



KERMAN XV. CARPET INDUSTRY

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Kerman has been the home of a thriving carpet weaving industry since the late 19th century. Kerman's hand-woven, knotted pile carpets are widely regarded by art historians and collectors as among the finest in the world for the quality of their materials and workmanship, their distinct range of attractive styles, and the use of vibrant colors supplied by Kerman's famed master dyers. The carpet weaving craft as practiced in Kerman developed from a variety of influences, many of them external to Kerman. Yet fine weaving has long been practiced in urban, village, and tribal settings alike throughout Kerman, as the province carried on a world-renowned shawl export trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. A rapid commercialization of Kerman's carpet industry in the 1890s was possible with the availability of a large pool of highly skilled weavers and access to appropriate material inputs. Kerman had the benefit of access to locally produced down wool (*kork*), a large pool of experienced weavers, and a community of master dyers, which together account for the distinct qualities of the Kerman carpet (PLATE I).

Despite the widely held assumption that Kerman's carpet industry is of great antiquity, there is little evidence of carpet weaving practiced there until the



Safavid period. The obscurity of the origins of the Kerman carpet is due partly to the highly perishable nature of the materials. Early references to weaving or textile production are also vague and difficult to tie to a particular craft. The first references to knotted pile carpets only appear in sources after the [Gōzz](#) migrations, suggesting that the craft may have been imported by Turkic migrants from inner Asia around the 10th or 11th century. Others insist on the Persianate roots of the carpet weaving craft, a debate fueled by the discovery of a 5th-century BCE pile carpet in a Scythian tomb in the Altai mountains of [Central Asia](#) (Wulff, pp. 212-13; see [CARPETS vi](#), [vii](#), and [viii](#)). Nonetheless, pile carpets were certainly produced on the Iranian plateau during the Saljuq period, scraps of which have miraculously been preserved. In Kerman, however, it is not known whether or not the craft was indeed practiced at that time. When [Marco Polo](#) passed through Kerman in the 13th century, recording the economic activities of its inhabitants, he mentioned only needlework and embroidery, not carpet weaving (Marco Polo, p. 219). It is only in the Safavid period that we find specific references to carpet production in Kerman after Shah 'Abbās I (r. 1588-1629) established a royal workshop there (Chardin, IV, p. 154; Kaempfer, p. 202). It is clear, in any case, that carpet weaving in Kerman in the Safavid era was a relatively small-scale industry in the context of an overwhelmingly agrarian regional economy with limited long-distance trade connections, particularly in finished craft goods.

Art historians differentiate sharply between “urban” and “tribal” carpet production. “Kerman” carpets refer generally only to those produced in the city of Kerman or in villages near the city that were under the direction of urban master weavers (*ostād*) and merchants. Urban and tribal productions involved most of the same material inputs, but vary in technique and style. Kerman carpets are woven on vertical looms with the pile hand-knotted along the warp and beaten in tightly with use of an iron comb implement. Urban workshops were capable of handling curvilinear designs with intricate details, sometimes plotted out full size on paper by drafters, with the patterns then recited orally to the weavers by a *kalifa* (Edwards, pp. 24-27). Rural and tribal carpets, on the other hand, were typically produced on horizontal ground looms, consisting of two beams held in place by stakes with tension on the warp strings created by driving wedges between the beams and their stakes (Edwards, p. 22). In this type of operation, it was impractical for tribal weavers to attempt anything but rectilinear patterns, which were nonetheless used to produce stunning geometrical designs. The differences also extend to the knots used by weavers. The “Turkish” (ghiorde) knot is typically used in tribal



carpet production, while the “Persian” (senneh) knot is almost exclusively used among the urban weavers. Kerman’s Afšāri tribal rugs became of such renown worldwide, and their methods and styles so influential on rural and tribal production elsewhere, that by the late 20th century many tribal rugs from the Kerman region were simply known as “Afshari” carpets, regardless of who actually produced them (Stöber, p. 256).

Throughout Iran, the methods of carpet production tend to be very similar. One of the major distinguishing characteristics of the Kerman carpet is the high quality of the locally produced material inputs. Most Kerman carpets are woven with a type of down wool (*kork*), which is unique to Kerman and comparable to the finest products even of [Kashmir](#). [East India Company](#) merchants carried a steady export of *kork* wool from Kerman during the Safavid era to supply weavers in British India, while the shearing, sorting, cleaning, spinning, and dyeing were completed locally (Matthee). The dyestuffs commonly used in Kerman include [indigo](#), cochineal, madder, walnut, weld, pomegranate, vine leaves, straw, and henna, which are capable of producing a wide variety of colors and intermediate shades uncommon in the weaving traditions of other regions throughout Iran (Edwards, p. 210).

After the decline of the *kork* trade during the post-Safavid interregnum in the 18th century, Kerman’s fine wool was instead used to support a local shawl-weaving sector within Kerman itself, which subsequently took its place as the region’s major handicraft (Dillon, pp. 259-61). Shawls remained the major non-agricultural export of Kerman into the late 19th century, and their manufacture is vividly recorded in the works of countless European travelers throughout the Qajar period. In 1850, Keith Abbott reported that “the little importance this town possesses is derived from its shawl and other woollen fabrics,” estimating there to be 2,450 looms employing 4,500 men and boys in Kerman city alone, besides 352 more looms in use in nearby villages, most of which made coarse woollen shawls for export (Abbott, pp. 83-84).

Although these looms were principally used for shawl weaving, there was a small but active community of carpet weavers in city of Kerman and the nearby village of Rāvar (often mistakenly called Lāvar) throughout the Qajar period. J. R. Preece noted that each carpet would take up to a year to produce and required large inputs of material, capital, and labor. The final products cost up to 75 pounds, and as such were luxury items, with a limited local market (Preece, p. 31). For these reasons, carpets were typically produced only on a commission basis. Provincial governors personally ordered many of the



finer products to give as gifts and curiosities. The governor Moḥammad-Esmā'il Khan Wakil-al-Molk, who also held a personal monopoly over the *kork* trade, commissioned two large carpets for the interiors of the shrine of the mystic Shah Ne'mat-Allāh Wali in Māhān and the Imam Rezā Shrine in Mashhad (see [ĀSTĀN-E QODS-E RAŽAWI](#)) during his tenure from 1859 to 1868 (Waziri Kermani, pp. 83, 189).

The market for Kermani shawls began to decline in the late 19th century in competition with Kashmir, just as an interest in Oriental carpets began to develop in Europe. This demand was inspired initially by the grand international exhibitions of the late 19th century (Kurzman, p. 142). After the 1873 World's Fair in Vienna, dealers began purchasing available carpets in large numbers via Istanbul through agents in Tabriz, who quickly bought up most of the available antique carpets on the open market throughout Iran (Helfgott, pp. 15-16). Once the older rugs began to disappear from the bazaars, entrepreneurs invested heavily in the production of new carpets specifically for export to meet the demands of the European upper and middle classes. This process began first in the north of Iran, particularly with the massive Ziegler enterprise at Solṭānābād (present-day [Arāk](#)). Kerman, by comparison, was relatively late to commercialize the craft (Ittig, 1992). As late as 1894, when J. R. Preece visited the city to survey its economic prospects, there were only some 100 active carpet looms, with about half of those run by a group of just six master weavers, who continued to produce on commission (Preece, p. 31).

The commercialization of Kerman's carpet industry played a critical role in the increasing integration of the province into global economic structures from the 1890s onward. In 1895 and 1896, wealthy notables in Kerman, many of whom had recently made their fortunes by cash cropping cotton and opium, began investing heavily in carpet production on speculation as demand for Persian carpets boomed overseas. While the commercialization of Kerman's carpet industry was certainly stimulated by this foreign demand, the process itself was carried out through the hands of Kermani investors and merchants (Gustafson, pp. 202-5; cf. Seyf, p. 208). As Āqā Khan Waziri, a contemporary Kermani observer, put it, "all the people of this land, from the *a'yān*, the khans, and the elites, to the most average people, the lower [classes], etc., every capable person with ten *tumāns* opened a weaving shop or acted to benefit [from this situation]. Most shawl weaving operations were converted to carpet weaving" (Waziri Kermāni, pp. 33-34). Yaḥyā Aḥmadi notes that the carpet



trade became so ubiquitous that Kerman's provincial governors invested in carpet manufacturing to supplement their income and thus attempted to regulate and improve the trade (Aḥmadi, p. 158). According to the British trade figures from the Kerman consulate, carpet exports increased from a mere 3,000 pounds in 1894-95 to an estimated 120,000 pounds by 1902 (Sykes, 1896; idem, 1903). The existing system of contract production remained in place, while the pool of financiers from among the local elite community expanded, producing what Robert Dillon called a process of "craft involution with significant continuity in local productive relations, and a process of growth without the development of 'modern' socio-economic formations" (Dillon, pp. 469-70, 476).

After nearly a decade of steady growth, the carpet industry suddenly collapsed in 1904, dependent as it was on the caprice of European fashions. British administrators blamed this reversal on overproduction, the use of inferior aniline dyes, and the introduction of "hideous semi-European patterns," like that of a Frankish warrior ridiculed by British consul [Percy Sykes](#) (Sykes, 1895, p. 5; idem, 1906, pp. 5-6). Mirzā Reżā Mohandes, the Iranian guide for the [Colonel Arthur Hills Gleadowe] Newcomen Mission (1904-05), estimated that there were 20,000 unemployed carpet weavers present in Kerman when he came to the city in 1904 (Mirzā Reżā Mohandes, p. 140). This is evidence of a rapid increase in the urban population corresponding to the boom in carpet manufacturing, and the subsequent bust in 1904-5. Nāẓem-al-Eslām Kermāni (I, p. 315) mentions large crowds, estimated at 10,000 people, participating in the factional urban riots in Kerman in 1905. It is likely that the large numbers of young, out-of-work carpet weavers in the city at that time were major participants in these events, which is corroborated by the notes of British observers. For instance, in November 1905, when someone broke into a Shaikhi mosque in Kerman city and urinated on the prayer niche (*meḥrāb*), the British consul noted "this is about the level of the Kermani weaver" (Haworth, fol. 187). In order to quell the violence, the Qajar governor bastinadoed a local theologian (*mojtahed*), an event that Mangol Bayat called "the spark that first set the fire of the Constitutional Revolution" (Bayat, p. 183; Nāẓem al-Eslām, pp. 315-16).

It was only after this temporary lull that Europeans began to set up carpet manufacturing ventures directly, as they had done in Solṭānābād and elsewhere in Iran. By early 1909, Nearco Castelli and Brothers and the Eastern Rug and Trading Company, both with headquarters in New York, had



appointed representatives in Kerman and began pushing local officials to improve communication and transport to enable them to increase their trade (FO 248/968). Annette Ittig notes that, like the Kermani and Tabrizi investors before them, direct European investment did little to alter the mode of production and created a “comprador situation” even with an estimated tripling of the number of looms in the city between 1900 and World War I (Ittig, 1985, p. 121).

During the initial commercialization of the carpet trade, weaving took place in small workshops staffed primarily by children. European observers consistently detail the contemptible conditions of these young Kermani weavers, much as earlier travelers described the horrors of the shawl manufactories. The records of the Church Missionary Society, which operated a medical clinic in Kerman from 1901 to 1941, describe a plague of rickets and deformities attributed to work conditions. Sitting in damp, squalid underground workshops along improvised benches, leaning forward to tie knots along the warp strings, many weavers were said to have “sat so long in that cramped position from the time when they were quite young, that their poor little bodies have grown too distorted and crippled for them to be able to walk” (Linton, p. 114). Leonard Helfgott singled out the conditions in Kerman’s carpet manufactories as exceptionally severe, and aiding in producing what he calls a “new Iranian proletariat” (Helfgott, pp. 249-50). Arthur Cecil Edwards, who visited several of Kerman’s carpet manufactories in autumn 1948, noted a marked improvement in working conditions by that time, which he credits to the attention paid by the League of Nations, the Iranian Majles, and the activities of the Tudeh Party (Edwards, p. 206).

Although the Kerman carpet represents a distinct regional style, the motifs in currency have continually evolved since the industry’s commercialization along with patterns of production and consumption. The Kerman carpet has remained primarily a luxury, export item, and the influence of Euro-American demand is readily apparent in the evolution of styles. Although there were some early experiments with overt Europeanization of carpet designs, many early patterns were clearly influenced by the motifs common to the preceding shawl industry. May Beattie describes the dominant trend of the pre-World War I era in Kerman as the “vase technique,” as “a vase, with or without a bracket, was the motif in the lattice designs which caught the attention of early writers and gave rise to the name . . . regardless of the fact that some of the designs contain no vases” (Beattie, p. 11). Some commissioned works from this



period were based on existing miniature paintings or new designs created to please a particular patron. One famous carpet from 1907, commissioned by Kerman's governor 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Mirzā Farmānfarmā, contains a strikingly nationalist theme with Iran woven in as part of a "tree of nations," placing the Qajar shah alongside a host of foreign heads of state to highlight Iran's new place in the world order (Kurzman; [PLATE II](#)). From the 1920s onward, in what Edwards calls Kerman's "classic era," designers explored a wide variety of motifs, from animal and floral designs to all-over designs filled with intricate details, and experimented with creative renderings of the central medallion (or multiple medallions) and broken borders (Edwards, p. 208; Beattie, pp. 33-96). Even as motifs constantly evolved, these styles were popular among European collectors as examples of traditional Oriental art.

After another downturn in the market during World War II, there was a sudden simultaneous shift in emphasis towards French inspired floral designs and towards a return to Iranian ownership of the carpet weaving enterprises. By the 1950s, various cost cutting measures began to affect Kerman's carpet weaving industry, like the introduction of the paired (*jofti*) knot" (an almost undetectable knot tied across four warp strings instead of two, thus using less wool and compromising the durability of the final product) and the use of synthetic dyes, although these were slower to appear in Kerman than elsewhere in Iran. Investors have established numerous regional hand-woven carpet cooperatives, which have been critical in maintaining hand weaving in the face of fierce foreign competition. Carpets remain one of Iran's chief non-oil and non-industrial exports, with Kerman continuing to play a leading role. In the year 2003-4, carpets comprised 8.4 percent of non-oil exports, valued at 573 million U.S. dollars (International Monetary Fund).

See also [CARPETS xi. QAJAR PERIOD](#); and [xii. PAHLAVI PERIOD](#).

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