The Turkish dresses in the costume-book of Rubens

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The L. A. Mayer Memorial at Jerusalem possesses a volume with watercolour drawings of Turkish costumes. A manuscript note on the first page gives all desirable information about its date and place of origin. The volume speaks in the first person: Le 25me de Jun 1587 Je suis este faict en Constantinople.

The costume drawings in the book alternate with leaves of Turkish 'silhouetted' paper which was much admired in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and which the first, or at least an early, owner used for entering French poems. This arrangement, which reminds one of the frequently found combination of costume-book and album amicorum, is not unique. In fact, a practically identical volume belongs to the art collections of the Veste Koburg. The leaves of ornamented paper are of Turkish origin, but the costume drawings are certainly the work of an European artist working at Istanbul. It is more than likely that he produced a number of replicas of the Volume which would have found a ready market.

A word should be said about the paintings of three animals which appear rather incongruously among the costumes. They are an elephant, a camel and a giraffe. The last one puzzled greatly the man who wrote explanatory notes in Italian under every picture. He was at a loss when it came to name this strange beast, and he confessed: 'Non so che sia'. As we shall see in a moment zoology was not the only field in which his knowledge was deficient.

Renaissance Europe showed an enormous interest in everything Turkish. Authentic drawings of Turkish costumes done on the spot were always welcome and sure of an immediate success. It will be sufficient to recall here the names of Pieter Coecke van Aelst, Nicolas de Nicolay and Melchior Lorichs. In spite of such a rich documentation the paintings in the Jerusalem codex are of importance because they reflect life in Turkey at a slightly later date, i.e. under Sultan Murad III (1574—1595). What adds to the interest of the volume is that Rubens copied from it not less than twenty-seven costume drawings. 'From it' means, of course, not that Rubens copied them from the codex now in the Mayer Memorial, but from one of its replicas.

These copies by Rubens form part of his costume-book now in the British Museum, a collection of pen drawings of historical and exotic dresses done
by the artist in his youth. The larger part of it consists of the dresses of the ancient Netherlands and of Burgundy, but the last eight leaves with altogether forty-one figures are dedicated to the picturesque costumes of the East. One leaf shows Arabic dresses (and also a Turkish woman) and the last two leaves Persian ones. We are concerned with the Turkish section.

Our statement about the Jerusalem codex being the source of Rubens does not apply to his very first Turkish drawing (fol. 33). The Turxsse vrouw in huys (fig. 1), a lady in trousers, a transparent undergarment, and a jacket, and with high wooden chopines, has no counterpart at Jerusalem. The best commentary on the drawing is provided by a passage in the travel-book of Reinhold Lubenau who stayed in Turkey from 1587 to 1589. Foreigners had no opportunities of seeing Muhammadan ladies in the intimacy of the house or harem, but Lubenau was able to observe from his window the wife of a wealthy neighbour. He described her dress in great detail: 'Uber den Hosen oben auf dem Leib tregt sie ein schon durchscheinendt Hambde von Seide... Ein Theil lassen das Haar ums Gesicht hangen... Sie gehen alle auf Holtzschuen, so schon gemahlet... Uber dem Hembde tragen ein gestept seiden Leibröcklein... ein Heublein von Goldt... hinter derselben einen Puschen schwartzer Reigerfedern... Sie hatte Halsbender, Armbender und Fusbender und trugk eine grosse, guldene Pantzerketten, die quer ums Leib.'

1 Rubens, Turkish Woman (fol. 33). London, British Museum.