

THE RETURN OF
THE ISTANBUL TULIP



FOREWORD

In 2013 the 7th summit of the World Tulip Society was hosted by the Municipality of Istanbul. During the conference, participants from all over the world learned about the city's rich tulip culture, including the cultivation of what now is commonly referred to as the 'Istanbul Tulip' or 'Istanbul Lalesi'.

At that time, we all believed this very peculiar 'almond shaped with daggerlike petals' tulip was no longer with us. How wrong were we, as we learned in 2018 that the Istanbul Tulip was still cultivated on a very small scale under the name of *Tulipa acuminata* by a specialty bulb grower in the Netherlands.

Based on extensive research by our vice-chairman Ibo Gülsen and consultation with botanical experts and art historians in Europe and Turkey, we have traced back the origin of the *acuminata* to the gardens of the Ottoman sultans.

It was a great pleasure to work with the Consulate General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Istanbul, to return this most famous tulip to its original birthplace.

Michel Gauthier
Chairman World Tulip Society





TULIP DIPLOMACY

For a long time, the tulip was used as a gift from the Ottoman court to foreign diplomats. Through these channels the tulip was first introduced to Europe in the 16th Century and found its way to the Netherlands. The Ottomans taught us and the world to appreciate the tulip in gardens and all forms of art and culture. The Dutch expressed their appreciation of the tulip especially through horticulture, by cultivating the tulip on a large scale on wide patches of arable land. Together we have contributed to the fact that nowadays hundreds of millions of people around the world enjoy tulips in their gardens, parks and at home.

The same Dutch horticultural skills managed to preserve a piece of Turkish history, as the cultivation of the Istanbul Tulip continued, albeit on such a small scale it made it practically invisible for many in the tulip industry.

On May 6, 2020, my predecessor Consul General Bart van Bolhuis presented the Istanbul Tulip to mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu. Due to COVID-19 restrictions the presentation was done virtually. With this gift he honored the tradition of tulip diplomacy initiated by the Ottoman court. As a follow up I had the opportunity in 2021 to physically hand over 1000 tulip bulbs of the Istanbul tulip to the city of Istanbul. As a result, on December 3 that year mayor İmamoğlu and I planted these tulip bulbs in Emirgan Park. So visitors of the Emirgan park can enjoy the Istanbul Tulip during the tulip festival in 2022.



Arjen Uijterlinde
Consul General of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Istanbul

A FLOWER FROM THE EAST

- THE JOURNEY -

The botanical center of the tulip, where more than half of wild tulip species can be traced back to, is located in the Tien Shan and Pamir mountain ranges, stretching from the West of China to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

Until today these mountains are some of the most uninhabitable and unexplored parts of the world. In the valleys and on the foothills of these mountains the Turkic nomads must have been struck by the bright color of the tulip standing out from its harsh environment, announcing spring and a new cycle of life.

As these nomads moved westwards in tribes, they saw that the tulips had spread naturally ahead of them, probably thousands of years before. At the time Turkish tribes appeared in the Middle East in the 10th and 11th century, tulips were already planted in gardens.

The first mentioning of the tulip was in a verse attributed to the Persian astronomer and poet Omar Khayyam in the 11th century, describing perfect female beauty.

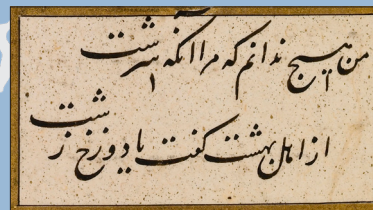
As one Turkish tribe, the Seljuks, moved further West into Anatolia, one of the oldest visuals of a tulip was discovered on a ceramic tile excavated from the 13th century palace of Sultan Aladdin Kayqubad I, on the shore of lake Beyşehir.



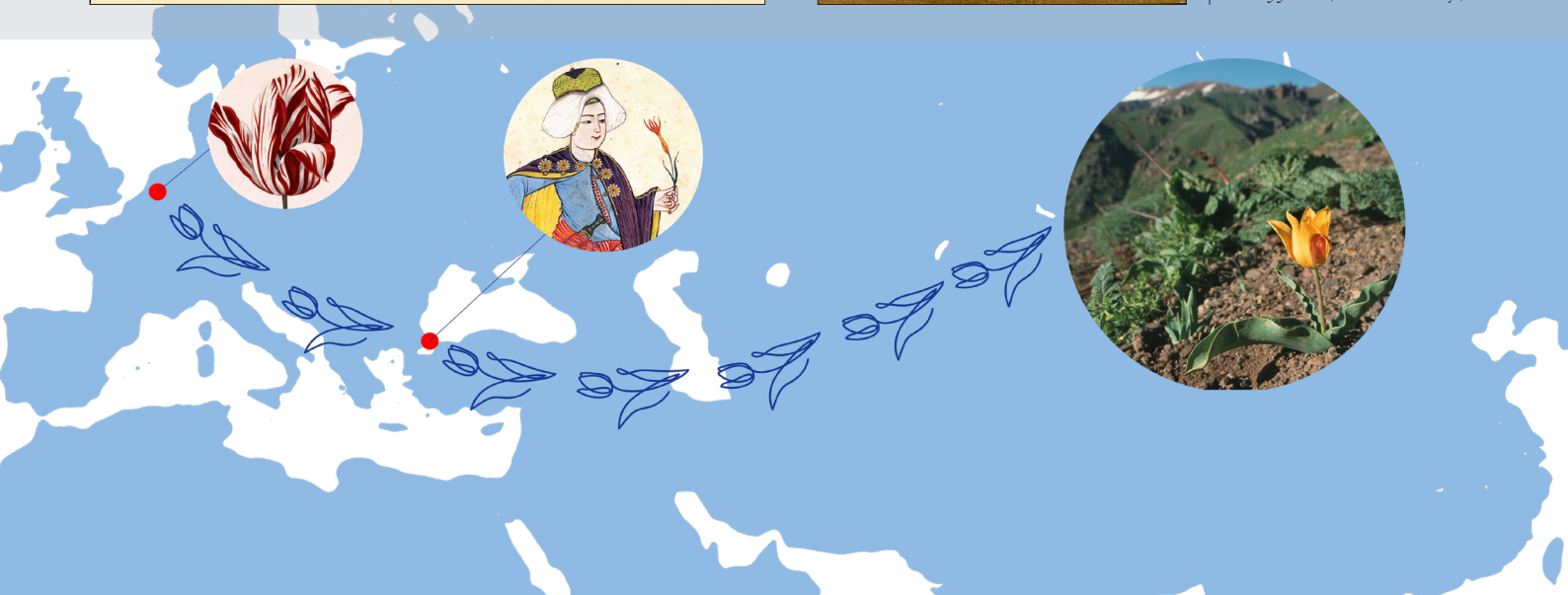
*Tile from Kayqubad palace (13th century)
Museum of Islamic Art Berlin*

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As then the Tulip for her morning sup
Of Heav'nly Vintage from the soil looks up,
Do you devoutly do the like, till Heav'n
To Earth invert you — like an empty Cup.



*Verses from the
Rubaiyat of Omar
Khayyam (11th century)*



THE ISTANBUL TULIP

- BIRTH -



Portrait of Suleiman 'The Magnificent' I (16th century)

Since the foundation of the House of Osman in the late 13th century, the tulip gradually became considered as the most sacred flower. It was also used as talisman to protect against misfortune and injury during battle. One of the earliest examples from the 14th century is an under shirt belonging to Prince Bayezid I on which tulips were embroidered. Soon after the conquer of Constantinople, pleasure gardens were developed across Istanbul. During the rule of Suleiman the Magnificent in the early 16th century, the tulip became the favorite motif of artists and craftsman, as tulips start to appear on ceramics, textiles, poetry, miniatures and more. At that same time, the Ottoman gardeners were the first to cultivate the tulip and breed new cultivars by crossing wild varieties that were collected from across Asia. One specific cultivar caught the eye and taste of the Sultans, an almond shaped tulip with needle pointed petals, which is now commonly referred to as the Istanbul Tulip. For sure it is a cultivar, as no wild species have shown any resemblance in shape or color.



Talisman under shirt from the tomb of Sultan Bayezid I (14th century)

Lale Pence and Zevk-bahş (giver of joy), Tulip Album (1726)



During the first exchanges of Tulip Diplomacy in the 16th century, it wasn't the Istanbul Tulip that was shared with diplomats and botanists in Europe, as the earliest documentation of tulips describe only the traditional cup shaped tulips. Cultivation of the Istanbul tulip continued well into the 18th century. The 'Tulip Album' from 1726 offers a rare overview of the many cultivars of that time, with names appealing to the imagination like 'Nûr-i Cenan' (The light of the beloved) and Muhayyiru'l-Ukûl' (That makes the mind spin). In 1730, about 100 years after the Tulipmania in the Netherlands, a similar event led to the anti-tulip rebellion and with it the abrupt end of tulip admiration and cultivation which many believe the Istanbul Tulip could not possibly have survived...

ARRIVAL IN EUROPE

- CONSERVATION -

As the Istanbul Tulip was certainly not the first Tulip to arrive in Europe from the East, botanist P.J. Redouté first described in 'Les Liliacées' in 1816 a *Tulipa Cornuta* (horned) as being introduced directly from Persia into the Parisian gardens in 1811, some 80 years later after the end of the Tulip era in Istanbul. The related botanical drawings show a remarkable resemblance to those tulips that were collected in the Tulip Album of 1726. At the same time another reference in the (British) Botanical Register appeared, stating that the specimens in the drawing were imported from Constantinople by the under-secretary for foreign affairs, Mr Hamilton and were planted at Mr Knight's nursery in the King's Road, Chelsea. These references provide evidence the Istanbul Tulip was all but lost. The *T. Cornuta* was later also referred to as *T. acuminata* and continued to be cultivated by botanists and specialty bulb growers in the Netherlands. The first mention of the *acuminata* in a Dutch bulb trader's catalogue was in 1845. Dried specimens or 'herbarium' were conserved in several botanical collections in the Netherlands and Europe in the 19th and 20th century.



A 19th century preserved specimen (*herbarium*) of the *acuminata*, Naturalis Biodiversity Center



Tulipa Cornuta. *Tulipe à fleurs pointues.*

Botanical illustration by P.J. Redouté
in *Les Liliacées*

HISTOIRE.

La Tulipe à fleurs pointues a été apportée de Perse directement en France, en 1811. M. Lelieur, administrateur des parcs et pépinières de la Couronne, la cultive au jardin de Sèvres de la même manière que la Tulipe des parterres, ou Tulipe de Gesner; elle réussit très-bien en plate-bandes. Sa tige est doucement fléchie; ses fleurs à longues pointes ont tantôt leur divisions resserrées en fuseau, et tantôt très-ouvertes en cloche; elles plaisent par la variété qu'elles offrent dans un des genres de plantes que la culture a le plus embelli. Cette Tulipe donne des fruits qui mûrissent.

The roots that produced the specimens from which the present drawing has been made, were imported by Mr. Hamilton (under-secretary in the department for foreign affairs) from Constantinople, and flowered last May at Mr. Knight's nursery in the King's Road, Chelsea. We have found no mention of this remarkable Tulip any where except in one of the later numbers of the work upon *Liliacées* by M. Redouté, where it is stated to have been introduced into the Parisian gardens directly from Persia, in 1811.

Section on *Tulipa Cornuta* (*acuminata*) from *Les Liliacées* by P.J. Redouté (1816) and the *Botanical Register* (1817)

Since the 1970's Mr Hein Meeuwissen in Voorhout has been growing the *acuminata*. The most peculiar thing is that Europeans never developed a real interest in the Istanbul Tulip as they preferred the cup shaped and flamed tulips. This in fact has contributed to the very survival of the Istanbul Tulip. If it were to be produced through mass propagation it would have led to loss of plant vigor and strength after several decades, resulting eventually in the extinction of a cultivar. At present day, we estimate only 25.000 – 50.000 of *acuminata* bulbs are cultivated each year, which is just a fraction of popular varieties like Strong Gold of which 10's millions are harvested annually.



THE HOMECOMING

On December 3, 2021, Consul General Arjen Uijterlinde and mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu planted the Istanbul Tulip bulbs at Emirgan Park. The Return of The Istanbul Tulip was widely covered in the (social) media.



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I hope that these kind of cultural bridges will move our beautiful relation with the Netherlands to higher levels.

Ekrem İmamoğlu

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The tulip is part of our shared heritage and inspires us to continue building new partnerships between the Netherlands and Turkey.

Arjen Uijterlinde

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This is a publication of the World Tulip Society and the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Istanbul.

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And we would like to extend special thanks to Paleis Het Loo for organizing a special photo shoot in their 17th century royal gardens and our project lead Ibo Gülsen for connecting the historic pieces of the Istanbul Tulip to present day.



Kingdom of the Netherlands



www.worldtulipsociety.org

“Kıymetli Civani, the Treasurer of Persian Shah” by Ottoman court artist *Levni* (Tulip era: 1718-1730), Topkapi Palace Museum Library