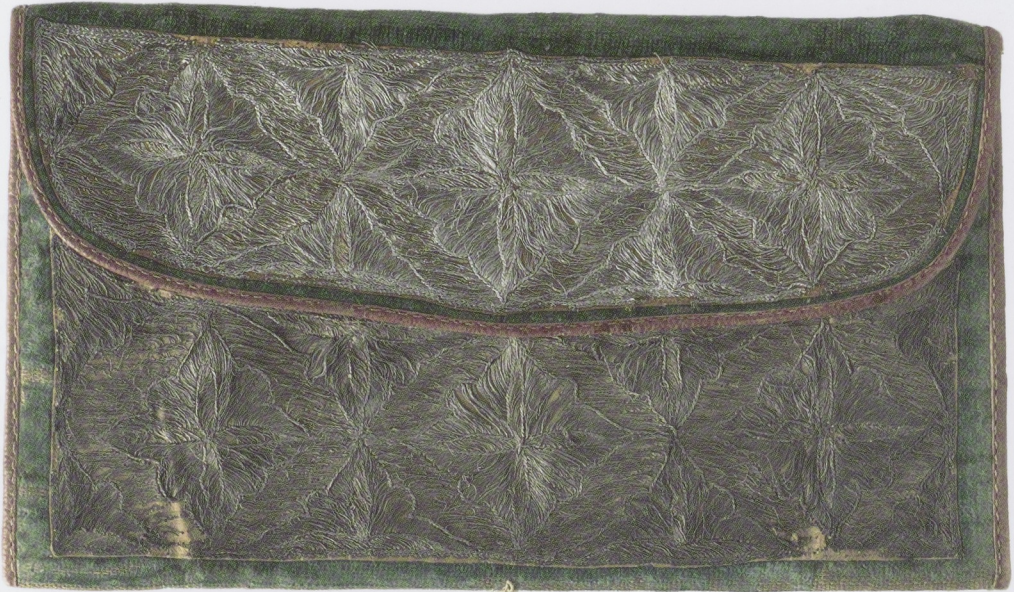
Fig. 9
Michiel Adriaansz de Ruyter’s Letter Case, North Africa, c. 1650-76. Leather, linen, ink, velvet and gold thread, 10.6 x 18 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, gift of A.W. Vinkhuyzen, NG-NM-12023.

Fig. 10
Michiel Adriaansz de Ruyter’s Letter Case, North Africa, c. 1650-76. Leather, linen, velvet, silver thread, 10.3 x 17.8 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, NG-NM-10408.

Fig. 8
Cornelis Calkoen’s Letter Case, Istanbul, 1728. Leather, velvet, embroidery, 10 x 17 cm. Private collection (The Netherlands).







In terms of style and gold thread technique, the two letter cases are quite similar to the seventeenth-century Istanbul type (figs. 9 and 10). The decoration differs insofar as the backs are undated: one is completely plain; the other has a spray of nine tulips rising out of a central point at the base, a design also found on Iznik ceramics. 'De Rvyter' is embroidered under the front flaps of both cases. Below there are three large blossoms of the *hatayi* type side by side, with smaller flowers between them, all in gold thread.

Less than ten years later, in 1675, Thomas Hees was posted as resident of the States-General to negotiate with the authorities in Algiers again. In 1679 he succeeded in concluding a trade

agreement. During this time he too acquired a letter case (fig. 11). At first glance his document case is similar to the Istanbul examples – made of leather, flat and rectangular. The red velvet on the front is embroidered with gold thread. Under the flap in block letters are embroidered the words 'De. Edele. Heer Tomas Hees Ambassadeur van Staate Generael der Vereenige Neederlanden 1676'.

In 1683 Thomas Hees had himself and his nephews Jan and Andries portrayed by Michiel van Musscher (fig. 12). Hees is dressed in an Oriental costume and surrounded by all kinds of Oriental curiosities. As well as a white-turbaned Moorish servant, Oriental carpets, exotic weapons, an atlas

Fig. 11
Letter Case belonging to Thomas Hees, Resident of the States-General in Algiers, North Africa, 1676. Leather, velvet, gold thread, 16.7 x 28.3 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, on loan from the Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen Mauritshuis, The Hague, SK-C-1216.





and a globe – all pointing to his role as resident in Algiers – we can also see a letter case on the table.

The letter case is obviously there first and foremost as a reference to Hees's brilliant diplomatic career, but perhaps it was also included out of admiration for the beauty of Oriental decorative art. From the fact that a striking number of cases like these have survived we may conclude that they were probably highly valued by their former owners, whose names still grace them in splendid curlicues.

Fig. 12
 MICHEL VAN
 MUSSCHER, *Thomas
 Hees, Resident of the
 States-General in Algiers
 with his Nephews
 Jan and Andries Hees,
 and a Servant, 1687.*
 Oil on canvas,
 76 x 63 cm. Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum, on
 loan from the Konink-
 lijk Kabinet van
 Schilderijen Maurits-
 huis, The Hague,
 SK-C-1215.

NOTES

- 1 '...kom nu eens hier staan en kijk met mij naar die ontzaglijke menigte van met tulbanden getooide hoofden, gewikkeld in vele windingen van zuiver witte zijde, die schitterende kleding van allerlei soort en kleur, alles stralend van goud, zilver, purper, zijde en satijn... Ik heb nog nooit iets gezien, waarvan ik zoveel heb genoten...' Ogier Ghiselin van Boesbeeck, *Vier brieven over het gezantschap naar Turkije* (Z. von Martels, ed.), Hilversum 1994, p. 103. With thanks to M. van Raemdonck for drawing attention to this edition.
- 2 'in een omhulsel van gouddraad gestoken en verzegeld'. Ghiselin van Boesbeeck, op. cit. (note 1), p. 107.
- 3 The use of embroidered bags attached to belts also existed in the West: V. Foster, *Bags and Purses*, London 1982, p.7.
- 4 Written information kindly supplied by Professor Hülya Tezcan.
- 5 Museum of Leathercraft, Northampton. Foster, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 25-26.
- 6 M. Hoenkamp-Mazgon, *Palais de Hollande te Istanboel*, Amsterdam 2002, pp. 39, 61.
- 7 With thanks to Madelief Hohé for the information on the embroidery stitches.
- 8 See S.S. Blair and J.M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800*, London 1994, figs. 298, 301, 302.
- 9 Jacobus Onversaaght's family were in the merchant class, as is revealed when Jacobus is named as a witness at the baptism of Helena Maria, a daughter of Hendrick Onversaeght in 1704. She later married Nicolaas de Meester, a merchant in Amsterdam. *Nederland's Patriciaat* 79 (1995-1996), p. 344. I am greatly indebted to Alle Diderik de Jonge for the professional support.
- 10 See J.M. Rogers and R.M. Ward, *Süleyman the Magnificent*, London 1988, p. 183, figs. 124, 125.
- 11 Information taken from the Calkoen family archives, kindly made available by Eveline Sint Nicolaas.
- 12 See note 4.
- 13 'eerloose Turckxsche schelmen': R. Prud'homme van Reine, *Rechterhand van Nederland. Biografie van Michiel Adriaenszoon de Ruyter*, Amsterdam 2007, p. 127.
- 14 Prud'homme van Reine, op. cit. (note 13), pp. 123, 127. Johan de Witte replaced the counsel Gilbert de Vianen, who died unexpectedly.



Detail of fig. 4

