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"Spices, Silk and Giraffes"

Diplomatic gifts of the Mamluks to the Ottoman, Timurid and European Courts

Prof. Doris Behrens-Abouseif will talk about the diplomatic gift exchange between the Mamluk sultans and other courts of their time (1250-1517). Due to its geographic position, the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt, Syria and the Hejaz held the monopoly over the spice trade between the Far East and Europe and controlled of the holy sites of both Christianity and Islam. Its international status and leverage worldwide was mirrored in a dense network of diplomatic exchange, making Mamluk Cairo a “crossroad of embassies”. Alongside written and oral messages, diplomatic gifts were a major element in diplomatic communication. Doris Behrens-Abouseif highlights in this talk some remarkable gifts sent and received by the Mamluks in the course of their diplomatic correspondence with the Ottoman, Timurid and European courts while also shedding light on the scenario that involved some exchanges of gifts. There were universal gift items such as spices, bejeweled objects and exotic animals, sometimes human beings and even severed heads. However, the criteria behind the selection of gifts on either side were complex, not always obvious to us, and sometimes even surprising.

Pera Museum Auditorium.

The conference language is English.

Free of admissions, drop in.