Initially used as simple shelters by nomadic peoples on the Central Asian steppe, tents had evolved into luxurious portable abodes by the time of Genghis Khan, the Mongol conqueror who ruled a vast region at his death in 1227. This illustration comes from a 14th-century Persian manuscript.

Opposite: A splendid entryway marked by horsehair banners leads into a tent city designated "the imperial camp" in a 15th-century gouache sketch of the Islamic School.

From a distance indeed the great tent would appear to be a castle... Round and about the pavilions on the ground outside is erected a wall of cloth, as might be otherwise the wall of a house or castle, and the cloth is of many coloured silks in diverse patterns.

— Ray González de Celis

From the Middle Ages onward, European travelers, such as the Spanish envoy quoted at left, wrote admiringly of great tent cities in Muslim lands—especially in Central Asia, but also in Persia, Egypt, and later Mughal India. They were astonished at the size and organization of these cities that at times numbered thousands and even tens of thousands of tents.

The cities that amazed Europeans were not simply the black camel-hair ridge tents of the Arab world or the domed tents of the nomadic Central Asian tribes. They included movable palaces, some complete with mosques, that housed traveling royalty and their vast entourages, or were set up to mark important celebrations, such as the marriage or circumcision of members of the ruling house. And it was not just the size of these tents that caught western eyes, but their splendor and comfort, and the way they served as showcases for wonderful textiles: cloths of gold, brocade, silk, embroideries, velvet, clout, and appliqué.

Across the world, nomads have used different types of shelters and tents, but some of the most varied and elaborate designs originated on the Central Asian steppe, a region that can be hot in summer, bitterly cold in winter and windy at any time. For centuries, but mainly from early medieval times onward, as diverse Turco-Mongol peoples...
This illustration by Nihay al-Wasiti from a 13th-century edition of the Magamat (Assemblies), a collection of Arabic poetry by al-Hariri of Baara (1064–1122), depicts a caravan stop with brightly colored tents in which travelers could rest and where they could care for their mounts.

spread out from the steppe in migrations or in conquest, they carried with them their circular dwellings, called yurts in Turkic or ger in Mongol. Even after they settled and began to build houses and palaces, they often returned to their tents for the major events of their lives: birth and death, feastings and all kinds of ritual occasions.

This ceremonial use of the tent reached as far east as China, where there was considerable influence from the steppe, especially along the western border. Paintings show that an 11th-century Song emperor gave birth in a special delivery tent, surrounded by 48 smaller ones. Among people who were originally nomadic, the custom of giving birth in a tent survived, particularly in Siberia, into the 20th century, possibly in part because of an awareness that a place never before occupied reduced the risk of infections.

Early accounts of yurts or gers—circular, with a collapsible frame covered in felt and a domed roof, sometimes also called “trelles tents”—come from Chinese descriptions and paintings that date to the ninth century. However, it is around the late 12th and early 13th centuries, during the time of Genghis Khan, whose role extended from northern China to the Volga River in Russia and south to Persia, that travelers and envoys began to describe the luxury of the ruler’s tent. Chinese author Hezhi Shih Liub, writing about 1237, tells us that “the emperor is protected from the wind and rain by a thousand roofs. It has one door. The threshold and doorposts are completely filled with gold. For this reason it is named golden.”

A couple of years later, the Persian historian Ata Malik Juvaini described the opulent tent his father, the subh-dan, or finance minister, of Khurasan, provided for the Mongol court: “My father provided another great tent of maroon wool felt and wondrous coloring with everything in keeping in the way of gold and silver vessels. He pitched this tent and fastened it if for days on end.”

Already by this date, a number of different types of tents were in use among the “Turco-Mongol peoples, apparently as a matter of personal taste and wealth. Miniatures illustrating the famous Magamat (Assemblies) of al-Hariri—for example, in a manuscript written in Baghdad around 1250, now in the St. Petersburg—show trellis tents, bell tents, circular tents with a central pole—and ridge tents all pitched side by side at caravan halts outside Damascus and elsewhere, and at the pilgrims’ camp at Makka.

These tents are elaborately decorated, perhaps reflecting the imagination of the artist, but more likely recording what they actually looked like. Some have designs similar to those still found today on actual, richly embroidered fabrics from Central Asia; another is decorated with a band of calligraphy reflecting the architecture of the period, and yet another appears to apply gold. These decorative traditions were carried from east to west across the steppes. Until recently, they were still found on tents in Tibet, and they are still used on the ceremonial tents of North Africa and Egypt.

These beautiful structures still stand in isolate. They were often part of cities of more than 20,000 tents, with the ruler and his wives housed in what were indeed tent palaces. Roy Gonzales de Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador to the court of the Mongol emperor Timur in Samarkand in 1404, described the royal tents in such detail that it would be easy to reconstruct one. See sidebar, page 41. By his time, the simple yurt-type tent had been extended into the ceremonial marquee, with its entryway enclosed by poles. These marqueses could be vast. The 14th-century Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta mentions one large enough to contain a minister, or poet, and accommodate several hundred men at prayer.

The people of the steppe who had come into contact—and initially in conflict—with settled Muslims (including most famously the 1257 sack of Baghdad that brought down the Abbasid caliphate) converted to Islam. From roughly the 14th century, their corpses took the traditional tent in two directions: to Turkey and to India. In Turkey, tents became a vital part of the Ottoman Empire. They held a special place on ceremonial occasions, in part due to the Ottomans’ own nomadic past, and they were also a critical item of equipment in a highly militarized society. The Ottoman army even had a department to deal with them, and the scaffold of tents were stored in Istanbul at a depot near the Bahadur Pasha Palace on the great hippodrome.

Cost is another way of understanding the elegance of royal tents. The Robinson-Foliot family of public financiers compiled in about 1362 by al-Maqqarini lists a few interesting statistics, all priced in the dinars of the day. For comparison, a good camel sold for about 430 dinars.

- Mosque and minaret with furnishings 7000
- Trellis tent for 100 men 5000
- Marquee-type tent extra large 7500
- Ornamental silk awning 1500
- Small kitchen tent 188
- Stable tent 500
- Luxury privy 7000


Mongols cook beside their finely decorated tents in this illustration from Jami’ al Tawarikh (Universal History) by the Persian physician Rashid al-Din (1247–1318). The tents, with their central opening, still bear some similarity to yurts. This painting dates to around 1430.
Repeating rosettes, arches and images of hanging lamps decorate the interior of this 17th-century Ottoman tent. Real lamps would have hung from the ridgepole. The tent was doubtless meant for an aristocrat or high-ranking administrator.

In 1683, the Polish king Jan III Sobieski routed the Turkish army that was besieging Vienna. Among the spoils listed by a London newsheet were "thirty thousand tents and two million lira of money in the Grand Vizier's tent." While the precise number of tents is probably a journalistic exaggeration, the Ottoman camp was indeed abandoned, and Sobieski, writing to his wife a few days after his victory, mentions the great quantities of tents acquired. Many of the tents in European collections today were among those captured at the Siege of Vienna.

A good deal is known about these tents. Some were made in government workshops. Others appear to have been commissioned in Aleppo and other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Osvald Sirén, in his wonderful description of the Gulf Processions in Istanbul at the late 19th century, says a little about the tent-makers. Their patron was Nasir al-Din Abu Abdullah Mekki, the tent maker...who had made the Prophet's tent...

They erect fine tents on litters...while some are being set up as awnings and mosquito nets. He also describes the toilet...nor were the curtains bejeweled with colored cords, and there existed also a mosquito net made of gold and silk guild.

As in other matters at court, there was a strict hierarchy of tents, with the most splendid decoration, and the color red, reserved for the sultans and the highest military ranks. Bearing in mind the harsh climate of much of the Ottoman territory, camping tents (as opposed to ceremonial tents) were generally made in two layers, the outer composed of heavy, waterproof material, often with very little decoration, while the inner, which is generally what has survived, could be extremely elaborate.

One of the most common decorative techniques was appliqué. Cut-out layers of material, which might include gilded leather, were stitched together to designs that generally imitated architectural motifs, arches, columns, oil lamps, sun rosettes, flower vases or the tree of life—all motifs in the classic Islamic repertoire.

The Ottoman tents now in the Royal Armoury in Madrid are excellent examples of this. One, probably dating to the mid-17th century, shows signs of a number of years' use and careful repairs before it was captured, possibly at Vienna. Highly prized, it appears to have been passed around the European nobility as a ceremonial gift until it was given in 1888 by the Prince of Pescara in Italy to Alfonso XIII. The tent is believed to have belonged to a high, if not top-ranking, official, and it would have weighed some 200 to 600 kilograms (around 440 to 1320 lb), which would have required three camels to carry.

Other fine tents, several from the same period, have been preserved—not surprisingly—in Hungary and Austria, countries bordering on the former Ottoman Empire, and as far away as Sweden. The largest collection is at Wawel Royal Castle in Krakow, Poland. One particularly lovely example, dating from the early 17th century, but also believed to have come from the siege of 1683, is oval, two-masted and wonderfully decorated in predominantly blue and gold. Another is mainly red with gold arabesque and medallion decoration in stronger colors: green, yellow and blue.

Giving tents as gifts was nothing new. As far back as 802, Harun al-Rashid, the fifth Abbasid caliph of Baghdad, is recorded sending one to Charlemagne of France, along with the more famous elephant.

Cairo, Metropolis of the Tent

Cairo remains famous today for its ceremonial tents (sunuzat). The city that presided Cairo, however, was called Al-Fustat, which means "large tent" or "camp." According to tradition, when the general Amr ibn al-As was conquering Egypt, a tent was set up on the spot where he was sleeping the night before one of his decisive battles. He ordered that none should touch after the tent or the tent, and on his return, victorious, he had his men tear down and set up their tents around his, thus creating a first fustat-the encampment of the tent or the metropolis of the tent. The name was shortened to Al-Fustat, and it endured until the founding of Al-Qahira ("the victorious"), i.e., Cairo, in 969.

An appliqué doorway of a tent used for celebrations and special events, stitched in Cairo in the early 20th century, features a variety of patterns and colors combined with Arabic inscriptions expressing greetings from the host to his guests.

One of the most spectacular surviving tents, preserved in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, was presented in 1836 to Tsar Alexander by the Emperor of Buhara. The tent and its surrounding curtain walls are literally a patchwork of the most sumptuous textiles in favor in Central Asia during the 19th century. Magnificent examples of ikat, specially dyed silk weavings, alternate with appliqué and embroidery, some of it in cut-out gold and silver thread. The windows are elaborately geometric cutouts edged with gold—a far cry from the woven reed screens that would have originally served that purpose. The inner roof has similar panels of different textiles, while the outer roof and awnings are boldly striped in red, yellow, black and white. The brilliance of the colors and the splendid workmanship make it the most remarkable still in existence.

The Hermitage in St. Petersburg has an earlier tent, which had seen a good deal of use before someone in the Russian army acquired it in the early 20th century. Because of its coloring, it is believed to have belonged to a middle-ranking officer. Even so, the decoration is exquisite, and though the tent is somewhat worn and far less catching than the emir's gift tent, it remains a more elegant production.

The Central Asian tents reached India with various waves of conquerors, culminating with Babur (1483–1530), who laid the foundation of the Mughal Empire. The yurt-type tent with its heavy outer-layer lasts, vanished in the warmer climate and was supplanted by the marquee. Keeping with the general history of the Mughal court, the most splendid fabrics were often used. The poet Abu al-Fadl, for example, mentions many-colored materials from China, Anatolia and India.

Numerous descriptions of the tents by local chroniclers and foreign visitors make it clear that, as in Central Asia, they were often pitched in a garden or a place where something particularly beautiful scenery could be enjoyed. The accounts also show that tents were sometimes preferred even when a splendid palace was available. Indeed, many of the buildings in the royal city of Fatehpur Sikri in Rajasthan have wings in the great courtyard which are believed to have served as tents for downy tents. This was partly personal preference and partly a political

This brilliant silk panel highlights an 18th-century Ottoman summer tent now in the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul.
Clavijo’s Description of Timur’s Tents

Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo was the Spanish ambassador to the court of the Mongol emperor Timur (Tamerlane) from 1403 to 1406. His description of Timur’s tents is corroborated by the miniature paintings of the period.

Near the camping place where we were lodged stood a very great pavilion, in fact a very huge tent, and it was four square in shape. In height it was the measure of three long lances such as used by a horse soldier, and the side was a hundred paces from angle to angle. It being as said four-cornered, the ceiling of the pavilion was made circular to form a dome, and the poles supporting it were twelve in number each as thick round as is a chest of a man’s breast high.

The inner walls of the pavilion are lined with crimson tapestry very beautifully woven in patterns of diverse designs, further it is hung with silk stuffs of many colours. In places worked over with embroidery of gold thread. The ceiling of the pavilion is of wood. At the front there is set a very tall staff capped with an apple of burnished copper above which is a crescent... From a distance indeed this great tent would appear to be a castle. It is so immensely broad and high. It is a wonder to behold, and magnificent beyond description...

Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo’s description of Timur’s tent is a fascinating insight into the practice of bedouin tent-making that was prevalent in the Middle Ages. The tents were not only well-constructed but also adorned with intricate designs and patterns that showcased the skill and creativity of the artisans who crafted them.

In this context, the mention of silk and gold thread used in the tent-making process highlights the luxurious nature of these tents. The tents were not only functional but also served as symbols of prestige and status for the owners of these tents.

The reference to the tent being likened to a castle also emphasizes the grandeur and awe-inspiring nature of these structures. The size and height of the tent are described in terms that would make it an imposing sight, even from a distance.

This description provides a glimpse into the world of 14th-century tent-making, offering insights into the materials, techniques, and aesthetic considerations that went into creating such magnificent structures. It serves as a reminder of the rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship that characterized this period, and the enduring appeal of these tents as symbols of status and prestige.