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Austrian School
first half of the 18th century

An Ottoman Lion Hunt

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Oil on canvas

186 × 293 cm

Provenance: Private collection

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Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The *Turqueries*

The Turkish people entered Western historical consciousness during the Middle Ages. In the tenth century, Selyuq (990–ca. 1038), who gave his name to the Seljuk Turkish Empire, entered Anatolia from Central Asia accompanied by a vast multitude of Turks seeking plunder and lands more fertile than those of their regions of origin. The successive territorial expansion of the Seljuk sultans led to the disappearance of the power of the Abbasid Caliphate and to a decisive weakening of the Byzantine Empire.

The weakening of this first Turkish empire in the thirteenth century, caused by Mongol invasions and its subsequent dissolution, allowed the Ottoman Turks to assume its legacy, establishing their own sultanate upon the remnants of the former Seljuk state.

From that moment onward, and under the leadership of several sultans, the Ottomans occupied the regions of Asia Minor and the Balkans that still formed part of the old Byzantine Empire, until its definitive extinction during the reign of Mehmed II (1451–1481), who conquered the last Byzantine stronghold—the imperial capital of Constantinople—on 29 May 1453.

From that point forward, with the disintegration of the Byzantine bastion in southeastern Europe, the expansion of the Turkish Empire across the eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans over the following two centuries proved virtually unstoppable. By the time of Mehmed II's death, the Ottoman Empire had extended into Europe as far as the Kingdom of Serbia, whose capital, Belgrade, stood under imminent threat; it had occupied nearly all of Greece, except for certain territories and islands that remained under Venetian control, and had conquered present-day Bulgaria as well as a substantial portion of Romania. By the end of the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had emerged as a major power, posing a significant challenge to the Christian order across much of eastern and Mediterranean Europe.

In 1529, Suleiman the Magnificent (r. ca. 1520–1566) reached the gates of Vienna and initiated a siege that lasted between September and October of that year. This moment marked the peak of Ottoman expansion in Europe. Although it is true that there were occasions during the sixteenth century when Christian powers managed to defeat—and thus temporarily halt—this expansion (the Siege of Vienna in 1529, the Siege of Malta in 1565, and the Battle of Lepanto in 1571), the Ottoman Empire nevertheless remained a genuine threat, and by the death of Suleiman the Magnificent it had reached its greatest territorial extent (Fig. 1).

The Ottoman danger persisted throughout the seventeenth century due to its domination over most of the Balkan region. Following the Siege of Vienna in 1683 and the subsequent Battle of Kahlenberg, which resulted in the decisive defeat of the Ottoman forces, European powers—led by the Holy Roman Empire—began to perceive that Ottoman power had reached its zenith and was entering a slow but continuous decline. On a cultural level, what had long been Europe's greatest enemy gradually began to be viewed with curiosity rather than fear, no longer as a direct threat but rather as an exotic power at the heart of Europe. During the eighteenth century, what came to be known as the taste for *turqueries* emerged (*Turquerie*, a French term that encapsulated the fascination and curiosity for all things Turkish).

The threat posed by the expansion of the Ottoman Empire gradually gave way to fascination among the various European nations with its culture, its people, and its customs—in short, with Turkish society as a whole. Interestingly, this fascination with the exotic, located at the very gates of Christian Europe, emerged and developed primarily among the upper classes, the high bourgeoisie, and the nobility of the principal countries of both Western and Eastern Europe. In the Italian states, the Habsburg Empire, as well as in France and England, a taste developed for fashions and customs considered unusual within European culture, such as the existence of seraglios or, using the Turkish term, the sultan's harems.

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Fig. 1 Turcici Imperii Descriptio, Abraham Ortelius Atlas Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, ca. 1570

This fascination manifested itself in different ways throughout eighteenth-century Europe and was closely linked to the increasing flow of information about the Ottoman Empire, as well as to the continuity and abundance of diplomatic and commercial contacts with territories under Ottoman control. European travelers who journeyed through the empire stimulated knowledge and interest through the publication of travel accounts and diaries describing their experiences in the Balkans, Istanbul, and the Middle East. One of the most notable examples is the ambassador of Louis XIV of France, Charles de Ferriol (1652–1722), who resided in Istanbul at the court of Ahmed III from 1692 until his return to France in 1711.

Ferriol was accompanied by Jean-Baptiste Vanmour (Valenciennes, 1671 – Istanbul, 1737), a French artist who, after his patron's departure from Istanbul, remained in the city painting for the sultan's court as well as for other ambassadors and Western travelers who settled there for various reasons. For Ferriol, he produced more than one hundred engravings intended to illustrate the book published by the ambassador recounting his experience, *Recueil de cent estampes représentant différentes nations du Levant*, whose success in the West was extraordinary, being published in five different languages and contributing decisively to the dissemination of the *turqueries*. The Dutch ambassador Cornelis Calkoen acquired many of Vanmour's canvases and brought them back to the Netherlands. Today, an important collection is preserved in the Rijksmuseum and constitutes a key reference for understanding the penetration of Turkish culture into eighteenth-century Western art (Figs. 2 and 3).

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Figs. 2&3 Above, Jean Baptiste Vanmour, *The First Day of School*, ca. 1720–37, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; below, Jean Baptiste Vanmour, *Audience of Sultan Ahmed III with the Dutch Ambassador Cornelis Calkoen*, ca. 1727, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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In particular, Vanmour's engravings, together with the arrival of products, garments, and all kinds of objects originating from the Ottoman Empire, contributed to the emergence of what came to be known as *turquerie* as a pictorial genre in its own right.

Members of the nobility commissioned portraits of themselves according to the customs of the sultan's court. This fashion for being depicted wearing luxurious garments of Turkish origin and set within domestic interiors resembling those found in the palaces of Istanbul spread throughout France, England, and, notably, the Austrian Empire, which during the eighteenth century bordered Ottoman territories. Numerous examples of this portrait à la turque survive from this period.

Within this trend, the most outstanding figure was undoubtedly Jean-Étienne Liotard (Geneva, 1702–1789), who emerged as the artist most responsible for disseminating the fashion for *turquerie* and one of the most prolific creators of works inspired by Ottoman themes. Although born in Geneva, his artistic training took place between Italy and Paris. What ultimately distinguished him and left an indelible mark on his career was his journey to Constantinople between 1738 and 1742, after which he settled in Vienna, at the Austrian imperial court.

Numerous examples survive that demonstrate his preference for dressing his sitters in Oriental attire and placing them within settings or interiors easily identifiable with those lands. A fine example of this type of portrait is the pastel depicting Marie Fargues, the painter's wife (Fig. 4), executed between 1756 and 1758 (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands). It remains, in essence, a fantasy—a *turquerie*—yet the blue ribbon that gathers Marie's abundant hair, the low sofa evocative of furnishings commonly found in Turkish domestic interiors, the Persian carpet at her feet, and the exquisite white dress bordered with blue bands harmonizing with the overall atmosphere of the room where the model poses all captivate the viewer with an air of dreamlike stillness. This effect is reinforced by the relaxed and distant pose of the artist's wife. The interplay between precise, realistic representation and the sensation of witnessing an intimate moment—ultimately a product of Liotard's imagination—perfectly reflects the idealized impression Europeans had formed of the private atmosphere of those interiors that Liotard came to know well in Constantinople, belonging to an exotic civilization situated at the very gates of the Habsburg Empire.

Liotard himself produced at least two self-portraits dressed à la turque, such as the pastel preserved in the Uffizi Gallery. The artist gazes directly at the viewer wearing a fur cap known as a kalpak, traditional in the Ottoman world—possibly of Central Asian origin—and generally made from lamb or astrakhan fur (Fig. 5). Such attire was commonly adopted by European intellectuals, diplomats, and travelers who visited the Ottoman Empire during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and embraced Turkish fashion.

As indicated by the inscription in the upper left corner, Liotard refers to himself as “the



Fig. 4 Jean-Etienne Liotard, Marie Fargues, exhibition of the painter, Pastel, 1752-58, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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Turkish painter,” a designation linked to his stay in Constantinople.¹ The work thus constitutes a self-portrait executed shortly after his return from the city, in which he reaffirms his identity as a traveling artist arriving from the Turkish Empire.

Vanmour and Liotard may in fact represent exceptions, having resided within the Ottoman Empire itself. Most artists, however, neither traveled to nor settled in Ottoman territories. Nevertheless, the fashion for *turquerie* spread throughout Europe, particularly within the Austrian Empire and in France. In both states, a rich iconography of paintings emerged that reflected this fascination with *turquerie* (Fig. 6). The hunting scene examined in the present study was most likely painted precisely within the Austrian Empire. The scene is set in an idealized landscape somewhere in the Near East—perhaps Anatolia, Syria, or ancient Mesopotamia.

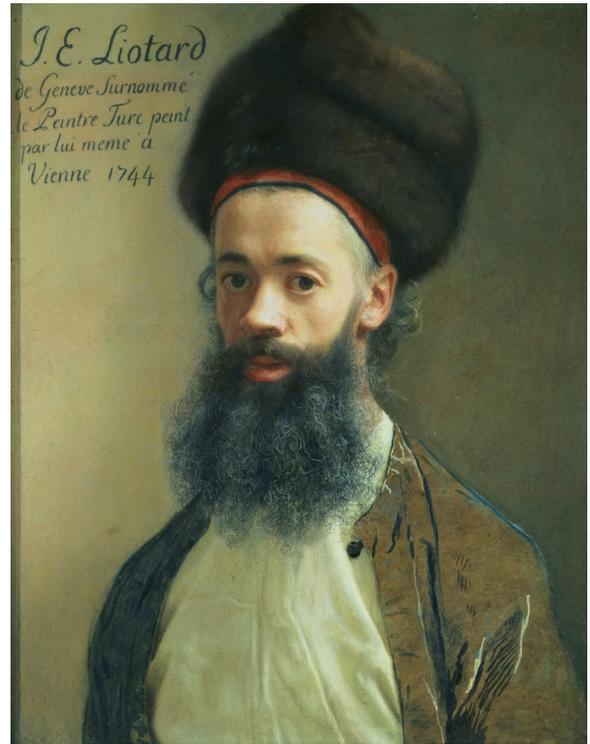


Fig. 5 Jean-Etienne Liotard, Self-portrait, pastel, 1744, Uffizi, Florence



Fig. 6 Charles-André van Loo, Madame Pompadour dressed as a Turkish sultana serving coffee, 1747, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

¹ J. E. Liotard/de Genève surnommé/le Peintre Turc peint/par lui même à/Vienne 1744; → J. E. Liotard of Geneva, surnamed “the Turkish Painter,” painted by himself in Vienna in 1744.

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The Work

The lion hunt possesses a long iconographic tradition that can be traced back to ancient art, at least as far as Assyrian civilization. One of the finest examples illustrating the representation of the Asiatic lion across the centuries is preserved in the British Museum in London, where a series of reliefs discovered in the North Palace of Nineveh depict the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal—whose reign lasted from 668 to 631 BCE—slaying numerous lions, most of them males characterized by their distinctive manes. Particularly striking in these reliefs is the similarity observable with our painting in the depiction of the mortal combat between man—mounted on horseback in both cases—and the lions that leap forward in an attempt to bring them down (Fig. 7).

This resemblance is especially noteworthy given that the Assyrian reliefs were only rediscovered for the Western world in the nineteenth century. Yet both in the Assyrian reliefs and in our painting, one of the lions leaps onto the hindquarters of the horse in an almost identical manner. In both images, this is the lion positioned furthest to the left (Figs. 8 and 9).

Such similarity appears to confirm that representational conventions for lion hunts remained remarkably consistent over the centuries across relief sculpture, manuscript illumination, and painting—very possibly because in these regions many monuments from Antiquity remained visible for long periods.

Within Ottoman culture, one also finds manuscript miniatures—naturally influenced by medieval Indian and Persian traditions—that present compositions comparable to that of our painting (Fig. 10).

It is evident, in light of the example selected, that the author of our hunting scene in some way took into account the decorative value of these scenes as illustrated in Ottoman manuscripts. The Western painter could easily have known such miniatures, which may have served as inspiration in lending a distinctly Turkish character to the representation of the hunt.



Fig. 7 Assyrian relief depicting king Ashurbanipal hunting lions. 645-635 BC. British Museum, London.



Fig. 8 Assyrian relief depicting king Ashurbanipal hunting lions, (detail). 645-635 BC. British Museum, London.



Fig. 9 An Ottoman Lion Hunt (detail), oil on canvas Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

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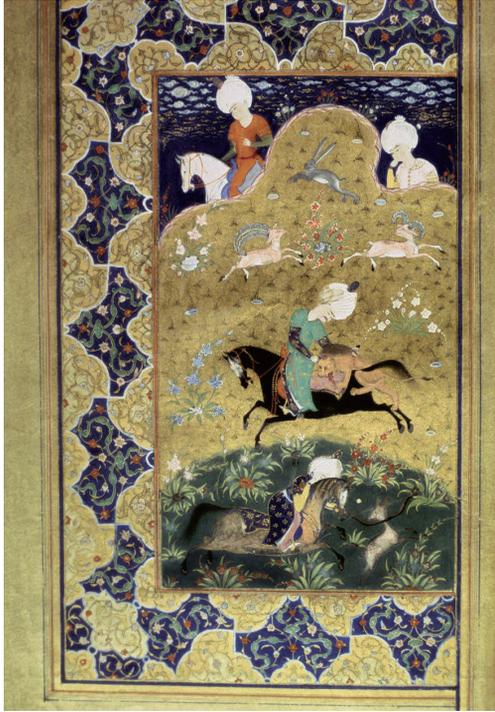


Fig. 8 Assyrian relief depicting king Ashurbanipal hunting lions, (detail). 645-635 BC. British Museum, London.

In Western painting, hunting scenes have been present since the fifteenth century, with their origins emerging between the Italian Trecento and Quattrocento. Works such as Paolo Uccello's *Hunt in the Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford (United Kingdom)—a panel originally intended to decorate the front of a cassone—and Pisanello's *Conversion of Saint Eustace* (National Gallery, London) established the archetype for the representation of such scenes in Western painting (Fig. 11).

Perhaps the decisive moment, and the one that most directly connects with the work examined here, occurred much closer in time to our painting: the first half of the seventeenth century. The hunting scenes of Peter Paul Rubens represent a qualitative leap. The purely decorative character became subordinated to the principles governing religious and historical art—in other words, to the Renaissance concept of *ut pictura poesis*, painting as poetry, or as an art that narrates for the eye. Several hunting scenes within Rubens's oeuvre exemplify this transformation. In all of them, unleashed violence dominates the composition: animals and warriors—whether Muslim or Christian—are intertwined in a whirlwind of twisting bodies, wounded, terrified, or consumed by rage and fury.

When comparing our painting with the Rubens example illustrated in this study (Fig. 12), both differences and similarities become apparent. It is clear that the painter of our work created a hunting scene set within a Turkish environment in which numerous elements from the traditional iconography of the lion hunt merge with Rubens's dynamic vision. The hunting scene presented here may thus be understood as an attempt to “transform” the violence and dynamism of Rubensian composition into a decorative art that simultaneously incorporates the tradition of Eastern miniature painting. Our *Lion Hunt* displays a characteristic diagonal or cross-shaped compositional structure frequently found in Rubens's own battle and hunting scenes.



Fig. 11 Paolo Uccello, *The Hunt*, ca. 1465–1470, tempera on panel, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, United Kingdom.

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Fig. 12 Peter Paul Rubens, *Lion Hunt*, 1610s, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.

Indeed, we possess a *turquerie* by a contemporary French painter depicting a lion hunt. Jean-François de Troy (Paris, 1679 – Rome, 1752) painted a hunting scene now preserved in the Musée de la Picardie (Amiens, France). The canvas recalls Rubens's compositional model and appears largely detached from Eastern artistic traditions (Fig. 13). The lions conform more closely to conventional representations in Western painting, and it is plausible that the artist had never observed a lion directly, instead adapting the appearance of common cats to which he added a mane. This stands in marked contrast to the colorful and animated representation found in the painting examined in the present study. Equally distinct are the remarkable lions in our work, which resemble mythological creatures imbued with the fury of a hydra or even Medusa herself, seemingly drawn from the iconographic imagination of the East. Our animals do not entirely resemble natural lions either, yet they clearly function as symbolic images of the ferocity of wild Nature.

This synthesis apparent in the painting might become fully intelligible if the original destination



Fig. 13 Jean-François de Troy, *Lion Hunt*, 1679, Musée de la Picardie, Amiens, France.

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of the work were known. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the hunt was initially intended for a frontier region between the Austrian and Ottoman Empires in the mid-eighteenth century. The painting may even have been destined for the Ottoman market itself, given the presence of elements rooted in Near Eastern artistic traditions, both in Ottoman miniature painting and in ancient reliefs that likely remained visible in many parts of the Ottoman Empire. Alternatively, it may have been produced for territories recently recovered by the Habsburg Empire in regions such as Wallachia or Hungary—perhaps for a noble residence whose owner was accustomed to the aesthetics of Ottoman art.

In any case, the painter of our work favors a compositional scheme resembling that of a relief and does not abandon a decorative intention, even embracing a certain naïve character. This naïve quality is particularly evident in the depiction of the lions: they possess black muzzles more appropriate to a hound, yet are crowned with agitated manes that lend them a captivating and expressive presence.

In summary, this is a painting belonging to the Austrian sphere of the first half of the eighteenth century, likely intended for a hunting pavilion or country residence of a noble patron. It would not be surprising if it had originally been destined for a region near the frontier with the Ottoman Empire, perhaps Hungary. The composition is rooted in the dynamism of hunting and battle scenes characteristic of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century painting, particularly within the Flemish tradition associated with the school of Peter Paul Rubens. At the same time, however, it preserves the structural qualities of ancient reliefs and hunting scenes from the classical world.

The scene unfolds within an idealized landscape of palm trees and mountains, with green meadows that bear no specific reference to the actual geography of Anatolia, for example, where groups of Asiatic lions still existed during the eighteenth century. This hunting scene, in which the protagonists appear as Turkish warriors, follows the fashion of *turquerie*, so prevalent in Western culture at the time and grounded in a fascination with the exotic and mysterious character of the Ottoman world.

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