BAZAAR to PIAZZA

ISLAMIC TRADE AND ITALIAN ART, 1300-1600

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UNTIL THE PORTUGUESE DISCOVERED THE SEA ROUTE around Africa at the end of the fifteenth century, the crossroads of East-West trade were in the eastern Mediterranean. Since antiquity, the Arabs at the hub of the known world had been intermediaries in the flow of spices, silks, and raw materials between Asia and the Mediterranean. From the eighth century the Muslim rulers of Syria and Egypt controlled the western ends of the network of caravan routes converging on Aleppo, Damascus, and Alexandria from Persia, Mesopotamia, Arabia, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean (Map).  

Trade between Asia and Europe increased steadily during the Crusades (1096–1271) as more Europeans discovered the rich culture of the East and established trading bases in the Latin crusader states of Antioch, Tripoli, and Jerusalem along the coast near Aleppo and Damascus. Venetian, Genoese, Pisan, Catalan, and French merchants who served the crusaders received permission to open operations in conquered towns. Italian mercantile states appointed consuls to organize and protect their citizens abroad. Emulating the privileges Venice had obtained from Byzantium in 1082, numerous European governments also dispatched ambassadors to negotiate commercial treaties with the Muslim rulers of the principal ports and markets of the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. Italian coastal city-states, which willingly used naval power to intimidate the land-based Arab rulers and promote the interests of their prominent merchant classes, led the rush. When they could extract customs privileges and consular protection for their citizens in important Muslim ports, they accepted restrictions on inland travel. Venice obtained privileges in Aleppo in 1207, having had them earlier in Alexandria. Genoa and Pisa soon negotiated similar privileges, as did Barcelona, Montpellier, and others. The main exports to the Orient were wood and iron from central Europe, to which Venice had the best access via the Brenner Pass; woolen and linen textiles; and hard currency. Imports included spices, raw silk, finished silk and silk brocades, sugar and other agricultural products, ceramics, glass, metalwork, and precious stones. Europeans living in the crusader states also may have been involved in production—merchants as owners of silk looms, and rich crusaders as patrons of some of the surviving thirteenth-century glass and metalwork decorated with Christian themes. From the late eleventh century Pisa had favorable concessions in Tunis, a source of many of the ceramic bacini in the region (see Fig. 2), as well as raw wool, hides, furs, and gold dust from the African interior. Venice negotiated privileges with Tunis in 1231, and Florence, about 1252.

In 1259 the Mamluks, a military caste of Turkish former slaves who served Saladin (d. 1193) and his Ayyubid successors, seized from their employers control over Egypt and Syria and quickly consolidated an empire from their base in Cairo. The early Mamluk sultans successfully maximized the revenue-producing potential of their territory and the trade flowing through it to maintain themselves; to continue the supply, and elicit the loyalty, of new slave trainees; and to patronize art and architecture.
They organized an efficient administration, halted the Mongol advance into Syria, dominated Arabian ports and caravan routes, and gradually overran the crusader states in Syria and the Holy Land. Though the Mamluks encouraged European commerce, they tightened restrictions on merchants and constantly changed, or forced the renegotiation of, their privileges. Metalwork, glass, textile, and ceramics industries blossomed under lavish patronage by the Mamluk court and contributed a modest volume to exports. European profits and Mamluk taxes from trade steadily increased until 1291, when the fall of Acre completed the Muslim reconquest of the Holy Land, and Pope Nicholas IV decreed a general embargo on Christian trade in Mamluk territories.

Until 1345 European trade with Egypt and Syria was seriously impeded, though it never stopped. The papal embargo specified war matériel—arms, horses, iron, and wood—but broadly included all supplies and merchandise. Because exports of wood and iron were important to the European balance of trade with Mamluk territories, even a limited observance of the embargo reduced profits, and all the major trading states evaded it to some degree. Venice openly violated it by sending ambassadors to renew privileges in Alexandria in 1302 and in Syria in 1304, incurring a fine. In addition, many privately owned Venetian vessels, operating under less scrutiny than state-organized convoys, defied the embargo. Venetians and others used Cyprus as an intermediary station to conceal the origin and ultimate destination of goods. That Mamluk brassware was slipping through the embargo is evident in halos painted by Giotto and his followers during the 1330s (see Fig. 56). Nonetheless, even Venetian trade diminished. When the pope reaffirmed the embargo in 1322, the Senate prohibited state convoys to Egypt and Syria, and in 1345 the sultan complained—less than honestly—that Venetian ships had been absent from his ports for twenty-five years.

Meanwhile, the Mongol domination of Asia from the 1240s to the 1360s provided new opportunities for East-West trade. During the Crusades, European merchants had rarely penetrated into Muslim territories beyond the Christian-occupied lands along the Syrian coast and Byzantine outposts on the Black Sea. The Mongols who conquered China, central Asia, the Caucasus, Persia, and Mesopotamia to the upper Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, however, were tolerant of other cultures and trade that could benefit them. For nearly a century, the great khans in China and successors to the conquerors in other parts of the empire kept the network of trans-Asian caravan routes known as the Silk Road open and safe for merchants and travelers of any religion or origin. Though the Il-Khanid rulers of Persia and Mesopotamia, who descended from the conqueror Hulegu (d. 1265), adopted Islam in the 1280s, both the northern overland routes to central Asia and China, and the sea route to India and China from the port of Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf (see Map) remained accessible to Europeans into the 1340s.

The period of openness between East and West that has come to be called the Pax Mongolica offered European merchants an opportunity to offset disruptions in commerce with Syria and Egypt resulting from the papal embargo. In addition, the elimination of Arab middlemen increased the profitability of the most valuable, easily transportable Asian imports. These included pearls, precious stones, the most exotic spices and aromatics, and especially silk. The Mongols' enormous consumption of luxury textiles boosted production in existing silk-weaving centers and spurred the development of new ones across their vast empire. European demand for the finest central Asian and Persian fabrics soared despite the development of a silk industry in Italy. The weavers in Lucca, who could not yet equal the quality and variety of Oriental cloth, also needed supplies of fine raw silk from the Caspian region, for which the major emporiums were Tabriz and, for several decades at least, the new capital of Sultaniyâ built by Uljaitu between 1305 and 1313, southeast of Tabriz (see Map). Italian capital investment in East-West trade shifted significantly from the eastern Mediterranean to the Black Sea and Persia. The Genoese and Venetians, who had the largest commercial fleets on the Mediterranean as well as the biggest and most influential merchant colonies in Asian ports and entrepôts, competed for predominance. Pisan, Catalan, and French merchants also were active, at least at the ports of entry and exchange.

The principal routes to Persia and central Asia and customary trading practices along them were described
about 1339—when they were rapidly becoming obsolete—in the Pratica della mercatura by Francesco Peggolotti, a Florentine employee of the Bardi banking firm.\textsuperscript{11} Ports in Christian-rulled principalities provided safe access to the Mongol hinterland into the 1340s.\textsuperscript{12} Until the Mamluk rulers of Egypt and Syria captured Lajazzo (Ayas), on the Gulf of Alexandretta, from the kingdom of Lesser Armenia in 1347, that city was an important departure point for Tabriz and the Caspian region via eastern Anatolia. For example, the brothers Niccolò and Maffeo Polo purportedly returned from China via Lajazzo in 1269 and departed from there with Marco, Niccolò’s son, in 1270. In the early 1300s Venice maintained a consul in Lajazzo, and sent an average of six state merchant galleys there each year.\textsuperscript{13} Shipping between Lajazzo and Europe regularly passed through Cyprus, which was also under Christian rule.

For those sailing east from Constantinople on the Black Sea, there were two ports of exchange and entry: Trebizond to the south and Tana to the north. Byzantine-ruled Trebizond served Tabriz and beyond until 1341, when a Turkish attack and local uprising initiated a decline. Genoese and Venetian merchants were conducting business in Tabriz during the 1260s, Marco Polo reported leaving Asia via Tabriz and Trebizond in about 1294, and Venice maintained a consulate in Tabriz during the 1320s. European colonies in Persia diminished rapidly during decades of anarchy following the death of Sultan Abu Said in 1336.\textsuperscript{14} Tana, a great emporium on the Sea of Azov, provided the principal entry to central Asia and China via Bukhara and Samarkand until the 1340s, when the Khan of the Golden Horde expelled the Italian merchant colony from the port (1343) and disintegrating Mongol control made connecting land routes dangerous. There were
Europeans in China from at least 1246, when Friar John of Plano Carpini reached the camp of the great khan near Karakorum, to 1371, when the emperor of the new Ming dynasty (1368–1644) dispatched an unidentified European to the West to announce his accession, soon thereafter closing the door to China behind him.15 The Pax Mongolica brought an influx of influential “Tatar” textiles into Italy about 1300 (see, for example, Figs. 22, 25, 32) and left its mark on fourteenth-century Italian art in Mongol figures, costumes (see Fig. 160), and script (see Figs. 43, 49) in paintings and in references to monuments along the caravan routes on the facades of the Doge’s Palace in Venice (see Fig. 10). Various travelers—merchants, diplomats, missionaries, and adventurers—contributed to the era’s transcultural exchange.

Between 1265 and 1308 the Il-Khanid rulers of Persia in Tabriz sent at least nine embassies to the Holy See and to several European kings; the pope sent two embassies to Tabriz, and the English, one.16 The Il-Khanids proposed an alliance against the Mamluks, offering European Christians possession of Jerusalem under Mongol suzerainty and hinting to the popes that they might convert to Christianity. The Persian embassies brought a considerable number of Orientals to Italy—certainly to Rome, Genoa, and Naples—and Italian adventurers and missionary friars who had attached themselves to the Persian court often participated as envoys, translators, and guides. Contemporary chroniclers recorded the appearance of Guiscardo de’ Bastari, a Florentine serving as ambassador, and one hundred companions, all in Mongol dress, at the Jubilee of 1300 in Rome,17 and other encounters with the Persian embassies provided Italians with views of Oriental peoples and costumes. Ambassadors customarily carried letters and gifts, at that time principally luxury textiles. In 1288, for example, Pope Nicholas IV sent the Persian ambassador back with gifts for the Nestorian Christian patriarch in Mesopotamia: ecclesiastical vestments in precious materials and a tiara and ring.18 Though it is not known what the Persian envoys presented, some among the scores of “panni tartarici” (Tatar cloths) listed in the papal inventory of 1295 must have been diplomatic gifts.19

The Church had dual interests in Asia: to convert the Mongol rulers and the peoples of their empire and to restore wayward Eastern Christians—such as the numerous Nestorians who lived by trade in cities and caravan centers from Syria to China—to the true Catholic faith.20 The first Franciscan and Dominican friars in Asia were primarily diplomats and adventurers, sent by the Holy See to gather information. Efforts to send friars who could teach the faith increased as a result of events that occurred at the Council of Lyons in 1274, when a Persian embassy unexpectedly appeared. The embassy’s Dominican guide testified to the mercy shown toward Christians during conquests, and three Mongol envoys were baptized. In 1278 Pope Nicholas III established Franciscan friaries in the Crimea and sent five or six Italian Franciscans to Khan Abaga of Persia (r. 1265–82), who had his son baptized Nicholas in honor of the pope. Several Franciscans were martyred in Persia in 1282–1284 when, after Abaga’s death, that same son embraced Islam and began persecuting Christians.21 The most celebrated mission was that of the Italian Franciscan John of Montecorvino (d. 1328 in Beijing), sent to the great khan in 1289 by Nicholas IV, the first Franciscan pope (1288–92). The Holy See was unaware of Friar John’s success, however, until letters describing his church and thousands of baptisms in Beijing arrived in Avignon in 1307 by way of the Franciscan missionary network and Italy. Pope Clement V immediately ordained Friar John “Archbishop and Patriarch of the Whole East” and ordered the Franciscan Minister-General to dispatch brothers to China, seven to be suffragan (assistant) bishops.22 Until the 1350s there were sufficient numbers of missionary friars to maintain houses and bishoprics in important cities and trading centers of Persia and China: the Franciscans had at least nine houses in Persia, and in 1318 an archbishopric with six suffragan bishops, all Dominicans, was established in Sultaniyaa.23 The accomplishments of the missionary friars—some of them martyrs—significantly affected the imagery in contemporary Franciscan and Dominican churches in Italy (see Figs. 159, 160).

Thanks to a dispute over profits that forced the disclosure of details Italian merchants would have preferred to keep secret, a colorful account of an Asian trading venture led by members of the Loredan family in 1338 survives in the archives of Venice. The organization of this joint venture, though it is among the few recorded to Delhi, the second largest city in Asia, was typical of the
time. Joining the company’s founder, Giovanni Loredan, who had already made a profitable trip to China, were his brother Paolo and another relative, Andrea Loredan, together with Marco Soranzo, Marino Contarini, and Baldovino Querini, all from noble families active in trade and government. It was widely known along the caravan routes that Delhi’s Muslim ruler, Sultan Muhammad ibn-Tughluk (r. 1325–51), generously rewarded foreigners who brought him rare and valuable gifts, and the six Venetians anticipated additional profits from trade on the outbound and homeward journeys. Each partner contributed to a common fund to purchase exotic items in Venice that might appeal to the sultan: a clock, probably made in Germany or France, and a mechanical fountain. The group bringing such complex mechanisms, presumably requiring reassembly, must have known that the Muslim elite had long been fascinated with them as well as automata. Each partner also brought money and merchandise to trade on his own account. Giovanni Loredan carried 1,930 ducats (their gold worth about $38,000 today), a little amber, and many fine fabrics from Florence and Milan—probably including fine English wool dyed and woven in Florence and linen from Lombardy and Germany. Giovanni took no Venetian glass imitations of precious stones, which the Chinese readily traded for merchandise, because the rulers along his Asian route were accustomed to receiving real gems as tribute.

Setting out in the summer of 1338, the six partners stopped first in Constantinople, the customary gateway to Asia and terminus of regular convoys of Venetian merchant galleys. There Giovanni Loredan sold some of his fabric to settle previously incurred debts. The group then followed the route recommended by Pegolotti as the safest to central Asia, taking another Venetian galley to Tana and traveling by camel caravan to Astrakhan on the Volga River northwest of the Caspian Sea. Delayed by ice on the Volga, Giovanni sold more textiles; he also encountered another Venetian, Andrea Giustiniani, who was returning from Urgench. The partners took the customary overland route east of the Caspian to reach Urgench, a caravan center south of the Aral Sea, where Pegolotti recommended trading remaining linens for currencies that would be needed to hire pack mules and camels and to purchase goods for the return journey. Before the group reached India, Giovanni Loredan died and his partners divided his assets to preclude their confiscation by local authorities, something Pegolotti had warned could happen.

In Delhi the sultan paid the survivors far more for their “gifts” than they had originally invested. They reinvested a little over half this sum in pearls, probably those of the highest quality from the Persian Gulf or Ceylon that would bring great profits in Venice and Europe. Such high-value, low-volume, and lightweight merchandise was most suitable for the long return journey. Pearls, moreover, were exempt from customs duties in much of Asia and the eastern Mediterranean. The partners spent the remainder of the sultan’s payment on local taxes and gratuities—a hefty sixteen percent of the total—precious metals and local currency for expenses on the return, and individual investments. At Urgench they dissolved the company and divided the pearls; they also made a loan to another Venetian, Francesco Barbarigo. When Querini too died, his goods (and probably also the four survivors) returned by a different route through Persia, perhaps because of disruptions along the previously “safe” route through Astrakhan and Tana. In Venice, Paolo and Andrea Loredan and Marino Contarini sold their pearls and goods for a little more than double their original investment. Marco Soranzo profited even more by exporting some of his merchandise to France. The survivors handsomely exceeded the average profit of twelve to twenty percent on an overseas venture, beating the odds during years of turmoil in Asia.

When the Mongol empire unraveled along the silk roads, Venice restructured her trade with Egypt and Syria. In 1344 the Republic negotiated a five-year dispensation from the papal embargo that permitted five state galleys and five other merchant vessels to sail annually to Mamluk ports so long as they carried no weapons or war matériel. The Senate, which directed the Republic’s trade and diplomacy, immediately dispatched an ambassador to Cairo and in 1345 opened regular service to Alexandria and sent a consul to represent the merchant colony still operating there. Both the papal dispensation and the treaty were renewed, and in 1366 state merchant galleys also sailed to Beirut. Between 1344 and 1382 the Venetian
manufactured items such as glass, ceramics, metalwork, and carpets) private merchant vessels carried bulky merchandise (cereals, salt, sugar, wood, and minerals) as well as some luxury goods. Private vessels, which could join the state convoys, replaced them entirely on some routes for long periods.

Venice early on established good relations with the rising Ottomans to protect the route to Constantinople and the Black Sea and to compete with the Genoese, who were well established there. Treaties guaranteeing freedom of navigation beyond the Dardanelles and conceding trading privileges were signed with Sultan Murad I (r. 1359–89) in 1365, 1368, 1376, and 1384 and then with Bayezid I (r. 1389–1402) in 1390. Meanwhile, Genoa lost possessions along the Black Sea route to the Ottomans and yielded access to the Adriatic to the Venetians. By the end of the fourteenth century, Venice dominated the now flourishing eastern Mediterranean trade. This dominance provided advantages to state-protected Venetian craft industries: reliable supplies of raw silk for textiles and alum for glass and a potentially significant market for the finished products.

Alexandria and Venice offered similar facilities for visiting merchants: the fondaco (fondaco in Venice) as an institution evolved from antique precedents, its combined purpose to accommodate foreigners and control their activities and payment of taxes. The fondaco as a building housed the merchandise, officials, and visitors, as well as the business and social life, of a substantial foreign merchant community. A share of local customs receipts supported its operations. Typically built around a courtyard, the building had a ground floor consisting of storerooms and shops where goods and transactions could be regulated. Above were consular offices, private rooms, dormitories, and facilities for religious and community activities. The staff of the Venetian fondaco in Alexandria included a consul who was appointed by the Senate for a two-year term, a customs agent and an interpreter who were usually non-Egyptians living in the country, a physician, a barber-surgeon, and a chaplain. Inside the fondaco, laws and customs of the home country prevailed. For example, the Venetian fondaco in Alexandria was administered by a council of twelve elected merchants headed by the consul, an administrative structure similar to that of the Republic. The doors of the fondaco were locked from the
outside at night—and during Friday prayers in Mamluk territory. Venetians had the largest funduqs in Egypt and the largest colonies in Syria. In Damascus, Europeans seem to have been restricted to a commercial district, the "Bazaar of the Franks," rather than to funduqs.37

In Venice the first fondaco was provided for the Germans in the early thirteenth century; it was lavishly rebuilt after a fire in the early sixteenth century. A fondaco for Turks was established only in 1621, after decades of discussion focused on the desirability of segregating them from the local population. The Venetians designated distinguished quarters for the Turks: the former state guest palace once allocated to the dukes of Ferrara.38 While the institution of the fundag in the hubs of East-West exchange facilitated trade, it limited contacts between people and perpetuated cultural divisions.

Other commercial practices in Venice and the Mamluk empire further restricted cross-cultural contacts.19 Both Venice and the Mamluks taxed exported goods or goods in transit, usually exacting in addition a share of the export merchandise and a head tax on visiting merchants. In Venice the rates were the same for everyone, but in Mamluk territories they varied and were negotiable. Venice normally required that entering goods be carried on Venetian ships, but the Mamluks depended on European shipping in the Mediterranean. As a result, few Egyptians or Syrians accompanied their goods to Venice, and Venetians conducted most of the necessary diplomatic and business negotiations on Mamluk soil. In Egypt, foreign merchants dealt mostly with Jewish and other minority intermediaries rather than directly with Egyptian Muslims or Mamluk officials. The sultans governing Egypt restricted travel to Cairo and the Red Sea to control overland transport and the supply of spices, the principal export. Ambassadors, consuls, and eminent travelers visited Cairo, but ordinary merchants did not. Damascus, however, a major source for raw silk and cotton as well as a variety of manufactured goods, was accessible. European merchants and pilgrims flocked to its markets and were impressed by its architecture and crafts. Trade was freer in Damascus than in Alexandria because distance and the division of administrative authority between two local emirs weakened the sultan's control. It is no accident that the most accurate Italian image of the Mamluk world came from Damascus (see Fig. 169). During the fifteenth century Venetians living in numerous other Syrian cities were represented by vice-consuls in Beirut, Acre, Hama, and Latakia. The loose Syrian control over trade and travel, however, exposed foreign merchants to extortion and confiscation.40

The luxury trade in Mediterranean countries changed after the great international epidemics of the 1340s, when the wealth and industries of Egypt and Syria declined while those of Italy grew. Whereas Europe successfully adjusted to economic changes, the Mamluk empire suffered a series of calamities. Decades of political instability followed the Circassian Burji faction's takeover in Cairo in 1382 and Tamerlane's invasion of Syria in 1400.41 Rapid and violent successions, diminishing tax receipts, increasing military expenses, inflation, the famine of 1403/4, and depopulation greatly weakened the economies of Egypt and Syria. Decreased Mamluk buying power affected all classes. In the early fifteenth century, the Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi lamented that even the rich were now wearing clothing previously used only in the rain, by the urban poor, or foreigners—made from cheap European fabrics "dumped" in huge quantities in Alexandria.42 Meanwhile, Mamluk industry failed to maintain quality or offer variety. The elite Egyptian royal textile workshops closed in 1341, and subsequently the industry suffered from the sultans' efforts to control it and from the lack of technical innovation. The number of looms in Alexandria plummeted from fourteen thousand in 1388 to eight hundred in 1433.43 The Spaniard Clavijo, who led an embassy to Tamerlane in 1405–1406, observed many silk weavers captured in Damascus at work in Samarkand.44 The production of inlaid metalwork fell because of decreasing court patronage and the costliness of materials.45 Syrian glass declined technically, and the industry never recovered from Tamerlane's destruction of Damascus and the Mamluk elite's rising taste for Chinese porcelain.46 Competition from porcelain and Spanish lustreware interfered with the recovery of the Syrian ceramics industry. To extract more revenue from trade, Sultan Barsbay (r. 1421–28) abolished traditional privileges of the local Jewish intermediaries and required foreigners to buy pepper and sugar—the principal Egyptian exports—from his own appointed agents at high fixed prices. His successors somewhat mitigated but sustained the monopolies.47 Though Sultan Qaitbay (r. 1468–96) increased
trade, by granting new privileges to foreign merchants and excepting local merchants from some taxes, and lavishly patronized the arts—spurring a significant revival in metalwork and a new carpet industry, both of which contributed to exports—he could not reverse the general decline.46

In Europe, despite the reduction of population and the drain on money—Venice was said to be carrying off the treasury of England—the consumption of luxury goods continued to grow.47 During the fifteenth century, Italian demand for luxury textiles and household furnishings accelerated rapidly, fueled by the urban elite’s desire for public display and the private enjoyment of their steadily accumulating wealth.48 To satisfy local consumers, Italians, certainly watching their balance of trade, expanded their already sophisticated silk production and swiftly developed their glass and ceramics industries. The Florentine Signoria officially linked industrial development and export trade when in 1422 it assigned the promotion of new arts and crafts to the officials responsible for the new state galley line to Alexandria that would compete with that of Venice.49 Luxury goods previously imported from the eastern Mediterranean increasingly were made in Italy and exported east as well as north. The Spanish ambassador Clavijo noted that his escort from Tamerlane’s court presented a Florentine textile to a Persian lord,50 and in 1449 a German pilgrim found the Damascus market full of silk imported from Venice, much of it probably destined for markets farther east.51 Northern Europeans and the Mamluk elite bought Venetian glass. Everyone was also buying Spanish lusterware, Turkish carpets, and Chinese porcelain. By the end of the fifteenth century, major manufacturing centers of luxury goods had developed in Europe, trade in these objects had become multidirectional, and there was a community of taste in Mediterranean lands.52

To maintain their eastern Mediterranean commerce during changes and setbacks in the Mamluk empire and Turkey, Venetians continued to rely on diplomacy. With the early Burji Mamluks, it was a question of constantly negotiating with new sultans for relief from mounting taxes and fees, arrests, confiscations, and general interference in trade. Consuls in Alexandria and embassies to Cairo protested in vain until 1415, when a favorable treaty exempted Venetians from punishments and residence restrictions imposed on other Europeans. But in 1421 the succeeding sultan, a religious fanatic, annulled these privileges and decreed all foreigners henceforth limited to a four-month stay. The Venetian Senate promptly dispatched two ambassadors to negotiate; before they arrived, however, the sultan died. The following year, Sultan Barsbay renewed the concessions of 1415. In his final oration in 1423 Doge Tommaso Mocenigo boasted that the city was receiving a forty-percent return on its investment in foreign trade, having earned 750,000 ducats (more than $28 million in gold today). He urged the Senate to pursue a policy of peace and accommodation to assure continuing prosperity.53 In 1428 Barsbay instituted a state monopoly on pepper, the mainstay of East-West trade: it could be bought and sold only in the sultan’s warehouses at his price, which was double the previous rate. The consuls’ protests were ignored. Sultan Jaqmaq (r. 1438–53) retained the monopoly but granted some relief. His successors replaced the monopoly with a requirement that each departing ship purchase a fixed quantity of pepper from state warehouses at the official price; more could be bought from local merchants at market rates. The quantity and price of the mandatory pepper purchases became the principal issue in Venetian-Mamluk relations, with prices tending to fall until 1500.54 Merchants’ grievances also remained a constant concern of Venetian envoys.

Though Venice could not avoid hostilities with the Ottomans, the Senate was ever quick to swallow losses and resume relations. Treaties with Suleyman (r. 1403–11) from 1403, and with Mehmed I (r. 1413–21) in 1415 prohibited Turkish commercial shipping in the Aegean but obliged Venice to pay an annual fee to maintain her colonies and guarantee free trade in Ottoman territory. When the Turks ventured beyond the Dardanelles, however, and a peace mission failed, Venice engaged and defeated them at Gallipoli in 1416.55 Venice participated in the defense of Constantinople reluctantly and sent ambassadors soon after the city fell in 1453. In the ensuing treaty with Mehmed II (r. 1451–81) Venice, to retain commercial privileges, acquiesced to a downgraded status for the Republic’s bailo, the consul in Constantinople whose perquisites dated from 1261. These privileges, renewed at
the beginning of each new sultan’s rule, were gradually reduced after the late fifteenth century.58

Venice lost control of important colonies after Ottoman victories in Salonika (1430), Negropont (1470), Tana (1475), and Scutari (1479) and even suffered Turkish incursions in the Friuli on her mainland territory (in 1472, 1477, and 1479).59 Seeking an ally capable of diverting or at least containing the Ottomans, the Senate sent ambassadors with years of experience in the eastern Mediterranean to the Turkoman sultan Uzun Hasan in Tabriz in 1471 and 1474, but no common front emerged.60 Finally, ambassadors who were experts in Turkish affairs went to Istanbul with instructions to agree to anything that would maintain commercial privileges, and in January 1479 they signed a humiliating peace treaty that relinquished all claim to the lost colonies. In August the Senate received a request from Mehmed II for artists and immediately dispatched Venice’s senior painter, Gentile Bellini.61 The portrait medals that he and other Italian artists executed for Mehmed (for example, see Fig. 165) disseminated the sultan’s image in Europe. Despite frequent interruptions, Venetian trade with the Ottomans continued, supplying carpets for all of Europe and a market for Venetian textiles and glass. Venice’s acquisition of Cyprus in 1489 helped prolong the Republic’s hegemony in East-West trade.62

Florence, after acquiring the ports of Pisa in 1407 and Livorno in 1421, sought to expand its overseas trade by establishing a state galley line.63 Ambassadors concluded a treaty with the Hašid ruler of Tunisia, Sultan Abu Faris, in 1421. The following year the Signoria sent Felice Brancacci and Carlo Federighi on the first new galley to negotiate with Sultan Barsbay in Cairo. A public holiday, procession, and Mass in the cathedral celebrated their successful return in 1423. Because of war with Milan, however, traffic began only in 1445 and was light. In 1487 Sultan Qaitbay sent one of his rare foreign embassies to renegotiate. The treaties of 1489, 1496, and 1497 increased privileges, following Venetian precedents.64 Parly to promote trade with Constantinople, the Signoria hosted the concluding sessions of the Council of Eastern and Western Churches in 1439, and upon his departure the Byzantine emperor John VIII Paleologus granted Florence customs privileges and the use of the former Pisan consulate.65 During the 1460s and 1470s, Mehmed II pursued good relations with Florence to the detriment of Venice, with whom he was at war. Florentine galleys sailed to Istanbul, where resident agents actively purchased luxury goods, notably carpets.66 In 1478 Mehmed extradited the fugitive assassin of Giuliano de’ Medici upon Lorenzo de’ Medici’s request, leading to the public hanging that ended the infamous Pazzi conspiracy. Lorenzo expressed his gratitude by commissioning a flattering medal of the sultan.67 Nonetheless, Florence’s trade with the eastern Mediterranean remained limited: the city had a small market for imported spices and could export only textiles and ceramics in quantity.68 Characteristically, Mehmed II expressed interest in Florentine artists.69

Diplomatic gifts were an internationally accepted form of princely tribute, and during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they also played a role in promoting trade in the most profitable luxury exports. In 1473, after discussing the usual issues regarding pepper with a Venetian ambassador, Sultan Qaitbay sent Doge Nicolò Tron twenty pieces of porcelain, muslin, rare aromatics and medicinal herbs, sweetsmeats, fine sugar, and a civet horn.70 When Qaitbay’s ambassadors arrived in Florence in 1487, they gave Lorenzo de’ Medici “finer porcelain than seen hitherto”; Valencian vases; rich textiles, including a magnificent striped ceremonial tent; sweetsmeats; spices; aromatics; medicinal herbs; and a giraffe, lion, bay horse, and fat-tailed sheep. The presentation of the gift is represented in a mid-sixteenth-century cycle of paintings by Giorgio Vasari in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, celebrating noteworthy achievements of the Medici family.71 The Chinese porcelain presented by Qaitbay and the Mamluk sultans who preceded him are some of the earliest documented pieces in Italy.72 At the time, most luxury ceramics were imported from Spain, and fine glass was no longer made in the Mamluk empire. By sending porcelain to Italian tastemakers, the Mamluks were promoting a costly new product beginning to arrive in their territory in sufficient quantity for export.73 Exotic animals, long a tradition among Oriental princes, were an appropriate gift for Lorenzo de’ Medici, who had a menagerie—also an Oriental tradition—at his villa in Poggio a Caiano.74 While the rare giraffe brought to Florence was intended
as a token of highest honor, Arabian horses were increasingly brought to Italy, which offered a rising market for them. Diplomatic gifts also undoubtedly included exotic antiques from the East, such as the famous Tazza Farrese, a Ptolemaic sardonyx cameo now in the Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples. It was in the royal Timurid treasury several decades before 1471, when Lorenzo de’ Medici acquired it in Rome, perhaps from the estate of Pope Paul II (d. 1471).  

Italian commercial states sought to impress Eastern rulers and their emissaries with locally produced luxury goods of the type and quality formerly imported from the Orient. In 1415 the Venetian ambassadors Lorenzo Capello and Santo Vernier presented textiles and several glass objects to Sultan Shaykh in Cairo. In 1474 the Venetian ambassador Giosafat Barbaro gave Sultan Uzun Hasan of Persia brocades and silks worth 2,500 ducats, and other fine fabrics worth 300 ducats (all together about $105,500 in gold today). In 1488/89 Florence sent Sultan Qaitbay silks brocaded with gold, small coffers and chests, and mirrors set in ivory and bone. In 1480 a French pilgrim passing through Venice noted that the Ottoman ambassador Hasan Bey, who had come to negotiate frontiers, appeared in public wearing a robe of crimson velvet brocaded in gold with a floral design, probably one of the garments customarily presented by the Senate, and on the Feast of Pentecost the ambassador was given a cloth-of-gold and the rest of his delegation scarlet robes, garments normally reserved for the doge and patrician officeholders. The senators’ flattering promotion of their most elite textiles met with great success: the Ottoman court purchased huge quantities of Venetian silks and velvets, and sultans often had them made into ceremonial kaftans (Fig. 184). Numerous Ottoman miniatures show Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66) and his attendants wearing Italian textiles. In 1512 Venetian envoys presented the Mamluk sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri with glass, velvets, brocades, damasks, woolens, furs, and Parmesan cheeses. Conversely, in 1483 Sultan Bayezid II (r. 1481–1512) presented the Venetian ambassador Bendirey with three types of velvet beginning to be produced locally at Bursa in competition with the Italian textile industry, a rivalry that soon became fierce.

The new Portuguese pepper route to Europe, around the Cape of Good Hope, and political instability in Mamluk territory diminished Venetian trade with Egypt and Syria as the sixteenth century opened. Violence in Cairo accompanying the accession of six sultans between 1496 and 1501 spread to the European merchant communities in Alexandria. By the time Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri (r. 1501–16) took firm control and attempted to renew the state monopoly on pepper and compel more purchases at higher prices, Portuguese pepper was arriving in the Netherlands. It probably reached Genoa in 1501 and England in 1504. Venetian ships found little pepper in Alexandria or Beirut in 1502, and none in 1504 and 1506. Though active trade continued in Damascus and northern Syria, Venetians there were incurring huge debts, bankruptcies, and seizures that followed upon excessive interest, taxation and levies of merchandise, local hostility, and increased competition with other Europeans. Venice, to protect the lucrative German market for Oriental spices and the city’s own industries, acted both at home and abroad, closing mainland frontiers to spices and luxury goods from Genoa and elsewhere in 1503. After several embassies to Cairo failed to win concessions from Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri, the Senate courted his ambassador, Taghri-Birdi, from September 1506 to July 1507. A treaty signed in March 1507 granted Venice privileges without requiring that the city supply the sultan with arms he wanted to confront the Portuguese in the Red Sea. In 1514, reversing traditional protectionist practice, the Senate permitted any vessel to unload spices from the eastern Mediterranean in Venice. Venetian trade with Egypt and Syria improved following the Ottoman conquest of Mamluk territory in 1516–1517. The Ottomans revived the caravan routes and even began a Suez canal. Complaints about the quality of Portuguese pepper and other difficulties with the long sea voyage around Africa favored a revival of the older, shorter eastern Mediterranean route. By 1550 the Venetian spice trade was thriving again; only after about 1625 would spices bound for Europe mostly travel the Atlantic route. Other trade also prospered. The Ottomans permitted the Venetians to establish consulates in Cairo and Aleppo, the first, the principal market for spices, the second, for cotton and silk arriving by caravan. In 1520 the Venetian ambassador in London concluded negotiations for the entry of Cypriot wine only after he was able to present Cardinal Wolsey, his interlocutor,
with fine, newly fashionable "Damascene" carpets worth more than 1,000 ducats (about $17,700 in gold today). Eastbound cargoes included copper in bars, manufactured copper—probably brass vessels shipped for decoration, woolen and silk cloth, coarse English woolens, coral, amber, glass, paper, and coin. In 1596 exports to Syria were valued at two million ducats (more than $75 million). Returning cargoes of spices, fine Persian silks, and raw cotton and silk had an even higher value.

Venice dominated trade with Turkey as well during the sixteenth century, though profits tended to decline. The Ottoman court spent lavishly on velvets, silks, and fine woolens until about 1550, when the aging Sultan Sulayman the Magnificent adopted pious ways and simple dress. Several consortia of Venetian merchants had sold him gem-encrusted regalia reputedly worth over 300,000 ducats (about $11 million) in 1532 (see Fig. 175), but in 1560 Venetian exports to the Ottomans totaled only 150,000 ducats, mostly fabrics and glass. Fluctuations in supply and demand and high overhead costs in Istanbul, including a fifty percent commission to increasingly active Jewish intermediaries, discouraged resident merchants. In 1553 only two Venetian nobles lived in Istanbul; middle-class agents handled most trade. The Ottomans soon developed their own luxury textiles and ceramics, with which Italian imitations competed in the European market. Northern European woolens and cottons, cheaper and lower in quality than Italian textiles, took an increasing share of the Turkish market. Though the Ottoman court imported more Venetian textiles and jewels toward the end of the century, and overland trade through the Balkans spurred Venice in 1590 to develop Split, trading patterns were shifting to Italy's disadvantage. By the 1630s English merchants outnumbered Venetians in Istanbul.

In 1600 as in 1300, Italy still imported luxury manufactured goods, notably fabrics, carpets, and ceramics. But Italian industries were now producing imitations that closely followed Oriental designs and, in far greater quantities, Europeanized versions of most of these items. Genuine porcelain and fine carpets continued to be imported exclusively, but Italy was now the primary producer of glass, and Italian textiles, ceramics, and inlaid metalwork had an international market. While Italians collected Greek and Arabic manuscripts from the East, they were also printing books in Arabic and other Eastern languages for export. The luxury trade had become truly international and competitive, and through innovative design, technology, and marketing, Europe had become the industrial leader and Italy the most diversified producer.