

# Tammaro De Marinis, Vittorio Forti, and the Acquisition of Islamic Manuscripts for J. P. Morgan in Constantinople in 1913

---

FEDERICO BOTANA  
*University of London*

**T**AMMARO DE MARINIS (1878–1969) was one of the most successful Italian book dealers of the twentieth century and an accomplished scholar (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Some of his trading practices, however, would seem questionable today, and the origins of the manuscripts he traded were frequently shrouded in mystery. This article is about one of De Marinis’s most ambitious and questionable undertakings: the acquisition of manuscripts for J. P. Morgan (1837–1913) in Constantinople in 1913. The story begins in 1911, when Morgan

---

The research for this article has been undertaken as part of the CULTIVATE MSS project, which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 817988). I am one of the researchers in this project, under the direction of Laura Cleaver at the Institute of English Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London. I am indebted to my colleagues for their feedback (especially Laura Cleaver and Karen Winslow), to Eryn Kropf, curator of Islamic Manuscripts at the University of Michigan, and to Moya Carey, curator of Islamic Collections at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, for sharing documents and information on their manuscripts, and to the Archivio di Stato in Florence.

1 On De Marinis, see Romeo De Maio, “Tammaro De Marinis,” in *Studi di bibliografia e di storia in onore di Tammaro De Marinis*, 4 vols., ed. Romeo De Maio (Verona: G. Mardersteig, 1964), 1:ix–xxix at xv; and the forthcoming proceedings of the conference on De Marinis at the Fondazione Cini in Venice in 2019.



FIGURE 1. Tammaro De Marinis, ca. 1965. Reproduced with permission from the Fondazione Cini, Venice.

bought seven lavish Islamic manuscripts from Alexandre Imbert (1865–1943), a French antiques dealer who established his business in Rome, and who regularly supplied the magnate with works of art (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> Morgan expressed his interest in buying more Islamic manuscripts, so Imbert put his friend De Marinis on the case. This partnership was not new: in previous years, at least eight manuscripts had passed from De Marinis to Morgan via Imbert.<sup>3</sup>

2 New York, Morgan Library, MSS M. 445, 466–71; see Barbara Schmitz, *Islamic and Indian Manuscripts and Paintings in the Pierpont Morgan Library* (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1997), 2 and cat. nos. 3, 5, 8, 10, 15, 23, 52. Six of these manuscripts are regarded as Persian (though MS 445, written in Persian, was produced in Mughal India); MS 466 is Ottoman Turkish and was probably produced in Bagdad. On Imbert, see Lucio Riccetti, *Alexandre Imbert e J. Pierpont Morgan: Il collezionismo della maiolica italiana fino al 1914* (Florence: Polistampa, 2017), esp. 59–66.

3 New York, Morgan Library MSS M. 401, 403, 405, 434, 443, 462, 497–98; Librairie Ancienne T. De Marinis, *Manuscripts et livres rares* (cat. VII; Florence: T. De Marinis & Co., 1907), no. 7; *Manuscripts et livres rares* (cat. VIII; Florence: Stab. Tip. Aldino, 1908), nos. 1, 23, 51; *Manuscripts et autographes* (cat. IX; Florence: T. De Marinis & Co., 1909), no. 222; *Manuscripts, incunables et livres rares* (cat. XII; Florence: T. De Marinis and Co., 1913), nos. 10, 15.

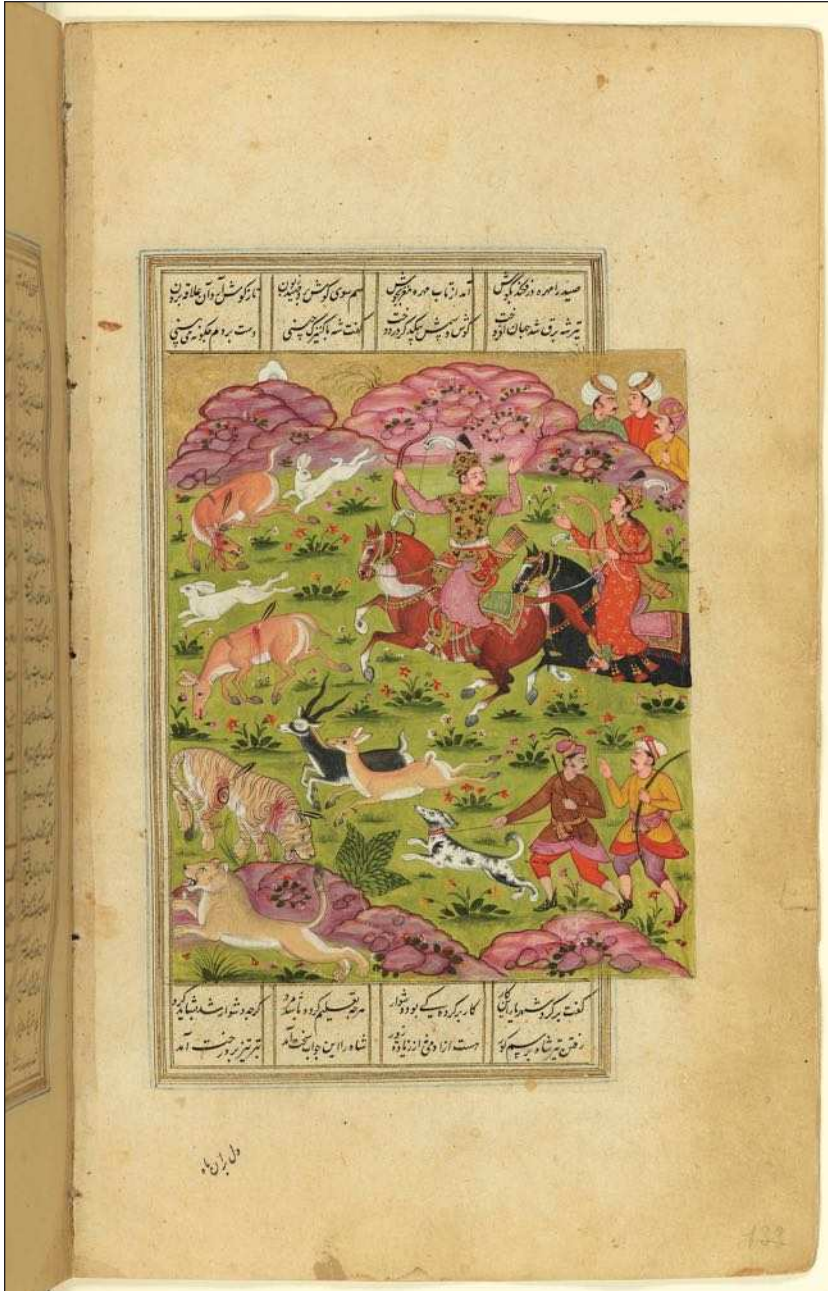


FIGURE 2. New York, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M. 445, Nizami Ganjavi, *Kamsah*, ca. 1618, fol. 202v. Reproduced with permission from the Morgan Library & Museum.

Prior to De Marinis's trip to Constantinople, his business associate, Vittorio Forti (1881–1980), traveled there to start hunting for manuscripts. Forti, a Florentine lawyer, was a colorful character, to say the least.<sup>4</sup> Five letters sent by Forti to De Marinis from Constantinople in February and April 1913, which have survived among De Marinis's papers preserved in the Archivio di Stato in Florence, provide the basis for the account given in this article.<sup>5</sup> The story, especially its unfortunate ending, has been the subject of much speculation: by the time De Marinis had obtained the manuscripts, Morgan was on his deathbed, and a decade went by before De Marinis could find another buyer.<sup>6</sup> However, Forti's role in the affair has not been explained before, nor have the contents of his letters been described.

Forti's letters seem particularly relevant today, as museums are increasingly confronted with the dubious provenance of some of their artifacts, and public libraries are facing similar problems with manuscripts and books.<sup>7</sup> As recently remarked by Donna Yates and Emily Smith (two scholars who work on art and crime), in past decades research on illicit antiques has focused mainly on two areas: the looting of artifacts in their places of origin, and their commercialization in the Western world.<sup>8</sup> In other words, attention has been given to the beginning and the end of the process, overlooking the middle: namely, how objects of cultural importance are handled and illegally exported by intermediaries. This is an extremely complex area of research; numerous

4 Francesca Manzari is conducting research on Forti's activities as a dealer and collector after 1920; see her future publications on the subject.

5 Florence, Archivio di Stato, Acquisti e Doni, 442–45 (hereafter ASFi Acq. e Doni 442–45).

6 See Schmitz, *Islamic and Indian Manuscripts*, 3; Riccetti, *Alexandre Imbert*, 3–4; Dániel Pócs, "Egy corvina története. Battista Spagnoli Mantovano: Parthenice Mariana (Pontosításokkal a Pierpont Morgan Library M496 és M497 jelzetű corvináinak provenienciájához)," *Ars hungarica* 43 (2017): 301–54 at 323; Alberto Vigevani, *La febbre dei libri: Memorie di un libraio bibliofilo* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2000), 80–81.

7 See Jane Milosch and Nick Pearce, eds., *Collecting and Provenance: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019); Dan Hicks, *The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); Anders Rydell, *The Book Thieves: The Nazi Looting of Europe's Libraries and the Race to Return a Literary Inheritance* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

8 Donna Yates and Emiline Smith, "Antiquities Trafficking and the Provenance Problem," in Milosch and Pearce, *Collecting and Provenance*, 385–94 at 387.

factors come into play—notably, the psychology and skills of the trader and the circumstances they face at each phase of the process. Forti's letters, as I shall demonstrate, reveal, even if only partially, a chain of events that resulted in a considerably less satisfactory outcome for everyone involved than originally intended.

In addition to shedding some light on events, the letters provide fascinating insights into the ways in which book dealers of that period could take advantage of political unrest and war. In 1908, a revolution brought the Committee of Ottoman Union (CUP), commonly known as the “Young Turks,” to power, forcing Sultan Abdülhamid II to embark on a program of reform.<sup>9</sup> A series of crises soon confronted the new regime: the independence of Bulgaria in 1908; the Italian invasion of Tripoli in 1911; and the first Balkan War in 1912, which resulted in the loss of 83 percent of the Ottoman Empire's territories in Europe.<sup>10</sup> In January 1913, a faction of the CUP conducted a putsch—the so-called Raid of the Sublime Porte—, forced the government to resign, and installed Mehmet Talaat as minister of the interior.<sup>11</sup> But the situation remained volatile: the military became more powerful, and the winning faction of the CUP increasingly nationalistic, triggering discontent and disregard for the central power among various quarters of the population.<sup>12</sup> Corrado Zoli, a correspondent of the Italian newspaper *Il Secolo* who covered the Balkan War, wrote that the empire was in a complete state of disorder, disorganization, ruin, and even putrefaction.<sup>13</sup>

9 Ryan Gingeras, *Eternal Dawn: Turkey in the Age of Atatürk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 26; Feroz Ahmad, *The Young Turks: Struggle for the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 1–30.

10 Gingeras, *Eternal Dawn*, 38–39; Ahmad, *The Young Turks*, 24, 92–100. On the Italian invasion of Libya, see R. J. B. Bosworth, “Italy and the End of the Ottoman Empire,” in *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Marian Kent (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 54–74 at 58–61.

11 Gingeras, *Eternal Dawn*, 40; Ahmad, *The Young Turks*, 121–26; Naim Turfan, *Rise of the Young Turks: Politics, the Military and Ottoman Collapse* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 205–13.

12 Gingeras, *Eternal Dawn*, 40; Turfan, *Rise of the Young Turks*, 285–30.

13 Corrado Zoli, *La guerra turco-bulgara* (Milan: Società Editoriale Italiana, 1913), 13: “Chi visitava le provincie europee dell'impero ottomano, per esempio, nella primavera del 1911, vi constatava tale una disorganizzazione, tale un disordine, tale uno sconcio e tante ragioni di

Despite the precarious situation, there was a long-established and thriving Italian community in Constantinople. Genoese, Pisan, and Venetian merchants had established colonies in the area of Galata as early as in the thirteenth century.<sup>14</sup> By 1906, there were around fourteen thousand Italians, many now living along the elegant Grande Rue de Péra.<sup>15</sup> Italian politicians and businessmen had greeted the Turkish revolution with enthusiasm, and by 1913 they were eager to stimulate a network of economic interests in Turkey more than ever before.<sup>16</sup> Forti, as it transpires from his letters, frequented a number of influential Italian figures in Constantinople, and some even helped him hunt for manuscripts. A name frequently cited is Mongeri, presumably the architect Giulio Mongeri (1873–1953), who later designed several important buildings in Istanbul and Ankara.<sup>17</sup> Mongeri was a member of the Società Dantesca and of several other Italian associations in Istanbul.<sup>18</sup> It would have been easy for De Marinis, with his literary connections, to obtain an introduction to such societies. Moreover, Mongeri studied in Milan in the 1890s, where he became acquainted with Giuseppe Fumagalli, one of

---

disgregazione, e tanti gemi di morte e di putrefazione.” See also Turfan, *Rise of the Young Turks*, 200–205.

14 See Robert Mantran, “Foreign Merchants and the Minorities in Istanbul during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, ed. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 127–37; Eric R. Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

15 Zeynep Cebeci, “The Italians of Istanbul and their Properties: An Analysis through their Petitions Addressed to the Italian Consulate, 1873–1910,” in *Italian Architects and Builders in the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey: Design Across Borders*, ed. Paolo Girardelli and Ezio Godoli (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 183–98; Stefania De Nardis, “La Società Dante Alighieri da Costantinopoli a Istanbul, 1895–1922: Diffusione della lingua e pedagogia nazionale,” *Diacronie: Studi di Storia Contemporanea* 20, no. 4 (2014), <https://journals.openedition.org/diacronie/1785> (accessed 5 August 2021); Bosworth, “Italy and the End of the Ottoman Empire,” esp. 53–55.

16 Bosworth, “Italy and the End of the Ottoman Empire,” 57, 67.

17 On Mongeri, see Giovanna D’Amia, “Giulio Mongeri’s Photo Collection: The Eye of a Milanese Architect in Turkey,” in Girardelli and Godoli, *Italian Architects and Builders*, 125–34.

18 De Nardis, “La Società Dante Alighieri,” 51, 59.



FIGURE 3. Hôtel M. Tokatlian, Grand' Rue de Péra, Constantinople, ca. 1907–15, Nicholas Catsimpoolas Collection, Boston Public Library. Reproduced with permission from the Boston Public Library.

the founders of the Società bibliografica italiana and a friend of De Marinis.<sup>19</sup> Conte Manzoni, “a charming and astute young man,” must be Gaetano Manzoni (1871–1937), diplomat, chargé d’affaires at the Italian embassy in 1912–13, son of Count Giovan Battista Manzoni, and nephew of the book collector and politician Giacomo Manzoni.<sup>20</sup> Luigi Barzini and Renzo Larco, two Italian journalists who together covered the Libyan and the Balkan wars for the *Corriere della Sera*, regularly lunched with Forti at the Hôtel Tokatlian—where Agatha Christie makes Hercule Poirot spend a night in

19 D’Amia, “Giulio Mongeri,” 129; ASFi, Acq. e Doni 143, includes thirteen postcards sent by Fumagalli to De Marinis over the period 1898–1917.

20 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 1 (no date): “giovane assai astuto e simpatico.” On Gaetano Manzoni, see *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 96 vols. (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1960–2019), 69:325–28; on his uncle Giacomo’s collection, *Catalogue de la bibliothèque de feu M. le comte Jacques Manzoni ministre des finances de la République romaine*, 4 vols. (Città di Castello: S. Lapi, 1892–94).

*Murder on the Orient Express* (fig. 3).<sup>21</sup> Forti sojourned at the no less luxurious Pera Palace Hotel, which was built for passengers of the Orient Express and still functions today.

### *The Letters*

Forti's letters contain lively accounts of his activities in Constantinople, and of his ambitious but unrealistic plans. The atmosphere is evocative of a novel by Graham Greene. The collection comprises five letters and a note (which was probably included with Letter 4). Two letters are not dated, yet the events included indicate their places in the sequence. They all contain addenda and postscripts; Forti continued making additions to his letters until the next ship left with the post for Italy, which happened three times a week (on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays).<sup>22</sup>

In Letter 1, written on letterhead paper of the Pera Palace Hotel and undated, Forti reports that he fears that he will return to Italy empty-handed: "All the manuscripts and precious objects from public collections that are easily transportable have been closed up and sealed for a year and a half in a place which I saw . . . from the outside, and which is called, alas, the Treasury."<sup>23</sup> This building could be the treasury in Topkapı Palace, which had not yet become a museum. More likely, however, it was the Çinili Köşk, the oldest pavilion in the palace, where antiquities and manuscripts from the national collection had been securely stored until their transfer to the new Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, opened in 1914.<sup>24</sup> Forti writes that a

21 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2 (13 February 1913). The building still exists but has been transformed into apartments. For Barzini, see *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 7:28–32; for Larco, see <https://lamaddalena.info/renzo-larco/> (accessed 5 August 2021).

22 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3 (15 February 1913).

23 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 1: "Tutto ciò che è Mss. e cose preziose facilmente asportabili dalle pubbliche collezioni da un anno e mezzo è chiuso, sigillato in un luogo che ò veduto . . . dal di fuori e che si chiama, ahimè "Tesoro."

24 See Edhem Eldem, "The Genesis of the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts," in *The Art of the Qur'an: Treasures from the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts*, ed. Massumeh Farhad and Simon Rettig (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2016), 118–39 at 135.



“good man” is hunting for manuscripts for him but so far has produced nothing valuable, just an eighteenth-century Persian manuscript with bad miniatures for 7,500 lire that was “much less beautiful than that of Rahir”—Édouard Rahir (1862–1924), an important French bookdealer and collector.<sup>25</sup> Apart from that, Forti has been offered two folios from a twelfth- or thirteenth-century Greek manuscript without decorations. He is very disappointed.

Forti appears more optimistic in the last paragraph, added a few days later: in the morning he had visited the “library of Vakif properties (inheritances and bequests),” where he saw extraordinary Persian manuscripts.<sup>26</sup> *Vakif*, from the Arabic *waqf*, refers to a financial endowment for charitable purposes, like most of the libraries located in mosques and schools, so it is impossible to tell which library he visited.<sup>27</sup> He was accompanied by a Persian book dealer who “knows and supplies Martin”—presumably Fredrik Robert Martin (1868–1933), collector of oriental antiques and attaché in the Swedish embassy at Constantinople in 1904–08 (fig. 4).<sup>28</sup> But Forti could not get what he wanted: “Fanaticism completely blocks Muslims from selling: I have told him to offer 20,000 francs for four books and he replied that they risked being arrested.”<sup>29</sup>

25 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 1: “un discreto Ms. persano del 700, con miniature quasi rozze si domandava £ 7500—Assai meno bello di quello di Rahir.” On Rahir, see Jean-Paul Fontaine, *Les Gardiens de Bibliopolis* (Paris: L’Hexaèdre éditeur, 2015), 518–30.

26 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 1: “stamani ò veduto alla Bibl. Dei Beni Vakif (lasciti, fidecommisi) dei Ms. miniati persiani straordinari.”

27 See Mehmet Vedat Gürbüz, “Ottoman Vakifs: Their Impact on Ottoman Society and Ottoman Land Regime,” *Çukurova Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 21 (2012): 201–12.

28 See *Grove Encyclopaedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*, 3 vols., ed. Jonathan M. Bloom and Sheila S. Blair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2:467; Robert Hillenbrand, “Western Scholarship on Persian Painting Before 1914: Collectors, Exhibitions and Franco-German Rivalry,” in *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition “Meisterwerke muhammed-anischer Kunst” Reconsidered*, ed. Andrea Lerner and Avinoam Shalem (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 201–30 at 206–7, 209–11, 215–16.

29 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 1: “il fanatismo impedisce assolutamente i Musulmani di vendere: gli ò detto di offrire 20 mila frs. per 4 libri e mi a detto che ci sarebbe da essere arrestati!”

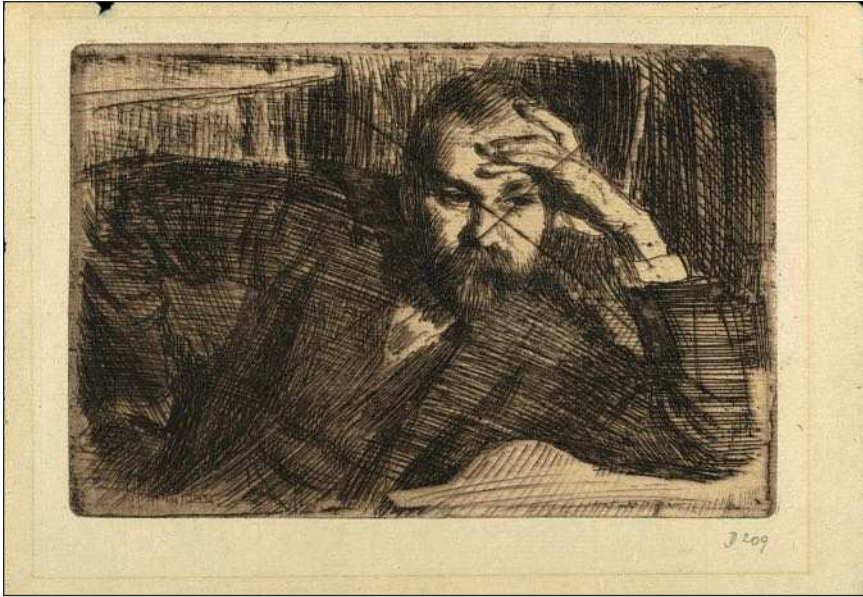


FIGURE 4. Anders Zorn, Fredrich Robert Martin, etching, 1907, Boston Public Library. Reproduced with permission from the Boston Public Library.

In Letter 2, written on Hôtel Restaurant M. Tokatlian letterhead paper and dated 13.II.913 (13 February 1915), Forti has good news. He is about to conclude a deal: Mongeri introduced him to an important and wealthy antiques dealer who has Persian manuscripts “of the very first order.”<sup>30</sup> This dealer will give Forti manuscripts “in examination” at cost price; the dealer will decide the selling price and they will share the profits in equal parts, but De Marinis and Forti will have to pay him in advance half of the cost price, which he will reimburse for the manuscripts they cannot sell. A manuscript that costs this dealer 2,300 francs, for example, he expects Forti and De Marinis to sell for 16,000. In addition, the dealer will provide a beautiful collection of bindings—for a fragment that costs him 800 francs, for example, he invoices 3,000. Forti adds: “We will have a lot of extraordinary manuscripts

30 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2 (13 February 1913): “per mezzo di Mongeri . . . che possiede diversi eccezionali Ms. persiani del primissimo ordine.”

from the XIV–XVII and XVIII centuries.”<sup>31</sup> Martin, whom Forti “knows well,” has not seen the manuscripts and must not know anything “because he does not pay, they say.”<sup>32</sup> The dealer is confident that he can obtain Greek, Latin, and Byzantine manuscripts for Forti, but he needs credit references—Forti will write to a certain Baroncini (presumably his bank manager).

Forti then tells De Marinis, “Concerning the government, I have spoken with the *avvocato del debito pubblico*,” very likely a lawyer of the Düyün-u Umumiye, the entity that collected debts from the Ottoman government on behalf of foreign companies and was run by officials of six foreign European states, Italy included.<sup>33</sup> Forti introduced himself to the lawyer as an acquaintance of Ugo Ojetti (journalist, writer, and close friend of De Marinis) and was accompanied by Mongeri and a Turkish consul.<sup>34</sup> He adds: “They all agree that not even a million will be a tempting figure because it could cause their fall, they would fear a scandal, it is against Muslim character, and a thousand other reasons.”<sup>35</sup> In any case, the *avvocato* will try with someone he knows, but Forti does not have much hope.

Forti has higher expectations of the “Persian bookdealer” (probably the same man he was introduced to by Mongeri). He believes they will earn at least fifty thousand lire with him, “because it is really amazing stuff, with superb bindings, in intaglio and in *vernis martin*, and Morgan will buy in bulk—but without him they can be sold well in Paris and also in London.”<sup>36</sup>

31 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2: “Avremo un lotto di Mss. del XIV–XVII e XVIII sec. straordinari.”

32 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2: “Martin, che ben conosco, non li à veduti, né deve saper nulla, perché non paga, dicono.”

33 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2: “Quanto al Governo ò parlato coll’Avvocato del Debito pubblico presentandomi da Ojetti.” See Ethem Eldem, “Ottoman financial Integration with Europe: Foreign Loans, the Ottoman Bank, and the Ottoman Public Debt,” *European Review* 13 (2005): 431–46; Bosworth, “Italy,” 53.

34 *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 79:177–82. ASFi, Acq. e Doni 445, contains five letters from Ojetti from the period 1901–40.

35 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2: “tutti sono concordi nel dire che anche 1 milione ora è cifra che non fa gola perché farebbe inghiottito nel baratro, che temerebbero uno scandalo, che è contro l’indole musulmana e mille altre ragioni contro.”

36 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2: “perché è proprio roba stupefacente, con legatura superbe, con legature superbe in intaglio e in vernis martin, e Morgan comprerà in blocco—Ma anche senza di lui a Parigi si potranno vendere ed anche a Londra.”

Forti reports that he spent two hours with “this Haïm” (the only clue to the book dealer’s name) who wants to send them manuscripts under the same “extraordinary” conditions regularly: “things of the same kind as those of Martin, not necessarily like the famous manuscript, but like the others which he appreciates so much more and at very convenient prices.”<sup>37</sup> The famous manuscript is perhaps the illustrated *Khamsab* of Amīr Khusrau published by Martin in facsimile in 1912.<sup>38</sup> Forti will have more meetings with Haïm to conclude further deals, “always without obligation.” He needs money now, so he requests that De Marinis or his father pawn his valuables kept in a safe-deposit box in the Credito Italiano and to wire him the proceeds to the Ottoman Bank, but he thinks that he will have to pay Haïm only twenty or thirty thousand—either lire or francs (the two currencies were paired one-to-one at the time).<sup>39</sup>

In a postscript, Forti adds that the Persian dealer who supplies Martin, asked 2,300 lire for a fragment of a tenth-century Greek Bible “of the kind Martin gave us in examination,” for which Haïm advised Forti not to pay more than 1,500. The dealer refused to sell at that price, but Forti thinks he will accept in the end. The following day Forti will go with Haïm and Martin’s supplier to see other things: “they promise me Greek manuscripts.”<sup>40</sup> If nothing else comes his way, he will leave with the lot from Haïm, “a dozen beautiful pieces, he believes.”<sup>41</sup> After reporting on the volatile political situation

37 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2: “si tratta di cose del genere di quelle di Martin, non forse del famoso Ms. ma degli altri che lui apprezza tanto più ed a prezzi convenientissimi.”

38 Fredrik Robert Martin, *Les miniatures de Behzad dans un manuscrit persan daté 1485* (Munich: F. Bruckman A.G., 1912); now Dublin, Chester Beatty, Persian MS 163. For other items in his collection, Martin, *The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia, India and Turkey from the 8th to the 18th Century* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1912), which also includes manuscripts in other collections; see also Hillenbrand, “Western Scholarship,” 206–7, 215.

39 Belgian, French, and Swiss francs and lire were paired one-to-one: the Latin Monetary Union started in 1867 and lasted until 1915.

40 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2: “mi si promettono dei greci che comprerei senza aiuto.”

41 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2: “Poi vedrò: se non viene altro, me ne verrò via col lotto Haim, credo una dozzina di bei pezzi.”

and the bad weather, Forti moans that he wants to return to Italy, but he must wait a little longer in case anything comes of the attempts by Mongeri and Chabert—probably Giorgio Chabert, lawyer and member of the Società Dantesca of Istanbul, of which Mongeri was also a member.<sup>42</sup> Forti concludes with a puzzling statement: “Do not believe the fables of journalists: I see how dispatches are made! In any case, I am also working on that side and in two days I will be able to telegraph that the *corvini* are ours! But don’t hope for it—they are dreams.”<sup>43</sup>

By “*corvini*,” Forti is referring to manuscripts from the library of Matthias Corvinus (1443–1490), King of Hungary.<sup>44</sup> De Marinis and Forti had already dealt with the Corvinus material, and very successfully indeed. In 1912, De Marinis provided Morgan via Imbert with two splendid manuscripts from the library of King Matthias: Cicero’s *Opera* (Florence, 1470–75), and a miscellany including *De Spiritu Sanctu* by Didymus and other patristic texts (Florence, 1488; fig. 5).<sup>45</sup> De Marinis obtained these manuscripts from another book dealer, Wilfrid Voynich, who bought them from the Jesuits at Rome, illegally, together with about thirty other manuscripts, including the famous manuscript now at Yale University that bears his name.<sup>46</sup>

42 On the political situation in February 1913, see Turfan, *The Young Turks*, 290–300; on Chabert, see De Nardis, “La Società Dante Alighieri,” 51.

43 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 2: “Non creda alle facezie dei giornalisti: vedo come si fanno i dispacchi! In ogni modo sto lavorando anche da quel lato e fra un paio di giorni potrei teleg. che i corvini sono nostri! Ma non lo speri—sono sogni.”

44 See Csaba Csapodi, Klára Csapodi-Gárdonyi and Tibor Szántó, *Bibliotheca Corviniana*, trans. Zsuzsanna Horn (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969); *Bibliotheca Corvina Virtualis*, <https://corvina.hu/en/virtual-corvinas/> (accessed 13 August 2021).

45 New York, Morgan Library, MSS M. 496–97; Librairie Ancienne T. De Marinis, *Manuscripts, incunables et livres rares*, cat. 12 (Florence: T. De Marinis and Co., 1913), nos. 10, 15.

46 See René Zandbergen, “Wilfrid Voynich’s Acquisition of Manuscripts from the Jesuit Collegium Romanum,” 2019, available at <https://www.academia.edu/39640759/> (accessed 5 August 2021). De Marinis may have obtained a third Corvinus manuscript from Voynich; see Pócs, “Egy corvina története,” 330–36. By the law of 15 August 1867, no. 3848, art. 2, the patrimony of religious congregations was transferred to the state; and the law of 20 June 1909 (no. 364 art. 8) ratified that objects of historical interest could not be exported without official authorisation.



FIGURE 5. New York, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M. 496, Miscellaneous patristic texts (1488), fol. 2r. Reproduced with permission from the Morgan Library & Museum.

Constantinople was a potential source for more corvini. The royal library at Buda was plundered by Ottoman troops in 1526, and the manuscripts of King Matthias that were still in Buda were then transported to Constantinople.<sup>47</sup> They joined the manuscripts of the Sultans in Topkapı Palace, including those originally belonging to the Byzantine emperors.<sup>48</sup> In 1869, as a diplomatic gesture of goodwill, Abdülaziz I, and in 1877, his successor, Abdülhamid II, returned a total of thirty-nine Corvinus manuscripts to Hungary.<sup>49</sup> However, a few remained in Topkapı: Ptolemy's *Cosmographia* and Crispus Rannusius Pistoriensis's *Sermo de Ascensione*, both produced in Italy in the fifteenth century and still there today, and four other manuscripts that were identified as Corvinus-related by a delegation of the Hungarian Academy in 1889—an antiphonary, a gradual, a lectionary, and a copy of Grazioso Benincasa's portolan.<sup>50</sup>

In Letter 3, written on Pera Palace Hotel paper and dated 15.II.913 (15 February 1913), Forti and Haïm have finally obtained “the parchment manuscript (the seller says that it is from the 7th century) and another in paper from the eleventh century with nice decoration for 1,960 francs together with a glass cup which costs 40 lire.”<sup>51</sup> They bought them in partnership, so that “Haïm's lot is completed with very ancient manuscripts.”<sup>52</sup> The “expert of

47 See Csaba Csapodi, “Quand la bibliothèque du roi Matthias Corvin a-t-elle été détruite?” *Magyar könyvszemle* 77 (1961): 399–421.

48 See Fehmi Edhem Karatay, *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi Arapça Yazmalar Katalogu*, 4 vols. (Istanbul: Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, 1962–69). For Western and Greek manuscripts, see Adolf Deissmann, *Forschungen und Funde im Serai: Mit einem Verzeichnis der nichtislamischen Handschriften im Topkapu Serai zu Istanbul* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1933); for the Persian manuscripts, see Fehmi Edhem Karatay, *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi Farsça yazmalar katalogu* (Istanbul: Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, 1961).

49 Deissmann, *Forschungen und Funde im Serai*, 23.

50 Deissmann, *Forschungen und Funde im Serai*, nos. 42, 44, 46, 47, 50, 68; “Kurze Sitzungsberichte. Akademie der Wissenschaften,” *Ungarische Revue* 9 (1889): 719–36 at 732–34; Vilmos Fraknoi, “A konstantinápolyi küldöttség jelentése,” *Akadémiai Értesítő* (1890): 36–42.

51 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3 (15 February 1913): “stamani finalmente con Haïm siamo riesciti ad avere il Ms. membr. (il venditore dice del 7° sec.) ed un altro cart. dell 11° secolo con belle decorazioni per 1960 frs. insieme a una coppa di vetro che costa 40 lire.”

52 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Li abbiamo comprati in sociale—così il lotto di Haïm si completa di Mss., di epoca antichissima.”

the Russian Bank” will entrust Forti with a carpet worth about fifty thousand francs.<sup>53</sup> Is he the same man who sold them the manuscripts and the cup? Whoever this “expert” was, according to Forti, he had the best carpets on offer in Istanbul, and in the lines that follow he speculates about how much he and De Marinis could earn by selling Persian carpets to Imbert and other antique dealers in Italy. Forti wants a carpet for his house and to spend one thousand francs on carpets to sell; he asks De Marinis if he wishes one for himself and, if so, to send him the measurements and the colors.

Forti then returns to manuscripts and Martin: they have seen about one hundred manuscripts that day, but they were either too new or in bad condition, and “numerous bindings like those of Martin, fragments which are found here for 70–100 lire and more or less, according to their condition and beauty.”<sup>54</sup> They have also spoken with the former owner of the manuscript reproduced by Martin: “He sold it to a fellow for 5,000 francs and Martin claims to have paid fifty thousand. But it is not true. And he asks me three hundred thousand.”<sup>55</sup> Again, this may refer to the manuscript published by Martin in 1912, though this is not conclusive. Forti declares that he will continue hunting for manuscripts on Monday (he is writing on a Saturday) and expects to know then if he can obtain Greek manuscripts and if something can be done with the government. He adds: “Manzoni tells me that it is impossible to see the Treasury (*corvini*) but he has procured me access to the Russian Archaeological Institute: something purely platonic, alas.”<sup>56</sup>

53 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Egli mi affiderà un tappeto che vale circa 50 mila fr. Egli è l’espert della Banca Russa, che fa un commercio immenso di tappeti persiani antichi.”

54 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “innumerevoli legature come quelle di Martin, frammenti che qui si trovano a 70–100 Lire e più o meno secondo lo stato e la bellezza.”

55 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Abbiamo parlato coll’ex propriet. del Ms. riprod. da Martin—questi lo vendette ad un tizio per 5000 fr. e Martin dice averlo pagato 50 mila. Ma non è vero. E me chiede 300 m.”

56 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Manzoni mi dice che è impossibile vedere il tesoro (Corvini), ma mi ha procurato l’ingresso all’ It. Archeol. Russo: cosa prettamente platonica (?), ahimè.”



By “Treasury,” Forti is probably referring here to the treasury in Topkapı Palace, where, in addition to some of the most fabulous jewels in the world, the manuscripts of the Sultans were kept, as mentioned above. Knowing De Marinis’s previous dealings involving Corvinus manuscripts, there can be little doubt that Forti was after those in Topkapı. The Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople was founded in 1895; in 1903, its director, Fyodor Ivanovich Uspenskij, obtained a permit to conduct research in the library at Topkapı, which he continued until 1914.<sup>57</sup> As to the meaning of “purely platonic, alas,” one can only speculate, but Forti almost certainly knew that Russian scholars had access to the Sultan’s library.

After mentioning the Russian Institute, Forti declares his intentions of leaving Constantinople on the twentieth (the following Friday), via Costanza, Bucharest, and Budapest, arriving at Florence on the twenty-third. However, he did not post the letter for several days, and on the following Tuesday he added: “I read again what I wrote and I believe the carpets will make you laugh—true, it would be a good business, but we cannot take care of it.”<sup>58</sup> He now needs to stay longer: he claims that Barzini has helped in the negotiations with the government, and “if it is humanly possible to get there, we will get there.”<sup>59</sup> In fact, that morning Forti paid a visit to “Giabid Bey, former minister of finances and present manipulator of the Turkish finances”—Mehmet Cavid Bey (1875–1926) was an economist and a prominent member of the Young Turks, who served as minister of finances in 1909 (fig. 6).<sup>60</sup> Forti

57 Pinar Üre, “Byzantine Heritage, Archaeology, and Politics between Russia and the Ottoman Empire: Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople (1894–1914)” (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 207.

58 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Martedì—rileggo quanto le ò scritto: penso che dei tappeti lei ridderà—Certo farebbe un affare, ma noi non possiamo occuparcene.”

59 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Credo che dovrò restare qui a lungo: ò messo di mezzo Barzini ed abbiamo già camminato assai nell’affare dalle trattative col governo: se è umanamente possibile arrivare, arriveremo.”

60 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Stamani sono stato da Giabid Bey, ex ministro delle finanze ed attuale manipolatore delle fin. Turche.” On Cavid, see Gingeras, *Eternal Dawn*, 17–22, 26–32.



FIGURE 6. Mehmed Cavid Bey, 1917, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

was accompanied by Selim Bey, a Turkish officer who participated in the negotiations with the Italian government during the Libyan war.<sup>61</sup> He claims

---

61 On Selim, see Salvatore Bono, “Archives du Ministère des affaires étrangères à Paris. Documentazione sulla guerra libica (1911–1912),” in *Le Fonti per la storia militare italiana in*

that Cavid will facilitate his access to the treasury, “something that not even the Embassy could do.”<sup>62</sup>

What follows is even more astonishing: “For now, God prevents me from speaking of acquisition, but this is a serious affair, only a big affair can be concluded: of several million” (underlined in the original).<sup>63</sup> He instructs De Marinis to get immediately in touch with Imbert to ask him the maximum amount he can contribute. He estimates that they will need at least three million: “In addition to seventeen Korans, [there are] Byzantine at will, and Greek and Latin.”<sup>64</sup> He then instructs De Marinis: “Telegraph me the answer, telling me, for example: buy 30 rugs = spend 3 million (that is, 1 rug = 100 thousand lire).”<sup>65</sup> He adds, “if we have to close [a deal], I want you and Imbert to come here—by Budapest, Bucharest—Constanza one can get here in two days and a half” and recommends “maximum secrecy.”<sup>66</sup>

Forti concludes the letter by stressing that he has rummaged through the entirety of Constantinople, including caravanserais (inns for traveling merchants), bazaars, shops, lost-and-founds, and churches. Only manuscripts in vakif libraries are comparable to the few manuscripts of Haïm, which he has seen at least twice and are “extraordinary” (underlined in the original); not even the most important antique dealer in the city, a certain Caffaro, has anything comparable.

In Letter 4, written on Pera Palace Hotel paper on a Thursday, probably 20 February, Forti begins by acknowledging receipt of De Marinis’s letters

---

*età contemporanea* (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali. Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1993), 183–98 at 190–92.

62 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Egli mi otterrà di vedere il tesoro, cosa che neppure all’Ambasciata àno potuto.”

63 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Per ora Dio mi guardi a parlare di acquisti—se non che, e qui è l’affar serio, non si può concludere che un grande affare: di diversi milioni.”

64 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “È indispensabile subito telegrafare o parlare con Imbert e fare re. la cifra massima di cui lui può disporre e può trovare. Bisognerebbe che almeno fosse 3 milioni: ci sono oltre i 17 cora., Bizantini a volontà, e greci e latini.”

65 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “mi telegrafi la risposta: dicendomi per esempio: compri 30 tappeti = disporre 3 milioni (ossia 1 tapp. = 100 mila lire).”

66 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 3: “Se si dovesse stringere, vorrei che lei ed Imb. venissero qui—per Bpest. Bucarest-Costanza in 2 giorni e mezzo si arriva . . . raccomando segreto massimo.”

from 14 and 15 February.<sup>67</sup> He continues by teasing his associate: “You will remain disappointed seeing that the telegram concerned other than a corvino.”<sup>68</sup> That morning he had gone to see Cavid, but he was not at home, so he left a note and would return the following day: “What is interesting is to see what there is”—presumably which manuscripts can be obtained from Topkapı.<sup>69</sup> He has already conceived an alternative plan “if this one does not work: through a certain Denari *massone*, himself also connected with Salem, Carasso, Giavid, in summary, with the Young Turks.”<sup>70</sup> Denari was presumably Edoardo Denari (1874–1954), Freemason, architect, associate of Mongeri, and an important figure in Constantinople’s Italian community with close ties to Turkish politicians.<sup>71</sup> Carasso is undoubtedly Emanuel Karasu (1863–1934), a Sephardi Jew, politician, and Freemason.<sup>72</sup> Cavid was also a Freemason, as were many other Young Turks.<sup>73</sup> By the late nineteenth century, Masonic lodges in Constantinople had become central to a social network in which Europeans—notably bankers, businessmen, and journalists—mingled freely with progressive Turks.<sup>74</sup>

Forti then tells De Marinis that he bought a sixteenth-century Armenian manuscript with mediocre astronomical watercolors for one hundred lire; he did so because the seller promised him important Greek manuscripts. He then returns to his fixation: “They would be sure of succeeding with the

67 The previous letter took at most a week to reach De Marinis; see n. 96, below.

68 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 4 (Thursday . . . 1913): “rimarrà deluso vedendo che il teleg. si riferiva ad altro che un Corvino.”

69 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 4: “L’interessante è di vedere che c’è.”

70 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 4: “Poi ò diverse vie molto buone: ieri mi ò trovata un’altra di cui profiterò se questa non va: per mezzo di certo Denari massone legato anche lui a Salem, Carasso, Giavid, ai giov. turchi insomma.”

71 See Büke Uras, “Rediscovering Edoardo De Nari, Italian Architect in Turkey (1874–1954),” in Girardelli and Godoli, *Italian Architects*, 233–45; Adelia Rispoli, “La figura di Edoardo Denari nei rapporti tra Italia e Turchia,” in *Atti del simposio di ricerche e di studi per uno sviluppo scientifico dei rapporti italo-turchi*, ed. Enrico de Leone (Milan: Dott. A Giuffrè, 1981), 149–69.

72 See Ahmed, *The Young Turks*, 59, 73; Elie Kedourie, “Young Turks, Freemasons and Jews,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 7 (1971): 89–104.

73 Kedourie, “Young Turks, Freemasons,” 98; Paul Dumont, “Freemasonry in Turkey: A By-product of Western Penetration,” *European Review* 13 (2005): 481–93, esp. 489–91.

74 Dumont, “Freemasonry,” 485.

government if they could make a big affair, for example, ten million—but for little they do not get involved, I am afraid.”<sup>75</sup> It is unclear whether “they” are the Freemasons or the seller of the Armenian manuscript. He concludes the letter by informing De Marinis that Haïm has received the credit references he requested from his bank in Rome.

A note on a small sheet of paper, which does not include a date but begins with “another line before the post leaves” was probably included with Letter 4.<sup>76</sup> Forti acknowledges receipt of De Marinis’s letter with the “porto d’armi” (lit., firearms license), with which he will “attempt the attemptable.”<sup>77</sup> By “porto d’armi,” does Forti mean money or instructions?—the first, I suppose. He then returns to his main preoccupation: “I think that obtaining something from the government is a dream: if they only wanted to pawn the jewels of the crown and the treasury, they would make hundreds of millions . . . the pearls and the emeralds they have! But they cannot contemplate the idea, according to everybody because of religious sentiment.”<sup>78</sup> He is about to meet Mongeri and Chabert again, as he still hopes they can help him with the government.

Letter 5, also written on Pera Palace Hotel paper, is dated 2.IV.1913 (2 April 1913), a considerable time after Letter 4, which may be explained by De Marinis’s presence in Constantinople. I shall return to this later. In this letter Forti laments, “yesterday the news of Morgan’s death arrived here: we are really persecuted this year! I am really depressed and cannot wait to return to Florence to have a bit of work that would distract me from this disillusionment.”<sup>79</sup>

75 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 4: “Li sarebbero sicuri di riuscire col governo se potessimo fare un grosso affare, p. e., 10 milioni—ma per poco non ci mettono, temo.”

76 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, note (no date): “Ancora un rigo prima che parta la posta.”

77 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, note: “ricevo la Sua lettera col porto d’armi—Grazie—Per qui tenterò il tentabile.”

78 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, note: “Penso che sian’ sogni di ottener qualcosa dal governo: se solo volesse impegnare le gioie della corona e del Tesoro farebbe centinaia di milioni . . . le perle e gli smeraldi che ànno! Ma non entrano in quest’idea, a detta di tutti per sentimento religioso.”

79 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 5 (2 April 1913): “Ieri qui è arrivata la notizia della morte di Morgan: siamo proprio perseguitati quest’anno. Io sono veramente depresso e non vedo l’ora di essere a Firenze per aver un po’ di lavoro che mi distraiga di questo scoraggiamento.”

Forti declares that he wishes to leave on the following Tuesday (he is writing on a Wednesday), but if he finds a good deal he will stay a few days longer, and Mongeri has apparently asked him to stay another five or six days. A man named Bottom is “trying to obtain directly those two Korans in parchment,” for which Forti has promised thirty thousand; “it would be a beautiful asset,” he adds.<sup>80</sup> Haïm is going to see on the same day “the manuscripts that remain: he is also depressed because of Morgan. He hopes that in Paris or in London we could as well conclude something, and I think so too.”<sup>81</sup>

In the next paragraph, Forti informs De Marinis that he has just received “the letter written by the hand of the *signora*”; he explains, “it is not my opinion to sue Imbert because in our part the thing is not genuine: in any case, we will discuss it.”<sup>82</sup> As we shall discover below, De Marinis did not follow Forti’s advice, and the signora was probably Imbert’s wife (Forti was not married as far as we know). He then adds: “Concerning the Haliss, I really wish that we could get Cavalieri interested for the real price, so we take care afterwards of the sale with calm and make a profit—unless we cannot make *papà* lose interest otherwise, I do not want him to worry on our account.”<sup>83</sup> By Haliss, he is referring either to a lot of manuscripts or perhaps to all the manuscripts he and De Marinis acquired in Constantinople, as I discuss later. Cavalieri is presumably Giuseppe Cavalieri (1834–1918), whose private library was the subject of a catalogue published by De Marinis

80 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 5: “Bottom sta lavorando per ottenere direttamente quei due corani su perg.; gli ò detto che li pagheremo circa 15 m. l’uno: sarebbe una bella risorsa.”

81 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 5: “Haïm vedrà oggi I manoscritti rimasti: anche lui è rimasto male di Morgan. Spera che a Parigi o a Londra potremo egualmente concludere qualche cosa e così credo anch’io.”

82 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 5: “Ricevo la posta: è la lettera scritta di mano della signora: non sono di opinione di far causa ad Imbert perché da parte nostra la cosa non è genuina: ad ogni modo ne ragioneremo.”

83 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 5: “Quanto ad Haliss vorrei veramente che interessissimo Cavalieri per il vero prezzo per poter poi con calma curare la vendita e realizzare un utile—A meno che non possiamo altrimenti disinteressare papà che non voglio sia in pensieri per causa nostra.”

in 1908; moreover, they were probably close friends, since Cavalieri's son addressed De Marinis as "carissimo Tammaro."<sup>84</sup> As to why Forti was so eager to get Cavalieri involved, his wording suggests he wanted to avoid relying financially on his father. Forti continues, concluding something with Mongeri or Bottom: "I will telegraph you two telegrams: one with the real figures and the indications of the group and individual numbers of the purchased group—the other with the figure doubled to be used with Cavalieri. Nevertheless, here we are at the same point as when you left: every day it seems that it would be resolved, instead I have nothing else to tell you today."<sup>85</sup>

Forti continued the letter on the following day, 3 April. Bottom had just been to see him, and he wanted "the individual prices of Fathi because he expects that tomorrow or the following day they will bring him something from there—I have given them to him quite reduced."<sup>86</sup> By Fathi, Forti may be referring to the library in the Fatih Mosque complex, founded by Mehmed II "the Conqueror" in 1481, which contained at least 1,600 manuscripts, or the Fatih Public Library, founded in the sixteenth century, which preserved several illuminated manuscripts copied for the Conqueror, and manuscripts bequeathed by viziers, noblemen, and scholars.<sup>87</sup> This appears to be confirmed by the next sentence, in which he writes that Bottom "will take him to other, less frequented, mosques and public libraries to find out whether the priests can sell at lesser risk."<sup>88</sup>

84 Tammaro De Marinis, *Catalogue des livres composant la bibliothèque de M. G. Cavalieri à Ferrara* (Florence: T. De Marinis, 1908); ASFi, Acq. e Doni 442, Cavalieri, Piero.

85 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 5: "Concludendo qualcosa con Mongeri o Bottom le telegraferò due teleg.: uno colla cifra reale e l'indicaz. del gruppo e dei singoli numeri del gruppo acquistato—L'altro colla cifra raddoppiata di cui si servirà con Cavalieri. Però qui siamo allo stesso punto di quando parti lei: sembra che si debba decidere ogni giorno, invece non è altro a dire per oggi."

86 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 5: "Venuto poco fa Bottom—Ha voluto i prezzi singoli di Fathi perché spera che domani o l'altro gli porteranno qualcosa di là—li è dati assai ridotti."

87 See Harry N. Howard, "Preliminary Materials for a Survey of the Libraries and Archives of Istanbul," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 59 (1939): 227–46 at 233–34.

88 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Forti, Letter 5: "Inoltre mi porterà in altre moschee e bibl. pubbl. meno frequentate da vere i preti possono vendere con minor pericolo."

Compared with the rest, the postscript of this last letter can be described as an anticlimax. He had spent the entire previous day showing “the volumes” to Haïm; as he expected, they were almost all from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and only the few older ones included calligraphy. On Saturday evening, Haïm would give Forti a more precise idea of how much could be obtained for those manuscripts there, but for him they are not good enough.

### *The Lawsuit*

On 5 April 1913, De Marinis and Co. filed a lawsuit in the Civil Court of Rome against the A. Imbert Gallery of Rome for breach of contract: Imbert had not fulfilled his obligation to pay half the cost of the manuscripts purchased in Constantinople by De Marinis and his partner, Forti. A printed legal memorial kept in the archives of the Morgan Library in New York provides a detailed account of the trial.<sup>89</sup> The evidence produced in the trial consisted of thirty letters and telegrams between De Marinis and Imbert, and transcriptions of oral examinations of both parties. Even if Imbert had not signed a proper contract, he lost the trial: according to the judge, Tito Carruccio, the correspondence demonstrated that De Marinis and Imbert had reached agreement. On 16 March 1914, Imbert was condemned to pay 644,000 lire, half of the amount De Marinis claimed to have paid for the manuscripts (1,288,000 lire).<sup>90</sup> De Marinis was not charged with any crime, but his conduct was vividly criticized by Carruccio: he had committed “deplorable and condemnable contraband,” violating Turkish laws by exporting ancient objects and by corrupting a dragoman (an official interpreter, usually attached to embassies and commercial enterprises).<sup>91</sup> Moreover,

---

89 New York, Morgan Library, ARC 1079, “In nome di Sua Maestà Vittorio Emanuele III per grazia di dio e volontà della nazione re d’Italia il Giudice della II sezione civile del tribunale di Roma avvocato Tito Carruccio ha reso la seguente sentenza nella causa commerciale iscritta al n. 658 del R. G. per l’anno 1914” (Rome, 1914) (hereafter NYMA, ARC 1079).

90 NYMA, ARC 1079, 24.

91 NYMA, ARC 1079, 7, 15.



Carruccio qualified as “serious fault” his having dissuaded Imbert from traveling to Constantinople to examine the manuscripts before their acquisition. An even more serious fault was “to magnify with hyperbolic words” their value; an equally serious fault was to make the final proposal to Imbert “under such form and content that it generated serious misunderstanding in the interpretation of the scope of the proposal itself.”<sup>92</sup>

Why the correspondence between Imbert and De Marinis led Carruccio to such conclusions is beyond the scope of this article, but some of the citations in the memorial help us make a little more sense of Forti’s letters. First, they confirm that the manuscripts were intended for Morgan and that Imbert and De Marinis believed the Balkan War provided particularly favorable conditions to achieve their aims.<sup>93</sup> They also confirm that Imbert and De Marinis discussed the possibility of traveling to Constantinople in early February 1913, but Imbert was not informed about Forti’s departure, which he considered “too rushed and premature,” since he was hoping to provide Forti with a letter of recommendation for a “high Turkish figure ‘with which several doors could be opened.’”<sup>94</sup> Imbert, however, repeatedly expressed his concerns that every purchase should be made with the approval of the Turkish government.<sup>95</sup>

On 22 February, De Marinis telegraphed Imbert—“Forti asks three million; urgently telegraph me maximum amount your participation. Moment of conclusion our presence considered necessary”—repeating what Forti wrote

---

92 NYMA, ARC 1079, 21–22: “Che proposito dell’Imbert si era d’intervenire di persona all’atto di acquisto quando questi non fosse ancora avvenuto; e fu certo grave colpa . . . quella Del de Marinis di impedirlo . . . e più grave colpa sua fu quella di magnificare con parole iperboliche . . . l’acquisto della collezione, quale di straordinario tesoro; nonché grave colpa fu ancora quella di concludere detto acquisto all’insaputa dello Imbert ED INFINE di fare a costui la ultima proposta sotto veste forma e contenuto tale da ingegnare equivoco serio nella interpretazione della portata della proposta stessa.”

93 NYMA, ARC 1079, 9.

94 NYMA, ARC 1079, 9: “il viaggio . . . , a insaputa dello Imbert, era a suo parere troppo affrettato e prematuro; la preoccupazione dello Imbert di procurarsi una lettera di raccomandazione per una personalità turca ‘avec la quelle plusieures [*sic*] portes pourraient être ouvertes.’”

95 NYMA, ARC 1079, 9.

to De Marinis on 15 February.<sup>96</sup> Imbert replied that he could contribute with half of the amount and agreed to travel to Constantinople, but he first wanted more information about the affair.<sup>97</sup> De Marinis, however, did not offer any precise information in the letters that followed, and Imbert did not come up with the money.

On 24 February, De Marinis informed Imbert that he and Forti had obtained all the money they needed from someone else, without any obligation other than paying interest—perhaps Forti’s father had provided some form of financial help, as Forti’s letter of 2 April would suggest.<sup>98</sup> Imbert then decided to withdraw his participation, so De Marinis was forced to send him a letter of explanation, in which, among other reasons for having failed to provide Imbert with information on the merchandise, he blamed Forti’s “chaotic and inconstant manner of conducting business.”<sup>99</sup> On 28 February, Imbert signaled that he was back on board, and on 1 March he told De Marinis that he had finally obtained “a letter of recommendation for a high-ranking Turkish figure, a letter that will have a great influence in the affair.”<sup>100</sup> But Imbert still did not pay.

On 12 March, De Marinis was in Constantinople and telegraphed Imbert: “We offer partnership very precious collection oriental manuscripts VI to VII century—we reserve [the right to] disclose the price until after your acceptance.”<sup>101</sup> On the same day, he describes the goods in a letter as

an extremely precious library containing a large number of Persian, Arab and Turkish manuscripts, or very ancient (VI, VII, VIII) or with superb decoration or rich miniatures (mostly Persian) or very beautiful and precious bindings. A library and a museum at the same

96 NYMA, ARC 1079, 10: “Forti chiede tre milioni; telegrafatemi urgenza cifra massima vostro concorso. Momento conclusione ritiensi [*sic*] necessaria nostra presenza.”

97 NYMA, ARC 1079, 10.

98 NYMA, ARC 1079, 10–11.

99 NYMA, ARC 1079, 11: “il modo caotico e contraddittorio di trattare del suo socio, Forti.”

100 NYMA, ARC 1079, 11: “una lettera di raccomandazione per un alto personaggio turco, lettera che potrà avere grande influenza nello affare.”

101 NYMA, ARC 1079, 12: “offrons social très précieux recueil manuscrits orientaux VI à VII siècle—réservons faire connaître prix après votre acceptation.”

time. A unique occasion that could only happen in such a historic moment . . . and to respect our little chat had in Rome (although it was not very engaging) and with the aim of being agreeable to you. If you accept, would you have the kindness to pay half of the sum that we will indicate to you to the Credito Italiano in Rome.<sup>102</sup>

By 14 March, Imbert knew that he was expected to participate with 644,000 lire; he still did not pay, but he insisted that his presence in Constantinople was necessary.<sup>103</sup> De Marinis, who had actively continued to dissuade him from traveling, wrote on that same day: “concerning your trip (to Constantinople) for the moment it is unnecessary. After much hard work everything is concluded, paid, collected and ready for departure.”<sup>104</sup>

On 27 March, De Marinis was already back in Italy and visited Imbert in Rome to show him part of the collection. Imbert then categorically refused to pay, claiming that De Marinis had exaggerated its value.<sup>105</sup> The latter became one of the grounds of Imbert’s defense, together with De Marinis’s violation of Turkish law by exporting the manuscripts illegally and by bribing a dragoman.<sup>106</sup> In turn, De Marinis claimed that Imbert broke his engagement because he knew that Morgan was about to die.<sup>107</sup> Morgan, who had arrived in Rome on March 10, was gravely ill, and by 23 March, he could no longer leave his room at the Grand Hotel.<sup>108</sup> According to the London *Daily*

---

102 NYMA, ARC 1079, 4–5, 12: “une bibliothèque extrêmement précieuse contenant un grand nombre de manuscrits persans, arabes et turcs ou très anciens (VI, VII, VIII) ou avec des superbes décorations ou des riches miniatures (surtout persanes) ou de très belles et précieuses reliures. Une bibliothèque et un musée dans le même temps. Occasion unique qui pouvait se présenter seulement dans un semblable moment historique . . . et pour respecter la petite causerie eu à Rome (bien qu’elle ne fût du tout engageante) et dans le but d’être agréable à vous. Si vous acceptez veuillez avoir la bonté de verser la moitié de la somme que nous vous indiquerons au Credito Italiano à Rome.”

103 NYMA, ARC 1079, 12.

104 NYMA, ARC 1079, 12: “e quanto alla sua venuta (a Costantinopoli) pel momento è inutile. Dopo molto faticoso lavoro tutto è concluso pagato ritirato a disposto per la partenza.”

105 NYMA, ARC 1079, 13.

106 NYMA, ARC 1079, 7.

107 NYMA, ARC 1079, 7, 13.

108 Jean Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier* (London: Harvill Press, 1999), 679.

*Mail*, the Grand looked like a besieged fortress; waves of art dealers descended on the hotel “from early morning to late night and are repulsed with the regularity of surf on the beach.”<sup>109</sup> Morgan died on 31 March.

Whether Imbert paid De Marinis and Co. or challenged Judge Carruccio’s sentence is very difficult to verify today. What is certain is that by 1915 De Marinis and Forti had parted ways.<sup>110</sup> In a letter written to De Marinis on 11 March 1915, Imbert’s wife, Rachel, lamented over Forti’s “stupidity” for having sold several volumes at cost to Murray—either Charles Fairfax or, more probably, his son John.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, she added, “I am delighted that you have finally hardened up! When I think that you have always worked to fatten idiots like the Mr in question. I believe the good times are finished for him!”<sup>112</sup> Were De Marinis and Imbert back on friendly terms? Probably not, even though his wife addressed him as “Très gentil ami” and gave him news on her children, she concluded the letter, “We cannot think about seeing you for now, but let’s hope soon.”<sup>113</sup>

### *And the Manuscripts?*

Most of De Marinis’s and Forti’s booty, consisting of 290 of their 410 manuscripts, is today at the University of Michigan Library in Ann Arbor.<sup>114</sup> These

109 Strouse, *Morgan*, 678.

110 As explained in a letter written by Forti to Hans Peter Kraus on 5 August 1975; Morgan Library MS M. 496, curatorial file. My gratitude to René Zandbergen for sharing this document.

111 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Furllet [Imbert]: “Je suis surprise de sa bêtise de vendre des volumes si beaux au prix coutant, surtout à Murray, qui naturellement arrive toujours au bon moment.”

112 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Furllet: “Je suis enchantée que vous ayez enfin serré! Quand je pense que vous avez toujours travaillé pour engraisser des idiots comme le M. en question. Je crois que le beau temps est fini pour lui!”

113 ASFi, Acq. e Doni 443, Furllet: “Pour le moment nous ne pouvons penser vous voir mais espérons bientôt.”

114 See Roberta Dougherty, “Islamic Manuscripts at the University of Michigan: Summary of Collection History,” 1993, available at <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/documents> (accessed 5 August 2021), 1–3.

items were acquired by Francis Willey Kelsey, professor of classics at the university, from a reputed antique dealer in Cairo, Maurice Nahman, in 1924.<sup>115</sup> A further sixty-seven were obtained by Edward Edwards, head of the department of oriental books and manuscripts at the British Museum, and fifty-four by Alfred Chester Beatty.<sup>116</sup> According to a note written by Nahman in 1923,

The collection of Arabic, Turkish and Persian manuscripts used to belong to Halis Pasha of Constantinople; Mr Morgan had it purchased for 12,000 golden Turkish pounds in 1912, but he didn't pay because of his illness, it remained with the antiques dealer Marini of Florence who in 1912 sent it to Egypt to be offered to Lord Kitchener [then High Commissioner] for the Egyptian government, but Lord Kitchener found the price excessive and refused to buy it. The collection returned to Italy. In 1920 Mr Marini sent it again to Egypt in the care of Mr Sherman, who after 3 months of negotiations with the Egyptian government, who proposed to choose about one hundred volumes. Mr Sherman wanted to sell the collection [but wanted to keep it together] and refused to comply with the desires of the Government. The collection was sold to Mr Maurice Nahman who remained the sole buyer.<sup>117</sup>

115 On Nahman, see Iman R. Abdulfattah, "A Forgotten Man: Maurice Nahman, an Antiquarian-Tastemaker," in *Guardian of Ancient Egypt: Studies in Honor of Zahi Hawass*, 3 vols., ed. Janice Kamrin, Miroslav Bárta, Salima Ikram, Mark Lehner, and Mohamed Megahed (Prague: Charles University, Faculty of Arts, 2020–21), 1: 105–23.

116 University of Michigan, Near East Research Memorandum no. 8, 1–15 October, p. 15.

117 University of Michigan Library, Special Collections Administrative Files, folder "Islamic Manuscripts: Acquisitions & General": "La Collection de Manuscrits Arabes Turcs et Persans appartenait à Halis Pacha à Constantinople; Mr. Morgan l'a fait acheter pour 12000 Livres (douze mille Livres turques or) en 1912 mais il ne l'a pas payée à cause de sa maladie, elle est restée à l'antiquaire Marini de Florence qu'en 1912 l'envoie en Égypte pour l'offrir à Lord Kitchener pour le Gouvernement d'Égypte, mais Lord Kitchener trouva le prix exagéré et refusa de l'acheter. La collection rentre en Italie. En 1920, Monsieur Marini l'envoie de nouveau en Égypte en la confiant à Mr. Sherman qui après 3 mois de démarches auprès le Gouvernement de Égypte qui proposait de faire un choix d'une centaines de volumes. Mr Sherman désirait vendre la collection et nia obtempérer aux desiderata du Gouvernement. La collection a été vendue à M. Maurice Nahman qui est resté le seul acquéreur."

A memorandum written by Kelsey in October 1924 confirms that Marini was De Marinis and that he obtained the manuscripts for Morgan in 1913, not in 1912.<sup>118</sup> We also learn here that Nahman told Kelsey that De Marinis was expecting to sell the manuscripts to Morgan for £40,000, then the equivalent of about 1,100,000 lire.<sup>119</sup> Thus it would seem that De Marinis decided to sue Imbert for half of the amount he was expecting to get from Morgan, plus generous expenses, and not for half of the cost of the manuscripts, which according to Nahman was 12,000 golden Turkish pounds, then worth about 11,000 British pounds or 270,000 lire.

As to the provenance of the manuscripts, Halis Pasha has never been identified. By the time Kelsey acquired the manuscripts, they were known as the “Abdul Hamid collection.”<sup>120</sup> Only four of these manuscripts, however, all calligraphy albums, can be associated with confidence with Abdülhamid II (fig. 7).<sup>121</sup> The owners of the other manuscripts whose provenance has been established were diplomats, statesmen, and members of the court—for instance, Mehmet Emin Âli Paşa (1815–1871), who served as grand vizier and as foreign minister several times (fig. 8).<sup>122</sup>

Can Forti’s letters shed more light on the provenance of the manuscripts? Without further research by specialists in Islamic manuscripts, this would be very difficult. The letters do not offer any precise information about the manuscripts Forti acquired. It seems almost certain that Haïm and Bottom, whoever they were, provided part of the merchandise. Given the number of manuscripts, however, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that a large part came from the same source and might have been obtained illegally. Topkapı seems out of the question as a source, since it would be evident by now—as in the case of Martin, who, there are reasons to believe, removed miniatures

118 University of Michigan, Near East Research Memorandum no. 9 (16–31 October), pp. 1–3.

119 University of Michigan, Near East Research Memorandum no. 9 (16–31 October), p. 2.

120 Dougherty, *Islamic Manuscripts*, 2.

121 Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, Special Collections Library, Isl. MSS 438–41 (according to Eryn Kropf).

122 See Eryn Kropf, “Following the Peregrinations of Isl. Ms. 350. Part 1: From Delhi to Istanbul,” 2017, <https://apps.lib.umich.edu/blogs/beyond-reading-room/following-peregrinations-isl-ms-350-part-1-delhi-istanbul> (accessed 9 August 2021).

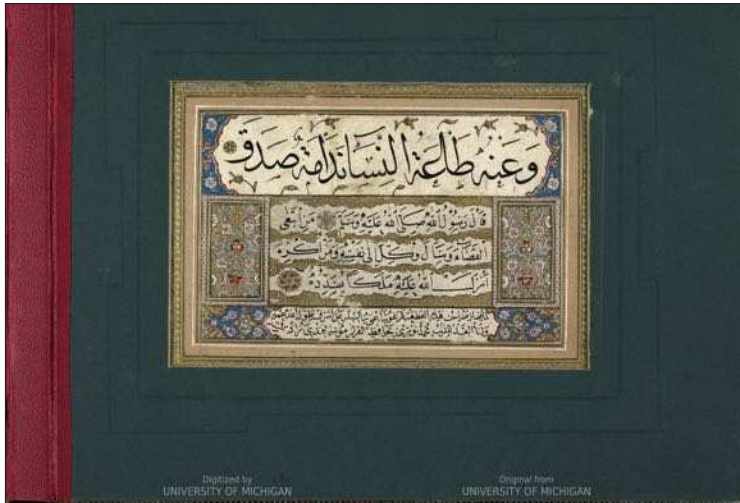


FIGURE 7. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, Special Collections Library. Isl. MS 439, *Hutut-ı mütevvâ-yı İslamiye albümü* (1600–1797), fol. 1r. Courtesy of Hathi Trust.

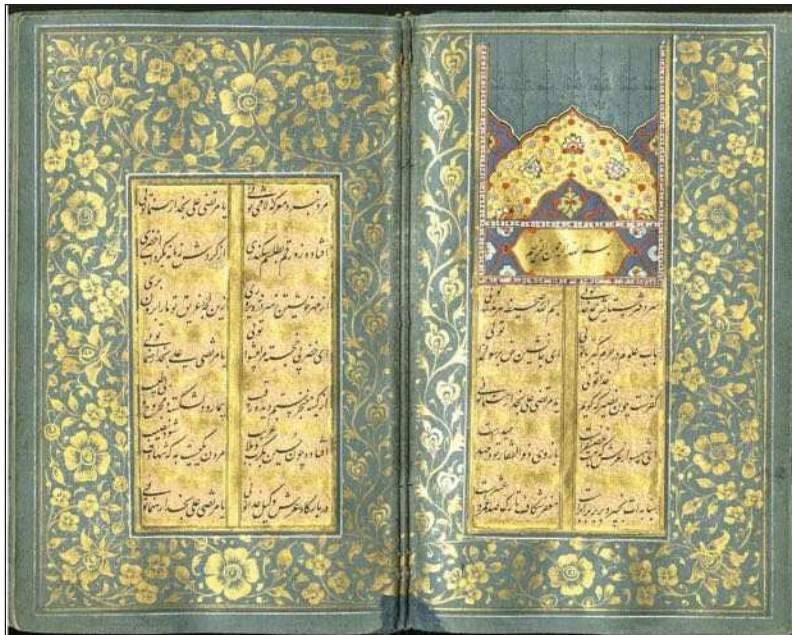


FIGURE 8. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, Special Collections Library, Isl. MS 350, *Ganj al-ma'âni* (1744), fols. 6r–5v. Courtesy of Hathi Trust.

from albums in the palace and smuggled them in his diplomatic bag.<sup>123</sup> A public library seems a stronger possibility: Forti's last letter suggests he had obtained manuscripts from one of the Fatih libraries; moreover, it is also possible that part of the collection belonged to a Halis Pasha, who might have bequeathed his manuscripts to a mosque or a public library. My hope is that this article will help specialists get nearer to the truth.

### *The Moral of the Fable*

It is impossible to know if all the letters sent by Forti to De Marinis from Constantinople have survived; moreover, we do not have any of De Marinis's responses or the telegrams between him and Forti, which would have revealed which decisions were made and when. Neither do we have any detailed information on De Marinis's activities in Constantinople. A puzzling question is why De Marinis kept Forti's letters, since the documents that have survived from his private archive do not include any other significant business correspondence. Given what we know about De Marinis, he is very likely to have destroyed any compromising material. Did he keep Forti's letters as souvenirs of a juvenile adventure? Or, more likely, because they were more compromising for Forti than they were for him? True, De Marinis broke Turkish law, but Forti emerges from the letters as the one who enabled this.

It is also true that the methods employed by Forti would be strongly condemned today. This is not the place to pass moral judgment. On the other hand, we may read Forti's letters as a fable. The setting: a place in turmoil (Constantinople); the characters: a millionaire with a bottomless purse to satisfy his whims (Morgan), a shrewd man who knows how to please the millionaire (Imbert), two ruthless middlemen (Forti and De Marinis) charged with providing objects for the millionaire, a few influential people (Manzoni, Mongeri, Cavid, etc.) who could help the middlemen, and local dealers disposed to sell anything for as much money as possible (Haïm,

---

123 David J. Roxburgh, "Disorderly Conduct?: F. R. Martin and the Bahram Mirza Album," *Muqarnas* 15 (1998): 32–58 at 32–33, 47–48; Hillenbrand, "Western Scholarship," 209.



Bottom, etc.). Forti, it transpires from his letters, arrived in Constantinople knowing virtually nothing about the city and its customs. The individuals he relied on do not appear to have provided any substantial help, apart from Mongeri, who introduced him to Haïm. The most influential of those individuals, Manzoni and Cavid, did not facilitate access to the treasury as Forti had hoped. Forti's behavior may not have helped either: he acted impetuously, sometimes incoherently, and was easily impressed; moreover, his letters suggest he was delusional and gullible. The manuscripts he obtained, as far as one can judge from those that have been identified, can hardly be compared to the lavishly exotic Persian manuscripts appreciated by Morgan and other wealthy collectors. Therefore, they ended up being purchased by specialists like Kelsey and Edwards. The moral of the fable: manuscript collections are the result of a myriad of circumstances, mindsets, abilities, and pure chance.