Published: December 15, 1986
Last Updated: October 22, 2014

ARDABĪL CARPET

ARDABĪL CARPET, a name applied chiefly to a Persian carpet acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1893, which is significant for its outstanding quality of design and weaving and for the precise date it carries. A second, almost identical carpet is less well known; it was presented by the late J. Paul Getty to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1953. Both carpets were acquired from Vincent Robinson and Co. of London, and were stated to be from the shrine in Ardabīl; but before reaching the Los Angeles museum, the American carpet was owned successively by Yerkes (1892), De Lamar (1910), Duveen (1919), and finally Getty (1938). Details concerning these transactions, and much more, are contained in R. Stead, *The Ardabil Carpets*.

Neither carpet is complete. The Los Angeles one is considerably reduced in length, has lost its entire border and is now edged with a pile-woven strip of exceptionally regular weave. The London carpet is only slightly shortened, but the beginning of the field and the border are much restored, probably at the expense of the Los Angeles piece; many of the small fragments scattered about the world are undoubtedly remnants from the restorations. The present state of the carpet shows the splendor of the great design much as it must have been originally (see below).

Technique. Both carpets are woven on silk warps with three shoots of two-strand silk weft after each row of asymmetrical (Persian or Senna) knots. When examined side by side in the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1972, the pile of the London carpet was reported to be harsher, shorter, stronger and more densely packed than that of the Los Angeles one, which was silkier,

softer and longer (Stead, pp. 19, 49). In addition the linear knot counts per inch (2.5 cm) of the American carpet (horizontally 20-21 by vertically 19-20 = 380-420 per square inch = 6.5 cm^2) were recorded as being somewhat greater than those of the London piece (horizontally č 18 by vertically 17-18 = 297-324 per square inch). The suggestion that because of this discrepancy in counts, the Los Angeles originally had some two million knots more than the London carpet (Stead, p. 30) is not credible. Two carpets woven from the same, or identical, cartoons, will have the same number of knots irrespective of the final sizes of the carpets. In brief, size depends largely on the counts per unit of measurement and the fineness or coarseness of the yarns appropriate to those counts. The addition of more knots than the design required would distort it. The higher knot count per square unit of measurement in the Los Angeles carpet simply means that, because it is slightly more closely woven, it originally must have been a little smaller than its "double." Today the London carpet (Inv. 272-1893) measures 34' 6" by 17' 6" (10.51 m by 5.35 m), and the shortened Los Angeles (Inv. No. 53.50.2) 23' 11" by 13' 5" (7.28 m by 4.11 m).

Inscription and date. An important aspect of the "Ardabīl carpet" is the inscription which it bears and the date it contains, for the study of which I gratefully acknowledge the valuable assistance of Mr. R. S. Skelton of the Victoria and Albert Museum. An ivory cartouche on the London carpet near the end of the field where the weaving terminates contains an inscription (an opening *bayt* from a *ḡazal* in the *Dīvān-e Ḥāfeẓ*), the name of the artist, and a date: *Joz āstān-e to-am dar ǰahān panāh-ī nīst sar-e marā be-ǰoz īn dar ḥawālagāh-ī nīst ʿamal-e banda-ye dargāh Maqṣūd Kāšānī sana 946*.

Stebbing gave a translation in the booklet which appeared when the London carpet was first exhibited in 1892, and also in the handsome publication issued by private subscription in 1893, both of which are entitled *The Holy Carpet of the Mosque of Ardebil*: "I have no refuge in the world other than thy threshold. My head has no protection other than this porchway. The work of the slave of this Holy Place, Maksoud [Maqṣūd] of Kashan in the year 942 [1535]." Other versions have been suggested by Sebastian Beck (Sarre and Trenkwald, II, pl. 18), Stead (p. 29), and R. Skelton of the Victoria and Albert Museum who revised the reading of the date to 946/1539-40. The earlier reading has been followed in many publications. The "Ardabīl" carpets appear to be the earliest known dated Persian pile carpets, antedating the Poldi Pezzoli (Milan) Hunting carpet of 949/1542 (Sarre and Trenkwald, II, pls. 22-23) by three years. When the latter carpet was exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1976,

there seemed no doubt about the second number being a 4 (Skelton) and not a 2. A comparison of the elegant “Ardabīl” carpets with the brilliantly colored Milan Hunting carpet, with its angular, provincial-looking background design, provides an interesting contrast in pieces so closely dated.

In such carpets the term *ʿamal-e* need not be taken literally. Maqṣūd may have been a courtier, donor, designer, devout man or priest, a superintendent of weavers, a slave; these and other identities have all been suggested. Kāšān may have been his place of birth or residence or simply the town from which his family came. Although written long before, the sentiments expressed in the quotation give the impression of being personal and imply a sanctuary. The greatest shrine in Persia is that of Imam Reżā in Mašhad. Judging from a small-scale plan of the shrine complex the two carpets, end to end, would fit into the sanctuary of the Gowhar-Šād mosque, and possibly elsewhere if used singly. More knowledge of the historical background and the names of the personages and the great craftsmen of the time might help to solve the problem of Maqṣūd’s identity.

Design. Little attention has been paid to the features that contribute to the greatness of the “Ardabīl” design. The plan is centralized and the decoration balanced bilaterally and biterminally, except for two lamps (*gandīl*) of single different size, a few minor details, and the ivory cartouche at one end.

Emphasis, centered on the golden yellow medallion (*gol-e Šāh-ʿAbbāsī*) with its sixteen points and dependent ogives, is achieved by variation in the concentration of motifs, gradation in their sizes, and the skillful use of color. The central medallion is of a lighter shade than the corner quadrants and more brilliant. Its scrolling stems are heavier than those in the corners, and the octafoil and clouds are omitted from these, all of which emphasize the centerpiece. The field decoration, a straightforward two-plane arabesque of floral scrolls (Figure 13) consists of sturdy primary red stems outlined in yellow. They are superimposed on a secondary system of fine yellow stems and bear an unusual type of composite palmette with a downturned cluster of leaves. The brilliance of the fine secondary stems counterbalances the weight of the primary stems and together with palmettes, rosettes, bi-colored leaves, and careful spacing, provide an intricate overall field design devoid of monotony.

The primary scrolls arise from a single stem which emerges near the tip of the triangle formed by the downward shaft of light from the lamp, and from this

develops the entire primary system in one quarter of the field. The sinuous main stem branches and rebranches into ever diminishing scrolls as the spacing requires. They progress beneath the ogives and terminate between the points of medallions but do not pass under them. Along the edge of the inner guardstripe small palmettes, bisected by the guard, overlie the peripheral scrolls, which then curve back and end in the field quarter in which they originated. On the horizontal and vertical mid-lines the same reversion of terminal stems occurs beneath noticeable lines of small palmettes which indicate where the stems from adjacent quarters of the field come into contact. The fine secondary stems arise from a large scroll which lies between the light from the lamp and the border.

An inconspicuous feature which emphasizes the center of the design comes from the small palmettes and rosettes borne by the scrolling stems. Those attached to the secondary stems are rich in yellow, and as the size of the palmettes increases slightly around the central medallion and its ogival appendages, so too does the amount of yellow in the palmettes, as a result of which a slight golden glow seems to surround the centerpiece. The ivory fields of eight out of the sixteen ogival pendants enhance the effect, and the use of ivory leads the eye to the inscription cartouche and to the broader of the two inner guards which provides a brilliant feature of the border. The crimson of the inner guard picks up the colors of the lamps and ogival medallions and links them with the border cartouches on a soot-black background. Restoration of the border of the London carpet explains certain discrepancies in the design.

Centralized designs were fashionable in the 16th century and crenellated medallions, although not necessarily contemporary, may still be seen in designs of tiled interiors of Persian domes. It is obvious that the “Ardabīl” design has been specifically drafted for a carpet of this size and shape and is not just a “cut” from an extensible pattern as is often the case with commercial carpets.

History. Ever since the two carpets became known it has been accepted that they were brought from the shrine in Ardabīl. This opinion was reinforced by the report of a journey in 1843 (Holmes, p. 37), in which the author mentions the remains of a splendid carpet in the shrine at Ardabīl, dated some 300 years previously. According to Edward Stebbing of Vincent Robinson’s, who was the driving force in the company at the end of the century, other carpets were acquired at the same time as the London “Ardabīl.” Two, said to come from

mosques in Central Persia (Stebbing, 1892, p. 15), were exhibited with it for two months in 1892. Only a year later the reported source of one of these carpets, having an animal design, was changed to the mosque in Ardabīl (Stebbing, 1893, pl. IV), and subsequent references to the other—an Indian carpet now in the Frick Collection—attribute it also to Ardabīl. Like the London and Los Angeles pair the animal carpet, which passed from the Yerkes Collection to the Metropolitan Museum, had a double which was once in the Thiem Collection and later was owned and illustrated by Sarre (pl. 45). He stated that it came from the mosque at Ardabīl, but Mumford (pl. XVIII) maintained there was no evidence that this carpet, now in the Mrs. J. D. Rockefeller, Jr. Collection, had ever been in Ardabīl. The uncertainties concerning the famous carpets obtained from Vincent Robinson and Co. in the early 1890s, give rise to doubts as to the accuracy of statements issued about the carpets at that time.

The late Mr. W. Leonard Flinn (1882-1971), once on the staff of Ziegler's, drew attention, when discussing the London "Ardabīl," to the version of its acquisition given by Jacoby (p. 27), which he said contained obvious inaccuracies. Jacoby's age and knowledge of Persia at that time have not been ascertained, but in the late 1880s Flinn was only a child so that his knowledge of events must have been hearsay. A letter to Stebbing of 4 June 1914 (The Victoria and Albert file) shows that A. F. Kendrick was obviously aware that, apart from the courtyard, there was insufficient space in the shrine for the carpets. Recent research by Weaver "Nominal File—Vincent J. Robinson" Paper No. 2935 M. (Stead, *The Ardabīl Carpets*, p. 36 n. 5) has focused attention on this point, and it has raised serious doubts as to where the London and Los Angeles carpets were formed. Apart from prayer rugs, a number of other pile rugs are mentioned in the 1795 inventory of the Ardabīl shrine (A. H. Morton in Beattie et al., pp. 470f.). None of those described corresponds with any of the rugs, said to have come from the shrine, which passed through the hands of Vincent Robinson and Co., at the end of the last century. One of the tales concerning the acquisition of the carpets states that the Los Angeles piece was bought in Tabrīz and said to have come from the shrine in Mašhad. Today this idea is attracting attention, as the shrine in that city is of a size sufficient to accommodate the carpets. The mystery of just where the "Ardabīl" carpets were found is an intriguing one, but the generation which knew is now gone, and speculation is fruitless. The one fact that remains is that valuable historical information has been distorted and lost in the tangled web of the carpet trade.

Provenance. Opinions about carpet provenance rest at best on shaky foundations. The materials and weave of a carpet may be helpful, but less so if the foundation is of undyed silk, as in the case of the "Ardabīl" carpets. The town of Ardabīl has never been noted for great carpets, and the idea that the London and Los Angeles pieces originated there is generally scouted. Maqṣūd's home town may have a claim but little either in design detail or color relates them to classical carpets usually assigned to Kāšān. Dimand points out that the designer of the "Ardabīl" carpets must have been familiar with Herat work because of similar features in late Timurid art and in the carpets. A broad, shaggy, light-edged motif with a down-turned cluster of leaves below the apex, is conspicuous in the field of the Ardabīl design. It occurs in a lacquer book binding of 1482-83 (Dimand and Mailey, fig. 51) and is more easily identified among the brightly colored, vigorous animal designs and floral scrolls of east Persian carpets than in those believed to have been woven in the northwest of the country. In the 15th century European travelers reported that magnificent large carpets of the finest materials were used in Tabrīz and elsewhere, and from the evidence of miniature paintings it is apparent that medallion designs were gradually replacing the small-scale repetitive Turcoman patterns.

The dated "Ardabīl" carpets provide tangible evidence, not only for the quality of the yarns and dyes but also for the skill of Persian draughtsmen and weavers in 1539. Great medallions in several different styles often dominate the carpets assigned to northwest Persia. They are set against pictorial scenes, repetitive scrolls and various other backgrounds. Unlike the Ardabīl design the curves in such carpets tend to be slightly angular and motifs rather stylized. This difference, however, may be due as much to the high knot counts of the "Ardabīl" carpets—which permit more graceful curves than can be achieved with lower counts—as to any lack of skill among weavers producing perfectly good but less costly carpets in lower knot counts. On the basis of "their decoration and their characteristically restrained color scheme" Dimand (p. 46) concludes that the "Ardabīl" carpets must have come from a Tabrīz workshop. Perhaps the rechecking of certain "facts" and further researches into contemporary literature may eventually provide more precise information as to just where the great "Ardabīl" carpets were woven.

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This comprehensive work on the Ardabīl carpets contains an extensive bibliography, but the information in the publications cited contributes little to the fundamental problems of the rugs, since in most instances it is based, directly or indirectly on two or three early books.

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