

Saner, Turgut, Şebnem Eryavuz, and Hülya Bilgi.
*Motif: From the Sadberk Hanım Museum Collection /
 Motif: Sadberk Hanım Müzesi Koleksiyonundan.*
 Istanbul: Vehbi Koç Vakfı, 2020.

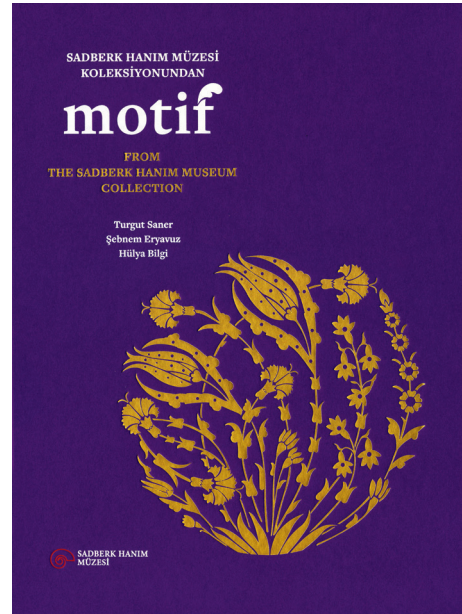
Review by: **Lauren Davis**

Museum catalogs are full of opportunities. They are a natural complement to exhibitions, yet their purposes can be varied (and sometimes incongruous). Exhibitions are full of potential pathways for reaching different audiences. Curators, although limited by space and budget, have the freedom to explore the boundaries of how information is presented, which can result in intriguing, layered, multisensory, and engaging exhibitions. How can that same level of intrigue and engagement be transmitted via the traditional paper-and-ink museum catalog?

In the context of a global pandemic, the pressure on exhibition catalogs is greater still. The Sadberk Hanım Museum's 40th-anniversary exhibition, *Motif: From the Sadberk Hanım Museum Collection*, opened in the fall of 2020—six months into the COVID-19 pandemic. It is fortunate, therefore, that the accompanying catalog is, by itself, a monumental work of art and should appeal to many different audiences and interests.

The inherent nature of most museums means that the objects are displayed out of context, and the goal of curators is generally to recontextualize them, to share the objects' stories in a way that is meaningful to visitors, and to facilitate engagement between the objects and the visitors. The *Motif* exhibition, curated by Hülya Bilgi, Turgut Saner, Şebnem Eryavuz, and Iğın Külekçi, invites visitors to an “explanatory visual panorama” (25) of the Sadberk Hanım Museum Collection, not just through artifacts but through the motifs that “link them together in a cultural and aesthetic framework” (19).

The *Motif* catalog is an incredible resource, featuring hundreds of objects in the Sadberk Hanım Museum Collection and linking their importance and meanings through their shared motifs. Exploring objects via overarching, conceptual motifs requires visitors both to look closely and to step back, and the catalog facilitates such a viewing beautifully. Iğın Külekçi and Ediz Demirel meticulously and artistically copied and redrew the motifs, bringing them to life and highlighting the contrasts, colors, figures, and shapes that can sometimes be difficult to ascertain on the objects themselves. There is a playfulness to their reproductions, and the deliberate decision to adorn the cover, front matter, and the section dividers with prints of the motifs enlarged and in bold colors further reinforces the aesthetic pleasure of pondering motifs.



Focusing on five overarching motifs—“Life and Power,” “Nature,” “Figural Ornament,” “Order and Harmony,” and “Space”—the curatorial team brought together objects in unique and unexpected ways. The curators paid particular attention to diversity: a wide variety of periods and artistic traditions are represented, as are different materials, techniques, and application methods. Furthermore, as Saner notes in his introduction to the catalog, not everything was chosen for an academic reason—“looking at motifs is a pleasure in itself” (25). The commentary and analysis that accompanies the motif illustrations in the catalog help contextualize them and provide a quick glimpse into how these artistic representations were significant in different civilizations. Each sub-category within the larger motif groupings is presented with an informative essay that highlights its meaning and uses in the different periods and different cultures related to Anatolia. The essays hint at tantalizing threads to follow for those who are interested in learning more.

The object catalog section of the volume, which includes images, technical details, and short histories for almost five hundred objects, highlights not only the magnificent collection of the museum but the breadth and depth of knowledge of the curatorial team and museum staff. Flipping through the pages makes one curious and want to know more: how and why did an Ottoman silver and pearl belt buckle, an Iron Age electron coin, and a Byzantine marble plaque and terracotta bowl end up on the page together? In absolute academic terms it would be considered anachronistic, but in this context, it highlights the universality of these motifs and artistic practices.

The catalog’s use as a reference volume for scholars is undeniable, but as a whole, this is not an academic volume (nor does it proclaim to be). There is much that could be said about the transmission of artistic traditions and ideas, intercultural exchanges, and the complicated nature of heritage, inheritance, and conquests. I cannot fault the curators for not including such academic essays in the catalog, as that was clearly not the intent of the exhibition. But for those hoping to explore more in-depth about these topics, some discussion of the current research (and a more robust bibliography) would have been a welcome addition. The bibliography also almost exclusively focuses on the Ottoman period, yet the objects included in the catalog span a wide range of cultures, such as the Romans, Greeks, Byzantines, Safavids, Mughals, Seljuks, and Ottomans, and geographies, such as Anatolia, Iran, and Syria.

The *Motif* catalog tackles the complex subject of motifs and meanings in an engaging and thought-provoking manner. Everyone can derive some benefit from perusing its pages, and although perhaps it is not a stand-in for the experience of viewing the exhibition in person, it is an excellent celebration of the Sadberk Hanım Museum’s 40th anniversary and of the rich artistic heritage of Turkey.