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CARPETS IX. SAFAVID PERIOD
Article by **Daniel Walker**

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CARPETS

ix. Safavid Period

The high point in Persian carpet design and manufacture was attained under the Safavid dynasty (907-1152/1501-1739). It was the result of a unique conjunction of historical factors—royal patronage, the influence of court designers at all levels of artistic production, the wide availability of locally produced and imported materials and dyes (see ii, above), and commercial acceptance, particularly in foreign markets. Although no certain examples of 9th/15th-century Persian carpets may survive today (see viii, above), the high level of quality achieved early in the Safavid period confirms what seems apparent from travelers' accounts (e.g., that of the Venetian Giosafat Barbaro, who was in Tabrīz in 878-79/1474; Barbaro and Contarini, pp. 124, 126-27; Eng. tr., pp. 57, 59-60) and representations of carpets in 9th/15th-century Persian paintings (Briggs; see viii, above): that a mature carpet-weaving tradition already existed in the century before the Safavids assumed the throne. Surviving Safavid carpets represent both court production (i.e., carpets produced to court standards but not necessarily at the court itself) and commercial production, which often reflects courtly tastes. Carpets were woven in palace workshops and on urban and village looms. No example of a nomadic carpet remains from the Safavid period, probably owing to hard use, but such carpets surely existed well before courtly and commercial interests engendered an urban industry (see v, above, and xiii, below). Depictions of nomadic carpets in manuscript paintings, though rare, confirm that

production of such rugs took place during the Safavid period (Grube, p. 127, right center).

Because of significant changes early in the 11th/17th century, it is convenient to discuss carpets produced before and after that dividing line separately. Although the major types are described here, there remain many Safavid carpets that are either anomalous or have not been available for direct examination and classification. The increased use of structural analysis in recent years has helped to clarify the criteria for assigning carpets to specific groups; nevertheless, several types bear traditional names that, though not technically correct, are still used for convenience. Geographical names, for example, can be taken only as general identifiers of type, not as absolute indications of the centers where the rugs were woven. Indeed, the localization of specific categories of weaving is generally still obscure, for it is rarely possible to match references in travelers' descriptions with existing rugs. The chronology of types can also be outlined only generally because of the scarcity of datable pieces around which a more precise chronology could be constructed.

I. The 10th/16th century.

The history of carpet weaving during the first century of Safavid rule can be traced only sketchily. The most important documentary evidence is three carpets with dated inscriptions. The date on a medallion rug in the Poldi Pezzoli collection in Milan has been read by some scholars as 929/1522-23 and by others as 949/1542-43 (Spuhler, in *Camb. Hist. Iran* VI, p. 700; cf. Beattie, 1986, p. 366). If the earlier date is correct, it was made late in the reign of Shah Esmāʿīl (r. 907-30/1501-24), just at the time when the court atelier was beginning to produce large numbers of royal manuscripts. The pair of carpets allegedly from the shrine at Ardabīl (see Beattie, 1986) is dated 946/1539-40, the moment of supreme artistic achievement under Esmāʿīl's son and successor, Shah Ṭahmāsb. The inscription on each of these carpets contains the weaver's name with a nesba (attributive name), Jāmī on the Milan carpet, Kāšānī on those from Ardabīl, but the *nesba* does not necessarily refer to the place of manufacture. There are also references in 10th/16th-century sources to specific weaving sites (see i, above). A gift from Ṭahmāsb to Sultan Bāyazīd, the fugitive son of the Ottoman sultan Solaymān, in 961/1553-54 included carpets from Kermān and Jowšaqān (near Kāšān) woven with gold thread, and Kermān and Jowšaqān carpets were presented by Shah ʿAbbās I to the shrine of Imam Reżā in Mašhad in 1007/1598-99 (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 112, 578; tr.

Savory, I, p. 169, II, p. 764). Silk carpets from Hamadān and from Dargazīn in Khorasan were presented as gifts to the Ottomans in 974-75/1567 (Hammer, III, p. 520). Among the abundant trade goods brought to the Persian Gulf entrepôt of Hormoz were carpets from Khorasan (Linschoten, I, pp. 47, 166). At the end of the century Abu'l-Fażl ʿAllāmī, biographer of the Mughal emperor Akbar, referred to carpets that were still being imported to India from Jowšaqān, Ḵūzestān, Kermān, and Sabzavār (Abu'l-Fażl, p. 55). Pedro Teixeira (p. 243) judged the carpets of Yazd to be the best, followed by those of Kermān and Khorasan. Carpets are not specifically mentioned in connection with the three Safavid capital cities of the 10th/16th century—Tabrīz, Qazvīn, and Isfahan—but it seems likely that they were produced there (see i, above). Although there is no direct evidence that royal weaving workshops had yet been established, the influence of court designers on carpet weaving is clear. The two key design features of rugs in this period, the medallion design and figural elements, were borrowed directly from the arts of the book as practiced in the royal atelier. Persian carpets continued to find their way abroad: Gifts of carpets to the Ottomans were recorded or depicted in 965-66/1558, 974-75/1567, and 988-89/1581 (Atil, p. 180; Hammer, III, p. 520), and India continued to import Persian rugs even after the establishment of royal workshops there (Abu'l-Fażl, p. 55). An English dyer was dispatched to Persia in 987/1579 to learn what he could of local dyeing methods (Hakluyt). Nevertheless, it does not seem, either from the quantity of extant rugs or from consistent use of certain designs, that carpet production was particularly stimulated by foreign demand.

Northwest Persian medallion carpets (cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1112-14, 1116-25, 1127-28). This group consists of about thirty carpets, most with wool pile (though at least two include some cotton), cotton warps, and either cotton or wool wefts. The designs feature multipointed (often sixteen-pointed) central medallions. The most celebrated example is a medallion carpet in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan (no. DT 1), with horsemen hunting animals across the field (Plate CVIII). In the center of the medallion is an inscription bearing a date (read as either 929/1522-23 or 949/1542-43). Another field design, more characteristic of the group, consists of a repeat pattern of scrolling vines and forked leaves. These carpets appear to have been woven from about the turn of the 10th/16th century, or perhaps earlier, into the 11th/17th century, though it is uncertain whether lower quality of design and execution indicates a decline over time or simply contemporary production at an inferior level. The group is usually associated with northwestern Persia because of perceived

similarities to other medallion carpets, including the "Ardabīl carpets," traditionally assigned to northwestern Persia (see "Silk-foundation carpets," below). Variations in coloring suggest that the carpets were made at more than one weaving center.

Silk-foundation carpets (cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1130-36, 1144-47, 1152-54, 1156-62, 1165-70, 1177). A significant number of extremely fine carpets woven on silk foundations have so far eluded categorization except by design (defined by single central medallions, multiple medallions, cartouches, prayer niches, and so on). Characteristics include extremely fine weave (in some examples there are about 500 knots to the square inch), luxurious materials (beside the silk foundations silver and gold brocading also occurs occasionally), elegant drawing, and rich colors. Some, like the multiple-medallion "Chelsea carpet" (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, no. 589-1890, *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1130-32) and a pair of fine cartouche rugs (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, no. 10.61.3, *Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1133; Musée Historique des Tissus, Lyons, no. 25.423) include elaborate figural motifs. Others, like the renowned "Ardabīl carpets" (Victoria and Albert Museum, no. 272-1983; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, no. 53.50.2), dated by inscriptions to 946/1539-40, are exclusively nonfigural (see Plate CIX). This famous pair of medallion carpets was long thought to have been made for the ancestral shrine of the Safavids at Ardabīl, but a study of inventories and the sizes of the rooms in the shrine, as well as suggestions that the carpets actually came from the Shrine of Imam Reżā at Mašhad (Weaver, p. 48), has cast doubt on this association. The so-called "Salting group," the nucleus of which is the "Salting rug," named for its donor (Victoria and Albert Museum, no. T. 402-1910, *Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1162), originally thought to be from 9th/16th-century Persia, has been reattributed to 13th/19th-century Turkey. Doubts about many similar pieces with medallion and prayer-niche designs and either secular or religious inscriptions have also been raised (Erdmann, 1970, pp. 76-80). Nevertheless, the earlier attribution should not be dismissed for every rug in the group without careful examination; some may indeed be early pieces. The Salting rugs (at least the possibly authentic ones) have silk foundations, and most are brocaded. Carpets of the silk-foundation class appear to span the full 10th/16th century and may have been manufactured in several places; Tabrīz, Kāšān, Qazvīn, and Herat have all been suggested as possibilities.

Kāšān silk carpets (cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1191-1202). A group of twenty

rugs with silk warps, wefts, and pile is characterized by designs based on a variety of lobed and ogival medallions and on figural elements found also in the arts of the book. Of the four large pieces the most famous is a hunting carpet in Vienna (Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, no. T8336, *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1191-92), with a central medallion around which are arranged horsemen hunting animals against a background of flowering plants. The figure style is comparable to that in royal illustrated manuscripts of the court of Shah Ṭahmāsb (r. 930-84/1524-76). This carpet is embellished with gold and silver brocade. Of the sixteen smaller pieces twelve have various medallion designs, and four have animals, some in combat, arranged pictorially (i.e., oriented toward one end of the rug, rather than symmetrically disposed; see iv, above). The dating of this group ranges from about 946/1540, when artistic production under the patronage of Shah Ṭahmāsb was at its peak, to perhaps the end of the century. The traditional attribution of this group to Kāšān is based primarily on the fame of that city's silk industry and on the 11th/17th-century production at Kāšān of carpets of similar luxury materials (see "Tapestry-woven carpets" and "Polonaise carpets," below).

Herat carpets (cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1140-41, 1143, 1148-51, 1174-76, 1178-79, 1182-84, 1186-87). Several dozen carpets and fragments belong to this group. The most prevalent field design consists of symmetrically disposed scrolling vines with palmettes and leaves. Animals and birds are sometimes added to the floral pattern, and palmettes and blossoms may take on highly complex and fantastic forms. Elaborate striped cloud bands occur. Usually the field is red, and the main border, which also contains floral motifs, is dark green. The best-known carpet in this group is the "Emperor's carpet," actually a pair of carpets (Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, no. T8334; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 43.121.1), supposedly a gift from Peter the Great of Russia to Leopold I, emperor of Austria, in 1698 (Plate CX). The finest examples have silk foundations; others, though closely related in style, design, and color, have mixed foundations of wool, silk, and cotton, sometimes plied together, a peculiarity rarely encountered elsewhere. Some examples are brocaded. A few fragments characterized by exquisite drawing and with pile of very fine wool, probably goat hair, seem to belong to this group. The Herat group is thus one in which a real hierarchy of weaving quality can be observed: Similar designs were woven in several easily distinguishable grades. The association with Herat is based on affinities between the rug designs and late 9th/15th-century painting and illumination in Herat, the Timurid capital. The Herat group probably dates from the second half of the 10th/16th and

early 11th/17th centuries and was the forerunner of the so-called Indo-Persian group of the 10th/17th century (see below).

Sanguszko carpets (cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1205-10, 1212A, 1213-14). The Sanguszko carpets, of which more than a dozen examples are known, are distinguished by figural decoration closely tied to manuscript illustration, a bright appearance owing to abundant use of white in the pile, and certain technical peculiarities. The group owes its name to the former owner of one magnificent example of the group (currently on loan to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. L1985.3; *Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1206). Medallion designs with symmetrically arranged floral patterns predominate, but directional designs with figural motifs are also found. Animal-combat motifs are plentiful, and animal heads often inhabit palmettes and border designs. Clusters of human figures embellish discrete compartments in the field or border; some of these figures can be directly linked to manuscript illustrations, for example, scenes from *Laylī o Majnūn* and images of fighting camels, a popular subject first seen in an early 10th/16th-century painting by Behzād. Technically the Sanguszko pieces resemble the so-called vase carpets (see below) with cotton warps and wefts of wool and silk, but they differ in other ways. The localization of this group is highly conjectural; Kāšān, Yazd, Kermān, and Qazvīn have all been suggested, but certain differences within the group suggest that these carpets were produced at more than one weaving center. A date late in the 10th/16th, or perhaps even early in the 11th/17th, century seems plausible on the basis of the figure style and the existence of Indian copies that probably date from the early 11th/17th century.

II. The 11th/17th century.

Several factors contributed to major alterations in the organization of rug production in the 11th/17th century. Most important, the Persian carpet became a commercial commodity. A dramatic increase in the number of extant pieces (perhaps ten times as many 11th/17th-century rugs survive as those of the 10th/16th century), most of which have been found in the West, attests to an extensive trade in carpets among English, Dutch, and Portuguese companies operating in the Persian Gulf (see i, above). Royal workshops were established by Shah ʿAbbās I in Isfahan, the capital, and elsewhere, but their production was not limited to materials for use at court; the surplus was exported for sale in Europe and India, and the profits were returned to the treasury (Tadeusz Krusiński, cited in Mańkowski, in *Survey of Persian Art*, pp. 2431-32; Keyvani, p. 171). The contemporary Turkish writer Evliya Çelebi

(Awlīā Čelebī/Čalabī) tells of Istanbul dealers who sold carpets from Isfahan (Atil, p. 182). Rural carpet weavers also worked for the shah, using materials provided from the court stores (see i, above). References to carpet weaving in 11th/17th-century travel accounts are far more numerous than before, but it is difficult to determine which factories or production centers were connected with the court and to judge which extant carpets were woven where. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier gave the precise location of the workshops in the Isfahan *bāzār* (Tavernier, I, p. 444), and Adam Olearius (p. 303) mentioned 1,460 villages in the vicinity that were engaged in weaving carpets and textiles. Other travelers commented on carpets produced in Isfahan (Silva y Figueroa, p. 216; Chardin, VII, p. 330). Kāšān is cited for its carpets, especially gold and silk ones, in many accounts (Paul Simon, cited in Mańkowski, in *Survey of Persian Art*, p. 2432; Silva y Figueroa, p. 216; Chardin, III, pp. 3-4). In a scroll dating from the reign of Shah Solaymān I (1077-1105/1666-94) the twenty-one main caravansaries of Isfahan are listed, two of them noted for Kāšān carpets and one for carpets from Khorasan and Herat (British Library, Sloane 4096; cf. Keyvani, pp. 237, 238). Herat was cited for producing the best carpets (Olearius, p. 199), but so was Kermān (Chardin, IV, p. 154). Engelbert Kaempfer (p. 202) described fine woolen rugs with animal patterns from Kermān. Other 11th/17th-century travel accounts refer to the carpets of Sīstān (Chardin, IV, p. 154) and Tabrīz (Schillinger, cited by Spuhler, in *Camb. Hist. Iran* VI, p. 702). Richard Steel and John Crowther (p. 275) reported a number of villages scattered along the edge of the salt desert where carpets, presumably of local manufacture, were sold in abundance. The style of carpets also changed in the early 11th/17th century. Although several earlier types characterized by figural decoration may have persisted, on the whole figural decoration was superseded by strictly floral designs. The relation between carpet design and the arts of the book, so notable in the 10th/16th century, seems to have ceased. All the 11th/17th-century pieces that can be dated by inscriptions, inventory lists, or depictions in European paintings have floral decoration.

Tapestry-woven carpets (*gelīm*s; see v, above; cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1262-69). One coherent group consists of about two dozen rugs that are tapestry-woven in silk and gold and silver thread. Although they are not executed in the knotted technique of the other pieces discussed here, they have many other features in common with Safavid knotted carpets. At least nine of the tapestry-woven pieces include animals or human figures in medallion or compartmented designs; the finest example (in the Residenzmuseum, Munich, *Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1264) incorporates both

well-drawn figures and poetic inscriptions. The remainder are strictly floral, typically with a central medallion on a field of scrolling vines, palmettes, and leaves. Three of these rugs include medallions containing the coat of arms of the Vasa kings of Poland (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1268B). Documents show that in 1010/1601 King Sigismund III (1587-1632) ordered carpets from Kāšān; they were delivered in 1011/1602, with an itemized account referring to the execution of the royal arms, which were not reproduced with perfect accuracy (Mańkowski, 1936, pp. 152-53). These particular rugs, then, were almost certainly woven in Kāšān in 1010-11/1601-02, and the figural piece in Munich was probably obtained there also; all of them were included in the dowry of Sigismund's daughter Anna Katharina Constanza in 1642. Many other rugs of this class may therefore have been woven in Kāšān, but it is not correct to infer that all were; some may well have been made in Isfahan or elsewhere. Production probably continued into the second half of the 11th/17th century.

Polonaise carpets (cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1242-257, 1261). The Polonaise group is an unusually large one; more than 200 examples are known. The name is somewhat inappropriate, for it is based on misidentification of a coat of arms on one example as Polish, but it has remained in use as a matter of convenience. It is also a reminder that many of these sumptuous pieces, of silk (occasionally with some cotton in the foundations) with silver and gold brocading, though woven for local consumption, were also presented or sold to Europeans. The Polonaise carpets reflect a new aesthetic, perhaps owing to the tastes of Shah ʿAbbās I alone or to commercial influences. About a dozen different field patterns were used. In the few large pieces the field pattern is complete or nearly so; in the much more numerous small pieces only a detail of one of the standard patterns is seen. The concept of a single ground color was generally abandoned in favor of design units with different ground colors. The palettes of many seem now rather "sweet," pastel and muted, and some colors have faded; the few examples in which the colors remain fresh demonstrate that Polonaise carpets were originally as brilliant as other types. The design elements of most Polonaise carpets are purely floral and include palmettes, curving leaves, and vines. At least twenty-five pairs of such carpets exist. There is some documentary evidence regarding these pieces. Traveler's reports (Tavernier, I, pp. 444, 654; Krusiński, cited in Mańkowski, in *Survey of Persian Art*, p. 2432) attest that such luxury weavings were produced in Isfahan itself, in the *bāzār* area near the public square (*maydān*), though it is likely that they were woven in other places as well. One of the rugs in Anna Katharina Constanza's dowry, obtained and possibly woven in Kāšān in

1010-11/1601-02, is in fact a Polonaise (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1251). Production of the type probably began early in the reign of Shah ʿAbbās, late in the 10th/16th century, and continued into the second half of the 11th/17th century. Five examples in the Treasury of Saint Mark's, Venice (*Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1244-45), can be linked to ambassadorial gifts of 1012/1603 and 1030/1621 (Spuhler, 1968, pp. 102-3). One beautifully preserved carpet in Copenhagen (Plate CXI, Plate CXII) is thought to have been presented to the Dutch queen Sophie Amalie in 1076-77/1666 (Mellbye-Hansen, p. 14). A silk carpet in the mausoleum of Shah ʿAbbās II at Qom is dated to the year 1081/1671 (*Survey of Persian Art*, pl. 1258B); there are uninscribed companion pieces (pls. 1258A, 1259-60). These examples are so different in style from most Polonaise carpets, however, that their inclusion in the group is uncertain.

Vase carpets (cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1218-39). Vase carpets take their name from the vases incorporated into the elaborate, multileveled floral patterns of some of the best-known examples. Rugs in this distinctive design, with two or three superimposed grids, or lattices, of vines and blossoms, often oriented toward one end of the rug (see iv, above), as well as pieces in several other designs, share specific technical features that are in fact now the basis for inclusion in the group. The warps are cotton, the wefts are wool and either silk or cotton, and the pile is wool. There are three weft passes between adjacent rows of knots; the first and third are of mixed colors of wool, generally either the colors of the pile fiber or brindle (mixed fibers in natural colors). This construction results in a distinctive "feel" and an easily recognizable pattern of wear. In general, the coloring is rich and varied. In addition to floral lattice designs, "vase carpets" are known with garden designs (water canals in aerial view and vegetation in profile), sickle-leaf designs, directional designs with rows of flowering shrubs or animals amid flowering plants and trees, and symmetrically arranged arabesque designs. Even classical medallion designs are found in examples belonging to this group. "Vase carpets" have most often been attributed to Kermān. They were produced in the reign of Shah ʿAbbās I, perhaps as early as the late 10th/16th century, and continued until post-Safavid times. It is ironic that the only documentary evidence for dating this group pertains to a carpet on which no vase is depicted, a magnificent garden carpet in Jaipur, India (Central Museum, no. 2225), which bears a label showing that it was first inventoried in the Amber fort, near Jaipur, in 1042/1632 (Dimand, p. 95).

Indo-Persian carpets (cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1179a, 1180-81, 1188-89).

Some time in the early 11th/17th century carpets with cotton foundations and wool pile in designs emulating those of the 10th/16th-century Herat group (see above) began to be produced in large quantities. The designs are simplified versions of the Herat type, usually consisting of symmetrical arrangements of vines and palmettes on a deep-red field with dark-green borders. Animals occur rarely and only on a few carpets that may be considered "transitional"; that is, the drawing is typical of classical 10th/16th-century Herat pieces, but the cotton foundations are more typical of 17th-century pieces. Such transitional rugs in fact suggest that the Indo-Persian class represents a continuation of the Herat type and its adaptation to commercial production. The origin of the Indo-Persian carpets has long been debated, and attributions to Isfahan, Herat, and northern India have all been put forth. The issue is far from resolved, but the evidence for a Persian attribution seems stronger: Indo-Persian carpets are technically more closely related to Persian products, and inventory information in Jaipur confirms that several such pieces were of foreign manufacture (Campbell, nos. 43, 45). It is possible that the variety in design and color typical of this class reflects different centers of manufacture. Several hundred such rugs are extant, many in Portugal, and they are frequently depicted in European paintings, especially by Dutch and Flemish artists, from about 1615 into the 18th century. All the evidence indicates that they were commercial products. Although many are small, some are more than 50 feet long.

Portuguese carpets (cf. *Survey of Persian Art*, pls. 1216-17). A particularly enigmatic class includes the "Portuguese carpets," so called because the sailing vessels and figures in European costumes depicted on them have been identified as Portuguese. These maritime scenes are crowded into the small corners of the field, the only space left by the main design, which consists of a diamond-shaped central zone with concentric, serrated extensions in different colors. The conventional border design consists of palmettes and a broad, strap-like arabesque. Portuguese carpets feature wool pile on cotton foundations, and the coloring tends to be bright and to include large amounts of pink, light blue, and tan. Various places in Persia and also in India have been suggested as the place of manufacture, but a definitive determination has yet to be made. Certain aspects of the maritime scenes recall conventions in 10th/16th-century and early 11th/17th-century Persian and Indian painting, but specific identification of the scenes remains elusive. It may be that no specific incident is represented and that the maritime imagery was included simply to appeal to Europeans for whom the carpets may have been made.

See also anhalt carpet.

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