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LOVE IN THE ALBUM OF AHMED I

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The Topkapi Palace Library is home to a number of albums that still await detailed examination. A renowned one among these is the Ahmed I Album. As we learn from its preface, the album was put together by a functionary in the court of Ahmed I upon the sultan's request. The album compiler does not name himself, but identifies his teacher of vaşale (paper joinery, the building block of album making) as Muhammad Sharif Baghdadi. From his claim that he had put together a number of other albums previously for the sultan, we can surmise that the producer of this album is Kalender, who also compiled a Falnama for Ahmed I and an album of calligraphy. The album is datable to around 1610. It currently contains 32 folios, 33.5 by 47.5 centimeters.

The album of Ahmed I contains calligraphies, drawings and paintings, which, according to Kalender's preface had been given to the sultan as gifts or as requests for his generosity. Ahmed I had asked Kalender to collect these in one place and arrange them with respect to one another, and illuminate and bind into an album. There is significant variety in the material collected in the album. The calligraphies are mostly examples of nastaliq, and contain Persian poetry. They include works by Timurid and Safavid period calligraphers such as Nur 'Ali, Mir 'Ali, and Shah Mahmud, as well as Ottoman calligraphers like Dervish Rejeb-i Rumi or Qutb al din Mehmed Yazdi. The latter, clearly hailing from the south Iranian city of Yazd, had written a treatise on calligraphers of naskh and nastaliq upon the encouragement of the Ottoman historian and statesman Mustafa Ali, when the two lived in Baghdad. The paintings and drawings,
too, include works in what might be called a local, Ottoman, style, as well as examples of Persian art. They range in subject matter from manuscript paintings to single figure studies. As has also been noted by Günsel Renda, the Ahmed I album is one of the forerunners of the “costume album” genre in the Ottoman context. The album stands at the threshold of a period in Ottoman art when album making became much more popular.

Differently than illustrated manuscripts of the sixteenth century, the album’s focus is not palace life or Ottoman dynastic history. Instead, it demonstrates a clear interest in the life of the city—presumably the city of Istanbul. There are numerous images of public gatherings and entertainments, as well as studies of individual types such as scholars, students, handsome and beautiful youths, and soldiers. The album is remarkable for how it brings the everyday life of Ottoman subjects into the purview of the palace—it was after all, made for the sultan’s perusal. Its courtly context of use might explain the presence of palace servants and officials among these studies, rendering the album a locus where city and court come together. It is also a place where poetry and painting intertwine, due to the numerous calligraphic specimens included. Many of them are poetic excerpts. Coupled with the accompanying poetry, the genre scenes such as entertainments and lovers’ outings recall the work of Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli in The Age of Beloveds. Indeed a number of images from the Ahmed I album were used in their book. As the paintings depict everyday life, everyday types, love emerges as a frequent theme. In its totality, the album of Ahmed I, with its poetry, drawings and paintings, depicts love in different guises: love for the ruler, love for the beauties of town, for the beauties of the court; or love as madness and disruption of order. What I would like to offer is a contextual reading of a select group of images from the album with The Age of Beloveds in mind.

On the present folios 18a, 19a, 20b and 23a (figs. 1–3, 5) are a series of paintings that are unified in terms of style, and stand apart from the rest of the album due to their greater size. The paintings all feature figures that are rather large in comparison to the picture plane. Many have skin that is pale enough to be called white, delicate features drawn in black, with red reserved for lips. Their costumes are generally of single color textiles. The women wear belts and conical hats, their black hair is parted in the middle framing the forehead in an upside-down V shape. The men too wear belted costumes, and have white turbans that are wound gently, loosely around their heads draping downwards on either side. The backgrounds are fully painted-in, with relatively low horizon lines and shallow pictorial spaces blocked off by trees or a hill. The interior scenes either have a tiled, pattern providing no differentiation between floor and wall or do not show much of the architecture beyond a floor and a back wall that is parallel to the picture plane, limiting the viewer’s depth of vision. This style can be identified as the

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predominant painting style of the early seventeenth century, and becomes more popular as the century goes on. The album also contains smaller-scale paintings in this style that depict romantic scenes. Other paintings in the album are either taken from earlier, mid-to late sixteenth century manuscripts, or are single-figure studies without backgrounds. Some emulate Safavid figures, and there are a few paintings that appear to come out of Safavid or Uzbek manuscripts. Our group, therefore, holds together stylistically as well as thematically. They are also grouped within six folios (folios eighteen to twenty-three), which unifies them further.

To begin with, fol. 18a (fig. 1) juxtaposes two paintings: a bath scene with young men swimming, bathing, and cleaning each other, with a scene from an insane asylum below. In the upper image, the young men embrace each other in the bath pool in an intimate fashion, converse in pairs, and groom each other. There is a sense of camaraderie as well as youth, intimacy as well as playfulness. It is a somewhat festive scene that helps us visualize one of the physical contexts in which men socialized intimately. One is reminded of the Molla’s baths mentioned by the poet Sa’yi in his poem quoted in the Age of Beloveds: “Do the pure born still flow like water towards Molla’s baths?/For truly it is the very lifeblood of pleasure” he says, longing for Istanbul. Andrews and Kalpakli remind us that “Beyond the pleasures of bathing, one of the chief attractions of popular bath-houses was the opportunity to observe attractive young men, from bath boys (dellak) to regular customers.”

The customers and bath boys in the painting certainly seem to be appreciating the view in this painting.

The panel below, however, contrasts with the joviality of this healthy socialization. Here we see three inmates in an asylum, all chained by their necks to keep them under control, and two restrained by their feet. These men are attacking their caretakers, with arms raised mid-strike. Two of them also have their genitalia visible, as an outward sign of madness. Madness is also signaled by the exaggerated physical features of the men: the one on the right has a large mouth and nose, his teeth visible in a caricaturized grimace, the others with unkempt hair, and large, rough features that are a far cry from the bow-like eyebrows and rose-bud lips of poetic beloveds, or the youths at the bath. The sexual organs are also part of this depiction of the grotesque. Indeed, the exposed genitalia become signifiers of madness. And that reminds us that there is an integral connection between this painting and the bath scene above it. What might be erotic in the above image becomes grotesque in the lower one.

We know from poetry, too, that love drives one mad, Majnun is a perfect example. The madness of these men in the asylum seems intimately connected to sex. This sexualization of madness is perhaps a reminder that amorous relations are best kept to certain rules of decorum. In the bath scene where we might expect it, we do not see any private parts, because here relations are being performed according to a certain script, within socially recognized norms. In the asylum, however, inappropriate, lewd behavior is on display. That we are to take the asylum scene as a depiction of the grotesque is also

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Andrews and Kalpakli, Age of Beloveds, p. 72
signaled by the figures watching from the window. Their fine features, small eyes and mouths, their fingers gingerly raised to their lips in surprise also provide an internal contrast within the image. As such, the asylum painting characterizes the bath-house image as demure: here the youths have elegant bodies, features and gestures. They dive, swim and play gracefully. The opposition provided by these two images helps to set the course straight, the viewer makes no mistake about acceptable socialization and love, and the carnal gone wild. Folio 18b, in other words, sets up an opposition between different types of male behavior. Both feature undressed figures—those undressed for social cleanliness, and those undressed out of sheer madness. One group enjoying love as it should be enjoyed, the other mad and sexualized. One is elegant, the other grotesque.

When we turn to the poetry on the facing page, we find three separate pieces of paper pasted together. One, a page from a small manuscript, talks of unrequited love, the poet using the first person voice to proclaim he wants to bring a rose up close to his face, despite its thorns. The other two are calligraphic examples, written in slanted nostalgic, and probably meant to be preserved on their own or as part of an album. One describes a beauty who plays with his curls, and the other curses those who do not want the beloved’s happiness:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Ghamîn bâd ânke u shâdat nakhvâhad} \\
\text{Kharâb an kas ke âbâdat nakhvâhad} \\
\text{Hame bar kâm-e dîl fîrûzî-at bâd} \\
\text{Ze Yazdân har che khvâhî rûzî-at bâd} \\
\text{May he who does not want your happiness be sad.} \\
\text{May he who does not want you prosperous be destroyed.} \\
\text{May your victory be the wish of all hearts.} \\
\text{Whatever you want from God, may it become your daily sustenance.}^9
\end{align*}\]

All three poems can easily be reconciled with the painting showing the young men bathing. For there in the bath, we can see love affairs taking place, one admiring another from afar, another two flirting, and the playfulness that arises out of sexual tension between those attracted to each other. The asylum on the other hand, perhaps shows love taken to the extremes, the madness that comes from, and partly explains, carnal desires, and unrequited love. As such, the last poem might be intended to link up with the asylum painting—perhaps we see the “destroyed” ones in the asylum?

Folio 19a (fig. 2) provides a glimpse into the lighter side of daily life and love. The upper image shows an amorous male-female couple surrounded by female attendants in a garden setting. A fountain with two ducks is gurgling in front of them, and in the background are cypress trees and spring blossoms with couples of birds gracing their branches. Five women are playing music for them, and another four are fanning and attending to their comfort. The man is gesticulating towards the garden and the

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^9 I am grateful to my dear colleague Sunil Sharma for helping me with this translation.
musicians, in conversation with his companion. The couple is seated on chairs, which would not be very common at the time. We are probably meant to read the chairs as status symbols denoting the couple’s access to foreign goods. Another possibility is to consider them as signs of foreignness, but everything else in the painting, the costumes of the figures, the patterns of the textiles, the kind of instruments being used to entertain them, the vegetation, are all Ottoman in character. What we are viewing here is probably a garden attached to an upper-class home. Such gardens were often used for entertainment. The presence of the chairs, as well as a large retinue for the lovers, implies that we are in such an outdoor domestic space.

This quaint love scene is juxtaposed with an urban entertainment scene below, where a large group of men have gathered at night, in the presence of candles, to be entertained by musicians and dancers, or players, with grotesque masks on their faces. The background does not provide any information about context, but the large size of the group suggests a public venue, such as a coffee house or a tavern, like those described by Andrews and Kalpakli. The spectators have amused expressions on their faces, and are all seated in calm, contained poses. They point to what they see, indicating wonder, amusement and conversation. But their upper-body gestures contrast significantly with the comical movements of the players/dancers in the center. These men stomp their feet, raise their buttocks in exaggerated motion, and turn their heads and arms in unlikely directions. Their gestures match the comical masks on their faces with caricaturized features and oversized hats.

Two different types of acceptable sociability and love are depicted here. Above is the well to do male-female couple, perhaps husband and wife, enjoying each other’s company, music and nature. Below are a group of men of varying ages, though none very old, watching an entertaining performance that has some elements of the grotesque, but nowhere near the asylum scene from the preceding page. The audience here, however, is very similar in appearance and costume to the few figures peering into the window of the asylum. The facing page contains poetry that refers to Layli and Majnun as well as four figure studies that can be construed as potential beloved types. The poetry helps strengthen the reading of the images as related to the theme of love. If this is indeed a tavern, perhaps what we see here are visualizations of what Ali describes as “sanguine youths and possessors of power” who are wine worshippers, woman chasers, and boy lovers, who come to the tavern, some with their beloveds. They eat, drink, and when evening falls, return to their private dwellings.” He later lists their professions as “businessmen, artisans, and government officials.” Coffee houses, which became popular during the second half of the sixteenth century, were even broader in their clientele. In the words of Andrews and Kalpakli, who draw on Ali and Pecevi, “The coffee house especially is a venue in which men of many social classes and occupations gather.

10 Andrews and Kalpakli, The Age of Beloveds, p. 76.
12 A fifth one has been removed from the page.
for conversation and a variety of entertainments, including games, music, dancing boys and girls, story telling, poetry, and shadow-puppet performances.\textsuperscript{14} In front of our eyes then, is a portrait of this broad clientele, the slightly different costumes and facial hair of the men helping to distinguish between them. The painting provides a glimpse into the life of different subjects of the empire, prepared for the sultan's eyes.

When we turn the page, we find the next opening (fols. 19b-20a) contains more love poetry, and drawings and paintings revolving around the themes of love and hunting. Love and the hunt characterize the following pages as well (fols. 20b-21a, figs. 3 and 4), which also contain one of the paintings in the same style as those we have been examining. This time we have a couple apprehended by Ottoman soldiers. They are dressed much more modestly than the amorous couple on fol. 19a (fig. 2). The woman is wearing a plain red outer garment, and her head is covered in a white turban, with a black veil over her face. Her lover is also wearing simple, unadorned clothes. The image comes to life and becomes almost humorous when considered with its facing page (fig. 4, fol. 21a). Here is one Persianate, perhaps Uzbek, image of a hunter and two paintings of lions. One of the lions has been chained, and a mouse and rabbit are playing around it, having nothing to fear from a captive lion. The poetry on this page again has love as its theme, talking of the fire of love, and the drunkenness from practicing. But it also has another element—the word ha\'fiz is repeated at the end of each line of the second poem. In addition to being the name of the renowned Persian poet, ha\'fiz also means guardian, keeper, preserver, governor, or one who has memorized the Quran. With this in play, all the images on these two pages can be related to each other. The image of the lion in captivity, hunted, and now guarded no doubt by a ha\'fiz, juxtaposed with the image of the archer who might be imagined to have captured the lion.

Most of all, however, the word ha\'fiz resonates with the soldiers who have just caught the amorous couple, potentially saving the woman from receiving a blow to her reputation, and also protecting the order of society. Some things, we know, could not take place in public places like the park or countryside in which we see this couple. Here we see love as an illicit activity, something that must be curtailed under the guardianship of the state so order can be kept in society. It is possible that what we see on this page is a result of the population surge historians have recorded in the mid-sixteenth century, as well as military problems in the countryside, which forced many rural young men to migrate to the cities, especially to Istanbul, in search of employment.\textsuperscript{15} This, coupled with "increasingly municipalized forms of prostitution," as Andrews and Kalpakli explain, meant that women became "objects of widespread erotic interest to the extent that demanded the attention of the authorities." The authorities' warnings to boaters on the Bosphorus not to allow men and women to ride together, brought to scholarly attention years ago by Ahmet Refik, are also a reaction to public

\textsuperscript{14} Andrews and Kalpakli, The Age of Beloveds, pp. 70-71

The state was thus trying to regulate the interactions of young men and women in the public sphere, in parks, markets, and streets. What we see in this painting is a visualization of that mechanism of control.

The two pages (20b and 21a) are also linked to each other with the theme of hunting, as the young man can be said to be the hunter, and the woman his prey, but also the couple is prey to the janissaries, just like the lions on the facing page are potential prey to the Uzbek archer, and the lion would have hunted the mouse or the rabbit, had he been free. Love, hunting, and protection...Although they do not come together to form a cohesive narrative, these two pages remind us that the album was put together with attention to how the separate pieces were related to each other. Here the relation seems to be metaphoric, enhanced by the juxtaposition of word and image.

Separated from this opening by two pages of calligraphy and illumination is our final example (fol. 23a, fig. 5). The upper image is very similar to the public entertainment scene on folio 19a, except that the performers at the center are fewer—there are only three of them. They are also engaged in much more exaggerated movements, their legs moving up and down fiercely, their arms pumping, and bodies in jarring poses. The audience around them is watching in wonder and amusement. The lower image again picks up on the theme of vulgarity and depicts what might be interpreted as the illicit side of love. Here we find four men in various states of drunkenness in the countryside. One is seated on the ground, kneeling, but his head has fallen forward and he is probably passed out. Another is spayed out on the ground in full dress, except that his turban has fallen off his head. This figure provides a link with the upper image, since in that entertainment scene too are two figures who have taken off their turbans. But theirs are neatly placed in front of them, the right way up, and furthermore, the small cap that serves as the base of the turban is still on their heads. Theirs is controlled relaxation, but in the image below, things have gotten out of control. Another contrast between the two images are the two cats. The cat in the upper image is white, and quietly sitting, watching. The black cat below, however, has started to eat form his masters' food: there is no one sober enough to attend to the food or control the cat.

Perhaps most out of control is the amorous couple on the right. These two men have discarded their pants and turbans, and are caressing each other, with their genitalia in full view. That this scene is not considered appropriate is evident by the servants on the left side of the painting: one of them is biting his finger in surprise, the other has raised both hands to his cheeks in exaggerated wonder. A third is gesticulating forcefully, and a fourth is trying to wake up the fully-clad drunk man. A fifth servant, however, has brought them food—endorsing the party? One is reminded here of...
Andrews and Kalpakli’s assertion that the “garden or natural setting is a special kind of space, one where the rules of normal (public) space do not apply.”

The two panels of poetry on the facing page talk of friendship and love. One begins with “Jami’s intention was not fame when he wrote these brilliant verses/On each page he wrote witty remarks, memories, for the sake of lovers and friends.” The other one uses floral (rosebuds and petals) imagery to remind the reader of divine love. The poems inhibit us from interpreting the lower image in too negative a way. Their link with the male camaraderie in the upper image is perhaps clearer. Here we are treated to a more innocent image than below. The undressed lovers in the park are a reminder of boundaries being transgressed—too much of anything, too much wine, too much love, leading to unintended consequences.

The seven panels examined here all share the themes of love and sexuality: love and friendship among men, licit and illicit love among men and women, in public and private spaces. We see an upper class couple in the privacy of their garden, as well as numerous youths, male and female, in the public spaces of the city. We see love and companionship, but we also see erotic, potentially arousing images of naked bodies. Explicit sexuality, however, seems reserved for males only. Whether it is in the more innocent guise of bathers in a bathhouse, the slightly more risqué image of the drunken lovers in the countryside, or the grotesque inhabitants of the insane asylum, men’s bodies become the object of our gaze in a way that women’s bodies do not. The women we see in the paintings, whether a part of the amorous couple or as servants, are all respectably clad. We can only appreciate the beauty of their faces, the curl of their hair, and ever so subtly, the contours of their bodies. In the case of the couple apprehended by the janissaries, which is our only image of a woman in a public space, we cannot tell anything about the appearance of the woman, since she is wearing a loose gown, overcoat and veil, and even her face is completely obscured from us.

All of the paintings thematize viewing, too, which provides another common thread through them. The viewers in the coffee house/tavern who watch the performance are not too different than the people peering in from the window of the asylum, the man and woman caught by the janissaries were also seen, and caught, and the servants in the final painting are surprised by what they see when they bring more food out to the revelers. The presence of viewers, watchers, reminds us that there is a spectacle on display, something to be marveled at: a funny performance, sheer madness, or unbridled passion. The youths in the bathhouse are all watching each other, and being watched, and even the amorous couple in the privacy of their own garden are watching a performance and have servants who watch them in turn. And then there are the viewers of the album, who would be “watching” these paintings in a way, as if they were a performance, not frozen in time, but unraveling in front of the viewer’s eyes as they turn the pages of the album.

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17 Andrews and Kalpakli, the Age of Beloveds, p. 186.
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A closely related question is who this viewer is, and why these particular paintings are gathered together. This album was prepared for a specific individual, Sultan Ahmed I, a sultan known to be rather pious. Yet like most of his ancestors, he was also a lover of poetry, and is known to have spent time browsing the albums in the Topkapı collections.18 This particular album was probably compiled to reflect his tastes and the extent of his collection. Through the calligraphic examples, the album marks its patron as a connoisseur of nasta’liq, and a collector of Persian poetry. Through the paintings, he is identified as an appreciator of beauty in its different guises. The album must have also served as a source of entertainment. The narrative images examined here would fall into the entertainment category.

Through the end of the sixteenth century, narrative images of love in the Islamic world were illustrations of well-known romances. It is true that in the context of albums, one finds images of beautiful youths, men and women, that are paired with lyric poetry, and thematically connected to the words they accompany. But narrative scenes of love, without an accompanying text, are rare.19 As indeed are narrative scenes in general that do not illustrate a certain text.20 In that respect, the paintings in the Ahmed I album are quite remarkable. One does wonder what lead to their creation, how they were supposed to be used. They were possibly used in courtly entertainments, to accompany stories that were being told. We do know of such images used for Shahnama recitals as well as accounts of Ottoman history.21 Imagining an oral component to the album also explains the disconnect between some of the calligraphy and the images. It is an odd characteristic of the album that in its visual contents it provides images of contemporary Ottoman life, but in its verbal contents, we find no such local inflections.

Given that there are Ottoman poems that do describe love settings like the bath house, the parks of Istanbul, Göksu, or the coffee houses of the metropolis, such as those quoted in the Age of Beloveds, one wonders why the poetry in this album is limited to Persian poetry that talks of generic lovers and beloveds, and does not localize them. Perhaps the answer lies in the context we find these works in. The calligraphic examples, in other words, the bearers of the poetry, were given to the sultan as gifts. The album compiler was mostly picking from among the present contents of the sultan’s collection to pull the album together. Either there were no poems in Ahmed’s collection that described the coffee-houses, baths and gathering places of Istanbul, or they were not by significant enough calligraphers to be included here. It is also possible that Kalender preferred to keep the relations loose, and the images generic. Evocation, and not

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19 An exception are the Chinese-inspired (or perhaps Chinese) paintings on silk to be found in Timurid albums, as well as the Muhammed Siyah Qalam materials. See David J. Roxburgh, ed. Turks: Journey of a Thousand Years (London and New York: Royal Academy of Arts and Harry N. Abrams, 2005).
20 For a Safavid exception, see Massumeh Farhad, “An Artist’s Impression: Mu’in Musavvir’s Tiger Attacking a Youth,” Muqarnas 9 (1992): 116-23.
documentation, seems to be the driving force behind this set of pages. If the paintings were viewed in group settings where relevant poetry would be recited, however, they would come to life in a new way.

On its own, or in the imagined company of contemporary Ottoman poetry, the album of Ahmed I provides a fresh look at the life of the Ottoman palace and how the court imagined the city around it. The palace and the city reflected in this album are full of beauty as well as the grotesque, inhabited by excitement and entertainment, and people of different walks of life. Love and friendship, as well as madness and jealousy, float through the streets of Istanbul, carried around by shopkeepers and madrasa students, ulama and merchants, beautiful servant girls and their coquettish ladies, government officials and janissaries, poets and artisans.
(FIG. 3 - 20b)