



# Prayer Carpets Colloquium

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**March 21-22, 2023**

10:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Washington, D.C. (EDT)

17:00-19:30 Istanbul (+3 GMT)



THE GEORGE WASHINGTON  
UNIVERSITY MUSEUM  
THE TEXTILE MUSEUM



SADBERK HANIM  
MÜZESİ

# Organizers

*The Prayer Carpets Colloquium is organized by The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., in collaboration with the Vehbi Koç Foundation's Sadberk Hanım Museum, Türkiye.*

## **The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum**

Located on GW's campus in downtown D.C., the museum celebrates art, history and world cultures. Public programs and exhibitions are inspired by diverse collections of global textiles and local history. Resources for students and scholars include the peer-reviewed *The Textile Museum Journal*, the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center and the Albert H. Small Center for National Capital Area Studies.

[www.museum.gwu.edu](http://www.museum.gwu.edu)

## **Vehbi Koç Foundation's Sadberk Hanım Museum**

The Sadberk Hanım Museum's collection of over 20,000 objects includes archaeological items representing the material culture of the numerous civilizations that arose in Anatolia between 6000 BC and the Byzantine period. It also features Ottoman period Islamic works, which include European, Near Eastern and Far Eastern objects made for the Ottoman market, as well as Ottoman period textiles, costume and embroidery.

[www.sadberkhanimmuzesi.org.tr/en](http://www.sadberkhanimmuzesi.org.tr/en)

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## Exhibition

*Prayer and Transcendence* introduces visitors to the role and iconography of prayer carpets from across the Islamic world, as well as design comparisons from the Jewish tradition. On view from February 18 through July 1, 2023, some 20 carpets spanning the 16th through 19th centuries are drawn from five collections – The Textile Museum Collection, Harvard Art Museums, Cincinnati Art Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Markarian Collection.

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## Colloquium

The Prayer Carpets Colloquium brings into conversation scholars and other leading voices from across the globe. Held in conjunction with *Prayer and Transcendence*, the colloquium is designed to enrich the scholarly contributions of the exhibition. Panelists on the first day will explore prayer carpets in context, with a discussion of the divine interpretation of these works following on the second day.

# Day 1: Prayer Carpets in Context

Tuesday, March 21 | 10:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

- 10:00-11:00**    **Welcome Remarks**  
**Keynote Lecture: The Sajjadah: Symbolic Architecture in the Realm of Textiles in Islamic Art**  
*Walter B. Denny, distinguished professor, University of Massachusetts Amherst, United States*
- 11:00-12:00**    **Panel: Prayer Carpet Traditions**  
**Silent Witnesses of Worship: Prayer Carpets From the Vakıflar Collection**  
*Suzan Bayraktaroğlu, retired director, Vakıflar Carpet Museum, Türkiye*  
**An Overview of Anatolian Prayer Rugs**  
*Şerife Atlıhan, retired director of research, Center of Traditional Handicraft and Design, Marmara University, Türkiye*  
**Court Artist Designs: Examining The Met's McMullan Ottoman Prayer Carpet**  
*Deniz Beyazıt, associate curator, Department of Islamic Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*
- 12:00-12:30**    **Discussion and Q&A**  
*Moderated by Hülya Bilgi, director, Sadberk Hanım Museum, Türkiye*
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# Day 2: Designing for Transcendence

Wednesday, March 22 | 10:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

- 10:00-11:00**    **Exhibition Overview: Prayer and Transcendence**  
*Sumru Belger Krody, senior curator, The Textile Museum Collection, Washington, D.C.*  
**Keynote Lecture: Things Seen and Unseen: Light, Color and the Divine in Islamic Textiles**  
*Idries Trevathan, curator of Islamic art and culture, Museum at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, Saudi Arabia*
- 11:00-12:00**    **Panel: Divine Designs**  
**The Multi-Layered Architecture of a Spiritual Journey on Anatolian Prayer Rugs**  
*Turgut Saner, History of Architecture Department, Istanbul Technical University, Türkiye*  
*Hülya Bilgi, director, Sadberk Hanım Museum, Türkiye*  
**Motifs of Islamic Cosmology on the Sajjadah**  
*Fatima Kadić, head librarian, faculty of Islamic Studies, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*  
**Shared Symbols, New Meanings: Comparing Jewish and Islamic Carpets**  
*Alberto Boralevi, independent researcher, Italy*
- 12:00-12:30**    **Discussion and Q&A**  
*Moderated by Sumru Belger Krody, senior curator, The Textile Museum Collection, Washington, D.C.*
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# Abstracts and Speakers

Tuesday, March 21

## KEYNOTE LECTURE

### **The Sajjadah: Symbolic Architecture in the Realm of Textiles in Islamic Art**

*Walter B. Denny, distinguished professor,  
University of Massachusetts Amherst, United States*

One of the most historically pervasive and geographically widespread iconographic motifs in what we call Islamic art is the idea of the arch – as a single motif, repetitive motif (arcade) and adjunct to three-dimensional forms (mihrab, portal). The arch motif has been the subject of much scholarly attention, especially as it has been reflected in textile arts, most notably in what is conventionally called a “prayer rug” (namazlık), “prostration carpet” (sajjadah) or “rank carpet” (saff). The stories of how this iconic form traveled through the highways and byways of artistic transmission, how it underwent evolution in both meaning and artistic details, and how it underwent a 90-degree transformation from vertical and three-dimensional (architectural element) to horizontal and two-dimensional (saff and sajjadah carpets) constitute some of the most fascinating narratives in the history of art in Islamic lands.

#### **About Walter B. Denny**

Walter B. Denny is Distinguished Professor of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, specializing in the art of the Islamic world. He completed a Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard in 1970 and began his teaching career at UMass/Amherst later that year. From 2007 to 2017 he also served as senior consultant in the Department of Islamic Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. His research interests and publications concentrate in the Ottoman Turkish sphere, the history of Islamic carpets and textiles, and the impact of Islamic art on the art of the so-called West. His long association with The Textile Museum includes six years as a trustee, the Charles Grant Ellis research associateship in Oriental Carpets, the George Hewitt Myers Award, and two major carpet exhibitions, both co-curated with Sumru Belger Krody.

## Silent Witnesses of Worship: Prayer Carpets From the Vakıflar Collection

Suzan Bayraktarođlu, retired director,  
Vakıflar Carpet Museum, Türkiye

We owe the creation of many carpets that are safeguarded in today's museums and private collections to the Islamic belief. For centuries, carpets have been preserved in mosques as part of their foundations. Initially, these carpets were given as gifts to mosques by the people who commissioned their construction or used them as their place of worship. The belief and hope is that the person who donates a carpet will also benefit from the rewards that occur while praying on it. Praying is performed on these carpets five times a day. When the servant meets with God, the carpet plays the silent witness.

At first, carpets with various patterns were donated to mosques. Later, prayer rugs with the distinctive "mihrab" design were produced. The mihrab is the recessed part on the qibla wall of a mosque, which Muslims face while praying and where the imam stands while leading the prayer. It is possible to see all the elements of the mihrab in the design of a prayer carpet.

Prayer carpets in various colors and patterns may be named based on where they were woven in Anatolia. This presentation will introduce examples in the Vakıflar Collection from Milas, Gördes, Kula, Ladik, Uşak, Kayseri, Kırşehir, Mucur, Nevşehir, Sivas and Bayburt in Türkiye.

### About Suzan Bayraktarođlu

Suzan Bayraktarođlu was born in Adana, Türkiye. She completed her graduate and postgraduate studies at Ankara University, Faculty of Language, History and Geography, Department of Art History. She is currently completing a Ph.D. at the same university. Her graduate and postgraduate theses focus on the art of carpets and kilims.

In 1983, Bayraktarođlu started work at the General Directorate of Foundations in Ankara. She worked as an art historian, carpet specialist, museum researcher and museum director at the General Directorate of Foundations until her retirement in 2020. She established nine Foundation Museums in Ankara, Konya, Tokat, Kastamonu, Gaziantep, Edirne, Istanbul, Nicosia and Sivas during her time with the Foundations. Her new book, *Silent Witnesses of Worship, Foundation Carpets*, was written with selections from the Ankara Foundation Works Museum collection.

## An Overview of Anatolian Prayer Rugs

Şerife Atlıhan, retired director of research, Center of Traditional Handicraft and Design, Marmara University, Türkiye

Prayer rugs constitute an indispensable part of worship for Muslims. Every person, rich or poor, has at least one. Prayer rugs are produced for individual and collective worship. This presentation will survey different types of prayer carpets woven in Anatolia and explain their differences and similarities based on material, technique, place of use and place of production.



### About Serife Atlıhan

Şerife Atlıhan graduated from the Applied Fine Arts State High School in Istanbul with a focus on textiles. After graduating, she worked as a designer and chief of the design department at Sezik Textile Factory in İzmir. She then began her academic career with the Traditional Turkish Arts Department of Fine Arts Faculty at the Marmara University. She became a professor, head of the Traditional Turkish Arts Department and director of Handicraft and Design Research and Application Center in the same institution.

Atlıhan has been field researcher to many projects, given many scholarly presentations and published myriad articles. Her book *Tablet Weaving from Anatolia and Topkapı Palace* was published by Marmara University Press in 2017. She has curated or co-curated numerous exhibitions. Since 1983, she worked as a coordinator of the DOBAG Project. Since her retirement in 2018, Atlıhan has completed her second book on traditional girth weaving, which is awaiting publication.

## Court Artist Designs: Examining The Met's McMullan Ottoman Prayer Carpet

Deniz Beyazit, associate curator, Department of Islamic Art,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Some carpets in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art have received significant scholarly attention, such as the Ballard double-column prayer carpet (22.100.51), while others have rarely been published. This is the case with The Met's floral prayer carpet donated by Joseph McMullan in 1974, included in the *Prayer and Transcendence* exhibition at The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum. This presentation will posit the importance of this carpet in understanding Ottoman artistic output in the early modern period. It is one of a group of Ottoman court prayer carpets with characteristic "saz" leaf design, which were woven in Istanbul and Cairo during the 16th and 17th centuries. Perhaps one of the earliest surviving examples of its kind, research suggests the carpet could be attributed to the artist-designer Shah Qulu.



### About Deniz Beyazit

Deniz Beyazit received a Ph.D. in 2009 from the Sorbonne in Paris and is an associate curator in the Department of Islamic Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which she joined in 2010. Her research interests vary from medieval Islamic to Ottoman arts. She has widely published and lectured on various aspects of Islamic Art. Among her exhibitions are *The Making of a Collection: Islamic Art at The Met* (2011-12), *Carpets of the East in Paintings from the West* (2014 at The Met and an expanded version at the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto in 2015) and *Portable Storage: Tribal Weavings from the Collection of William and Inger Ginsberg* (co-curated with Walter B. Denny, at The Met 2017-18). Together with Sheila Canby and Martina Rugiadi she co-curated the exhibition *Court and Cosmos: The Great Age of the Seljuqs* (2016).

Dr. Beyazit contributes to *Collecting Inspiration: Edward C. Moore at Tiffany & Co.* (2024, catalog published in 2021). With Guy Burak and Sabiha Göloğlu she co-directs the ongoing project "From West Africa to Southeast Asia: The History of Muhammad al-Jazuli's *Dala'il al-Khayrat* Prayer Book (15th–20th Centuries)" on the history of al-Jazuli's prayer cycle for the Prophet Muhammad. Among her other projects are "History of Dress in the Islamic world" and "Orientalisms and Collecting Islamic Art".

**Wednesday, March 22**

**Exhibition Overview:  
*Prayer and Transcendence***

*Sumru Belger Krody, senior curator, The Textile Museum Collection, Washington, D.C.*

Prayer carpets share a distinctive iconography recognized by Muslims around the world. Developed over centuries and circulated through trade and religious pilgrimage (hajj), this set of images – including flowers, an arch, lamp and water pitcher – transforms each carpet into a sacred space where the worshipper can commune with God. *Prayer and Transcendence* explores this iconography and its interpretation across time and artistic traditions, from Ottoman Türkiye to Safavid Iran to Mughal India.

Examples on display from western Anatolia, the Caucasus and Iran all share a central motif: an elegant arch surrounded by vegetation and flowers. One of the most iconic images in a prayer carpet, the arch often symbolizes the gateway to paradise, conceived in the Koran as a lush, walled garden. The exhibition also explores the spiritual meaning of the lamp and water pitcher motifs that recur throughout prayer carpet design.

Spanning the 16th through 19th centuries, the works on display are drawn from five collections – The Textile Museum Collection, Harvard Art Museums, Cincinnati Art Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Markarian Collection – and also include related examples from outside the Islamic tradition.

**About Sumru Belger Krody**

Sumru Belger Krody joined The Textile Museum in 1994 and was appointed senior curator in 2011. Additionally, she is editor in chief of The Textile Museum Journal. She occasionally teaches courses at GW's Corcoran School of the Arts & Design.

Born in Izmir, Türkiye, Krody specializes in textiles from the late antique era and from the Islamic world. She has curated or co-curated 21 exhibitions, including most recently *Woven Interiors: Furnishing Early Medieval Egypt*; *A Nomad's Art: Kilims of Anatolia*; *Binding the Clouds: The Art of Central Asian Ikat*; *Unraveling Identity: Our Textiles, Our Stories*; and *The Sultan's Garden: The Blossoming of Ottoman Art*. She has authored or co-authored seven exhibition-related publications, along with numerous articles and book chapters.

Krody holds a bachelor's degree in classical archaeology from Istanbul University and a master's in classical archaeology from the University of Pennsylvania. She is a member of several professional organizations, including the Textile Society of America and Centre International d'Etude des Textiles Anciens.



## Things Seen and Unseen: Light, Color and the Divine in Islamic Textiles

*Idries Trevathan, curator of Islamic art and culture, Museum at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra), Saudi Arabi*

Among the most significant works exhibited in Ithra's exhibition *Shatr Al Masjid: The Art of Orientation* is a carpet fragment which originally formed part of a communal multiple niche prayer carpet, or "saf," in the Selimiye mosque of Edirne, Türkiye. Built in 1569-1575 during the reign of Sultan Selim II (1524-1574), the Selimiye Mosque is widely considered the greatest masterpiece of celebrated Ottoman architect Sinan Agha (1490-1588), who designed and supervised its construction. Sinan Agha may have also had a hand in designing its interior furnishings, as the design of the saf clearly reflects the splendor of the mosque's interior.

In addition to examining the design, history and context of this saf, this presentation explores how worshipers at the time may have perceptually engaged with this masterpiece of religious art. Drawing on a range of contemporary literature, such as architectural and mystical treatises, histories, travelogues and poetry, the presentation aims to provide insight into pre-modern Islamic aesthetic perception and its concern with the importance of color, light and wonder. The analysis also extends to contemporary descriptions of other Ottoman mosques, situating our understanding of the aesthetic dimension of the prayer carpet within a pre-modern Islamic intellectual context. Thus, it can be seen to support the view that mystical conceptualizations of light and color were often connected to corporeal color in objects. The world of sensuous color observed in the prayer carpet could serve as a vehicle and focus towards the spiritual world.

### About Idries Trevathan

Idries Trevathan is curator of Islamic art at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra). Since its opening in 2018, he has established Ithra as a major destination for Islamic art, building its collection from scratch and curating major exhibitions in partnership with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Supreme Council of Egyptian Antiquities. In 2021, Dr. Trevathan organized the first major international Islamic art conference in Saudi Arabia, "Mosque: Innovation in Object, Form and Function," which drew distinguished scholars from leading museums and universities around the world. Trevathan received a B.A. in conservation studies at the City & Guilds of London Art School, and an M.Phil. and Ph.D. in Islamic art from the Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London.

As a trained conservator, Dr. Trevathan regularly works on major conservation projects and has conducted technical and aesthetic color studies on a range of Islamic architectural works, most notably on several 18th- and 19th-century Damascene reception rooms and the 16th-century Ottoman era porticoes in the Masjid Al-Haram in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. He has also authored and edited several books, including *Colour, Light and Wonder in Islamic Art* (Saqi Books 2020), *The Art of Orientation: An Exploration of the Mosque through Objects* (Hirmer 2020) and *Hijrah: In the Footsteps of the Prophet* (Hirmer 2022).

## The Multi-Layered Architecture of a Spiritual Journey on Anatolian Prayer Rugs

Hülya Bilgi, director, Sadberk Hanım Museum, Türkiye

Turgut Saner, History of Architecture Department,  
Istanbul Technical University, Türkiye

Anatolian prayer rugs of the Ottoman classical period echo features of the built architecture of the Seljuk empire. The designs of these rugs incorporate spatiality, and their surfaces reflect the configuration of a prayer room, including the main portal and the "mihrab," with its symbolic function as a gateway to the afterlife. This presentation will explore how Anatolian prayer rugs convey the experience of movement within a space or, when the rug is hung on a wall, of beholding a celestial building firsthand. Presenters will demonstrate the many ways in which the designs of prayer rugs convey the spiritual journey to eternity.



### About Hülya Bilgi

Hülya Bilgi received bachelor's and master's degrees in the Department of Art History at Istanbul University. She has been director of the Sadberk Hanım Museum since 2005, where she started work as an art historian in 1988. Bilgi has curated many exhibitions held at the museum, including *A Heartfelt Passion: The Sevgi Gönül Calligraphy Collection* (2004), *Reunited After Centuries* (2005), *Ottoman Silk Textiles: Çatma & Kemha* (2007), *Dance of Fire* (2009), *Skill of the Hand Delight of the Eye* (2012), *Jewel* (2015), *Kütahya* (2018) and *For My Friend* (2022). Specializing in Ottoman embroideries and Iznik and Kütahya tiles and ceramics, Bilgi has also authored publications such as *Suna and Inan Kiraç Foundation Collection Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics* (2005) and *Iznik, Ömer Koç Collection* (2015).

### About Turgut Saner

Turgut Saner received a Ph.D. from Istanbul Technical University (ITU) School of Architecture, where he later became a member of the Department of History of Architecture. Today, he still teaches at ITU in the same department. He completed his doctoral studies on Hellenistic architecture and conducted several fieldworks in Turkey, including his latest archaeological surveys in Zenonopolis and Larisa. In addition to archaeological works, Dr. Saner initiated many research projects on Ottoman art and architecture, especially in the context of intercultural aspects and encounters with Europe. As a guest lecturer, he has held teaching positions in Berlin, Munich, Karlsruhe, Rikkyo, Valencia and Cottbus. Dr. Saner is currently involved in collaborative studies with Istanbul Archaeological Museums and Sadberk Hanım Museum.

## Motifs of Islamic Cosmology on the Sajjadah

*Fatima Kadić, head librarian, faculty of Islamic Studies,  
University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

This presentation aims to show that the cosmological motifs applied on the "sajjadahs" of different Muslim artistic traditions are actually mentioned in the Qur'an and the Sunna, and elaborated in different Islamic theoretical approaches with special reference to those based on Sufism. The three main cosmological motifs mentioned in the Light Verse (Qur'an, 35:24) are the light (the lamp), the niche and the tree. Acknowledging that these motifs are not unique to Islamic art, the paper explores Muslims' contribution to the wide body of interpretation of these motifs, contextualizing their application in the case of Islamic prayer rugs.

The presentation will begin with a definition of the sajjadah, stressing its poorly understood or neglected aspects in carpet literature. Brief insights into the Sufi exegesis of Qur'anic images (the lamp, niche and tree) will be shared, before identifying their application on different types of sajjadas. The presentation will also explore whether these motifs still bear their basic Islamic meaning in the light of their deformation and/or stylization as found on village sajjadas made by Muslim weavers.

### About Fatima Kadić

Fatima Kadić works as head librarian at the library of the Faculty of Islamic Studies, University of Sarajevo. In addition to a diploma in librarianship, she obtained two bachelor's degrees from the University of Sarajevo, one in Islamic studies and another in Persian and Turkish languages and literatures. She defended her M.A. and Ph.D. dissertations at the University of Sarajevo. The former explored the tree-of-life and bird motifs in Bosnian kilims and embroidery, and the latter, supervised by Walter B. Denny, focused on the Islamic prayer rug and its cosmological iconography.

In addition to English, Dr. Kadić reads Arabic, Turkish, Persian and Russian. She has published papers in Bosnian and international scholarly journals, and has presented papers at Bosnian and international conferences in the fields of history of Islamic culture and history of Islamic art.

## Shared Symbols, New Meanings: Comparing Jewish and Islamic Carpets

Alberto Boralevi, independent researcher, Italy

Unlike faithful Muslims, Jews do not use carpets or textiles to pray, but to decorate the interior of their synagogues for specific ceremonial purposes. From this point of view, the main function of a carpet can be that of a hanging or a curtain ("parokhet" in Hebrew) to cover the doors of the Holy Ark (Aron ha-kodesh), the wardrobe containing the manuscript scrolls of the Torah (Pentateuch). Normally these curtains are precious embroidered textiles, but in the Middle East and Italy it is also possible to find carpets with this function with a pattern borrowed from Islamic prayer rugs. It is interesting to compare the various ornaments and symbols, highlighting the change of meaning from one religion to another. For example, the hands often flanking the "mihrab" in Islamic prayer rugs, indicating where to place them when worshippers bow, are moved to the center of the niche where the Kohen (literally "priest," someone descended from Aaron and Moses) rests his hands for blessing the congregation. Other uses of a rug are as a cover for the reader's desk (tevah or bimah) or as a hanging decorative panel indicating the direction of prayer towards Jerusalem (shivity or mizrach). Finally, examples of carpets with purely decorative or secular functions are also known, bearing inscriptions in Hebrew taken from sacred texts.



### About Alberto Boralevi

Alberto Boralevi is an architect and dealer in antique textiles and carpets, who comes from a family of art dealers. He has conducted scholarly research in the field of antique carpets and textiles, publishing numerous articles, books and catalogs, and working as consultant for museums such as the Museo Stefano Bardini in Florence, the Museo del Tessuto of Prato and the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum of Baku, as well as for important private collections. As chairman of the International Conference on Oriental Carpets Academic Committee, he organized several carpet conferences from 1999 until 2018 in Europe, the United States, Turkey and Azerbaijan. In 2011, he received the Joseph V. McMullan Award for Stewardship and Scholarship in Islamic Rugs and Textiles. From 2013 to 2019 he was board member of the Foundation for Jewish Cultural Heritage in Italy. In this role, he participated in organizing the exhibition *Jewish Textiles, The Colours of Judaism in Italy* at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, also curating the section devoted to the textiles from the Near East and the Islamic world.

### Image Credits

Cover: Prayer carpet, Ottoman Empire, Türkiye or Egypt, 17th century. The Textile Museum Collection R34.6.4. Museum purchase.

p6: Prayer carpet; Türkiye, western Anatolia, Ladik; 18th century. The Textile Museum Collection R34.6.4. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1911.

p7: Prayer carpet (detail), Ottoman Empire, Türkiye or Egypt, late 16th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1974.149.1. Bequest of Joseph V. McMullan, 1973.

p10: Prayer carpet, Türkiye, 18th century. The Textile Museum Collection R34.22.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1925.

p12: Torah Ark curtain, Ottoman Empire, Egypt, early 17th century. The Textile Museum Collection R16.4.4. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1915.