

A Comparative Study of Persian Rugs of 14th - 17th Centuries as Reflected in Italian Paintings

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Abstract

The art of carpet weaving has undergone changes during the course of history. This ancient art has gradually found its place among other branches of art due to its artistic and consumer characteristics. The art of carpet weaving has heavily influenced other fields like painting for its elegant ornamentation. This paper will elaborate on the widespread relations between Persian and Italian art during 8-11/14-17 centuries; hence, the influence of the ornamentation of Persian rugs on Italian painting will be analyzed. There are several questions to which this paper seeks to answer throughout the article.

1- What were the cultural, political and trading backgrounds of the import of Persian rugs to Italy during 14th -17th centuries?

2- What are the common patterns of Persian rugs reflected in Italian paintings?

The data were compared through available historical documents and images.

Keywords: Persian rugs, Italian paintings, Pattern, Comparison, Collation.

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Introduction

Oriental carpets first appeared in Italian paintings in the early 14th century; with both quantity and quality of carpet representations rose significantly between 14th and 16th centuries. This surge resulted from several overlapping developments: changes in painting style, arrival of high-quality carpets with geometrical patterns, and increased interest in acquiring and displaying luxury domestic furnishings. Though Italians made no sustained attempt to develop a competitive carpet industry, the painted images of Oriental carpets indicate the taste and demand that fueled the rapid growth of other Italian decorative arts. Indeed, paintings show how Italians changed their use of Oriental carpets, signaling new attitudes toward their household objects and environment (Rosamond 2002:73).

Carpets of 15th and 16th centuries that came to light into the light 20th century prove that the European painters who represented them in a descriptive style were remarkably accurate. Most of the field and border patterns in 15-16 centuries Italian images occur in surviving carpets, and the images and surviving examples show a comparable range of variations (Ibid, 2002: 73).

The period of this study encompasses the development of Italian Renaissance culture, in particular the fine and decorative arts, and Italy's predominance in trans-Mediterranean

trade. The very paintings that revolutionized Italian art in around 1300 also reflect the dynamic rise in overseas trade and travel.

The imported art objects popular and influential in Italian painting during the proposed three centuries varied considerably in origin, type, and style.

Expensive carpets, on which the oriental elite sat, decorated floors, altars, and furniture in Italian churches and palaces, and painters commonly represented them beneath the throne of Madonna.

Initially, this paper will focus on the transfer of art from Persia to Italy and its underlying reasons; furthermore, the cultural, political backgrounds and also the trade during these three countries will be analyzed. Later, in a comparative study, the focus will be on the rugs painted in Italian paintings as well as Persian carpets of 14-17 centuries.

Cultural, Political and Trading Relations

The history of the East and West ties date back to thousands of years in a way that the exact time for the commencement of these connections are unknown. However, one can easily presume that the historical background of this connection is in harmony with the existence of mankind.

Persia has always been the focal point for trade between the east and west for it is located

as a link between Europe, Asia, and the Mediterranean (Savori, 1987: 90).

The spiritual treasures and reserves and also the cultural heritage of Muslims were transferred to Europe in four ways. The first and probably the most significant channel was Spain; second through the Normans in Sicily, third by the emergence of the Crusades, and finally through the translation of natural sciences and the works of Islamic philosophy from Arabic to Latin which, for Europeans, was the originator of the development of natural sciences (Parisa, 2005:9).

However, one should not completely neglect the role of trade and merchandise so far as cultural transformation is concerned. In all the ages, ports of Italy such as Venice, Pisa, Lussa, and Geneva have witnessed the cultural trade between the East and West. Goods and various objects were transport via these ports. From the 12th century onwards, Venice became the main trade point for the two continents. In time of Crusades and the centuries later, Venice was still considered as a major connector of the East and West (Hunke, 1965: 24).

Trade between Asia and Europe increased steadily during the Crusades (475-650/1096-1271) as more Europeans discovered the rich culture of the East (Heyd, 1886: 1318). The Crusades which took place between 11th and 13th centuries incurred much influence of western culture on the East. After the wars, the

Crusaders could bring goods, luxurious items, and also the religious knowledge of Muslims back to their country (Parisa, 2005:11).

Meanwhile, the Mongol domination of Asia during 1240s and 1360s provided new opportunities for East-West trade (Rosamond, p. 16). The Mongols enormous consumption of Luxury textiles boosted production in existing silk-weaving centers and spurred the development of new ones across their vast empire (Allsen, 1997: 11-45).

The Ilkhanid Mongols which dominated areas of central and East Asia, paved the way for European travellers to Asia since they had no religious beliefs and soon after there were influx of Europeans to Asia (Kavoussi, 2000: 110).

Regarding the development of silk weaving in Italy, there were still much demands of Persian-made silks. Therefore, between 1305 and 1313, the Italian trade moved from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and Persia. Before the invasion of *Ayas* by the Mamluks and its separation from *Armenia*, this city became a transit center of products from *Tabriz*, Caspian district and the western Anatolia to Europe. In the western part of the Black Sea, another trading port *Trabzon* transferred goods from Italy to Europe in 1341 (Rosamond, p. 16-17). In 1260, the first trading firm was established in *Tabriz* and in 1330 after signing a peace treaty between Ilkhanid and Mamluks, a

trading point was created between Tabriz and Europe which passed through cities of *Ayas* and *Anatolia* (Griggs & Morgan, 2000: 61).

In the Timurid era, Timur had a great interest in developing his foreign affairs with the Europeans. He sent many emissaries to the European courts and concluded some of his famous invasions to attract the exceptional attention of the West. The relationship between Persia and Europe, which were constructed on political and military basis, declined after the death of Timur and expulsion of the Ottomans. The trading routes of the Italians in the Caspian Sea also closed due to the dominance of Timur and later with the invasion of Constantine by the Ottomans; also the discovery of new routes all weakened the importance of Persian silk trade.

In the Ilkhanid era, merchandise between Venetian merchants and Persia was accomplished at the large extent; however, this trade was lessened in the Safavid era. Venetians travelled to *Tabriz* and *Qazvin*, the initial capitals of the Safavids, and also to large cities like *Isfahan*. *Shah Abbas* used these merchants for trading goods such as Persian silk and therefore, hence; they were under the support of the Persian king. In the midst of the *Shah Abbas's* reign, various Venetian trade firms were established in *Rasht*, *Lahijan*, *Ardebil*, *Tabriz*, *Isfahan*, and other small towns. Venetian merchants alike Armenians of Persia

engaged in the export of Persian silk from Asia and the Mediterranean to Venice.

The West became a source of silk cloths and magnificent rugs. European artists applied the splendid patterns and grandeur of Persian art in their works. The ornamented western rugs with its rich colors influenced the world of patterns and on the other hand had a major role in the development of color in Italian Renaissance art. European artists used these rugs mainly as backgrounds of their paintings or alongside the main subjects of their work.

Comparison of Persian Rugs of the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries as Reflected in Italian Paintings

As mentioned, Persia and Italy had strong relations the 14-17 centuries which paved the way for the influence of Persian art on Italian paintings. In this section, the similarities of Italian paintings and Persian rugs will be highlighted with emphasis on the rug patterns applied on both. At first, a number of paintings by Italian artists will be selected which are all ornamented with an eastern rug and reflect the content and patterns of Persian rugs.

Before analyzing the samples, it is noteworthy that the main fundamental substances of rugs consisting silk and wooly materials did not survive for an extended time and destroyed gradually. Therefore, the much remaining carpets of Persia do not go beyond

500 years and are mostly related to the *Safavid* period. Unfortunately, no surviving sample has remained from the *Timurid* era meaning the fourteenth century was contemporary to the Italian Renaissance. Due to the fact that there was not much alteration of carpet designs throughout its history, many carpets capture within themselves the design and form of the previous eras which have undergone minor changes in different stages; therefore, the proposed samples are chosen from the *Safavid* rugs whose patterns coordinate with Italian paintings. Many of the patterns applied on *Safavid* rugs are taken from the paintings and manuscripts of the Ilkhanid and *Timurid* eras including the image of the *Grief of Alexander* from the *Demot Shahnameh*- 1420 Timurid era.

The first carpet sample is the one at the feet of the Virgin Mary of 1456-1459 (Figure 1), San Zeno Altarpiece by Andrea Mantegna, an Italian artist. The carpet endures a *pseudo-Kufie* border which can be seen in prayer rugs of the *Safavid* period. Prayer rugs last appeared in religious subjects on feast tables in a context of excessive luxury in one painting. The directional design of these and later related carpets and their standard portable size have been associated with Muslim ritual of praying five times a day facing Mecca, and the practice from at least the 14th century of using one's own rug or mat for prayers at the mosque. The characteristic niche is believed to symbolize

both a doorway to paradise and the *mihrab*, (the mosque niche) orienting prayer toward Mecca, and the lamp commonly suspended in the niche refers to a verse in the Qur'an likening Allah to a lamp in a niche. The keyhole at the bottom of the niche has been interpreted variously as the basin for ablutions before prayer, a niche-within-a-niche, or a mountain providing elevated ground for prayer, lamp, vase, or candlestick motifs that sometimes appear beside the keyhole may represent objects placed at a mosque's entrance or *mihrab*.



Figure 1

The export of these carpets to the West and their frequent representation in Italian paintings

from about 1490s to 1562 raises questions about their original meaning and subsequent interpretation in Christianity.

Carpets designed, in a shape of an altar or mihrab, have various types. An example can be the mihrab carpet related to the *Safavid* era in Figure 2. This carpet is currently preserved in Tehran's Carpet Museum and measures approximately 141x105cm. The main background of this carpet is a pointed mihrab in which, a podium, lantern, and small pool are seen. Presumably, the artist was attempting to imagine a small mosque within the carpet.

The wide border of this carpet is ornamented with *Kufic* writing. This carpet is similar to the carpet illustrated at the feet of the Virgin Mary; both have a similar pointed and inscriptional altar with same contents. Therefore, dissimilarities can be recognized in the realm of content and border.

A painting of the Virgin Mary (Figure 3) by *Hans Memling* dating to the last quarter of the 15th century. The carpet which is illustrated in this painting is related to the Lotto carpets.

A similar example of this design is seen in a medallion of a sixteenth-century rug from *Kashan*. Although this rug was fabricated a hundred years after this painting, as mentioned, there was not much change in the rug patterns and perhaps even in centuries before such designs were fashionable (Figure 4).



Figure 2



Figure 3

Figure 5 is an artwork by *Lorenzo Lotto*; the famous Italian painter of the 16th century. This painting was created in 1523 and shows a

couple beside a table with a rug stretched on the top. This rug has broken patterns consisting of arabesque especially on the borders of the carpet.



Figure 4



Figure 5

A comparable example of broken patterns can be depicted on the border of a rug from the north-eastern district of Iran which is related to the sixteenth-century and is currently preserved in the Staatliche Museum in Berlin (Figure 6). In the large borders of both the rugs, arabesque patterns are applied in the form of broken patterns and among them designs of decorative leaves are seen. On the smaller borders, a collaboration of stems and small leaves unique beauty to the rugs.



Figure 6

As early as the 14th century, Persian designers were breaking up their endlessly repeating geometrical patterns with diapers, medallions, or compartments. The process continued in the Timurid period, as we see, with the introduction of central medallions, often with complicated outlines with the beginning of

the 16th century the medallion and compartment designs were further developed.

Paris Burdon's *Return of the Doges Ring* 1538 (Figure 7), is one of the few Italian Renaissance paintings that represents carpets on the floor in a contemporary court setting. In front of the doge is a large *Star Ushak* carpet. The central medallion is comparable to an example from the early 16th century (Figure 8), a medallion rug from *Tabriz*, from *shah Ismail's* period.

In the center, there is an eight-pointed lobed medallion filled with floral scrolls bearing palmettos of various size, buds and leaves. Between the points, there are compartments, containing the same floral design. The center of medallion contains an octagon surrounded by an angular and a lobed medallion, all containing palmettos and buds on stems.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 9 shows another painting by Piero Della Francesca showing the Virgin Mary and her newly born son. Upon the feet of Mary,

there exists an ornamental carpet, much of it is decorated with a large star medallion, almost covering the whole carpet. The wide border of this carpet is painted with the red background similar to the stars and crosses carpet which is decorated in between. The stars and the crosses of this painting are similar to a rug preserved at the Circhehem Collection which is dated between 1270 and 1470 and is related to Azerbaijan (Figure 10)

Although in the painted rugs, the forms of the cross and star is much more simplified than the rug, the overall combinations are matching. However, it is possible that the painter would have manipulated the patterns according to his own taste and hence; a more cut down pattern is painted.



Figure 9

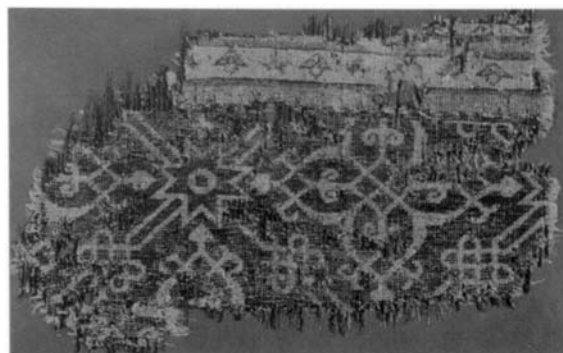


Figure 10

In the Annunciation by the Bergamese painter *Andrea Previtali*, about 1508 (Figure 11), the carpet is displayed lengthwise on a bench giving the spectators full opportunity to appreciate its design and colors and to admire the artists descriptive powers.

The border of this rug is quite similar to the second rug; along its borders lines similar to Kufic writing. Another similar sample is a rug in which its borders are ornamented with Kufic writing and in the center floral patterns are seen in a broken manner (Figure 12).

This type of lines present in the rug of the painting by *Sebastiano del Piombo* created in 1516, are among the rugs with a Lotto design (Figure 13). The background of the rug is ornamented with broken patterns and *Shah Abbasi* flowers. These patterns can be seen in a rug related to *Azerbaijan* with a date of 1720 (Figure 14).



Figure 11



Figure 13



Figure 12



Figure 14

The *Shah Abbasi* flower, as the name suggests was first applied during the reign of *Shah Abbas* the great.

In another painting by Andrea de Verrocchio which is dated to 1475-88; we can see the Virgin Mary and Jesus sitting on a throne. A rug with the design of *Halbian* is seen with patterns of crosses and arabesque. Figure 15 shows a real life sample of this rug. This rug is preserved at the British Museum (Figure 16).



Figure 15

In what follows, the author will provide a brief summary of Amy Briggs work and then go on to investigate as to what extent the carpet types listed there correspond to the designs from the region of Armenian Cultural influence, thus making plausible the assumption that they originated in this area.

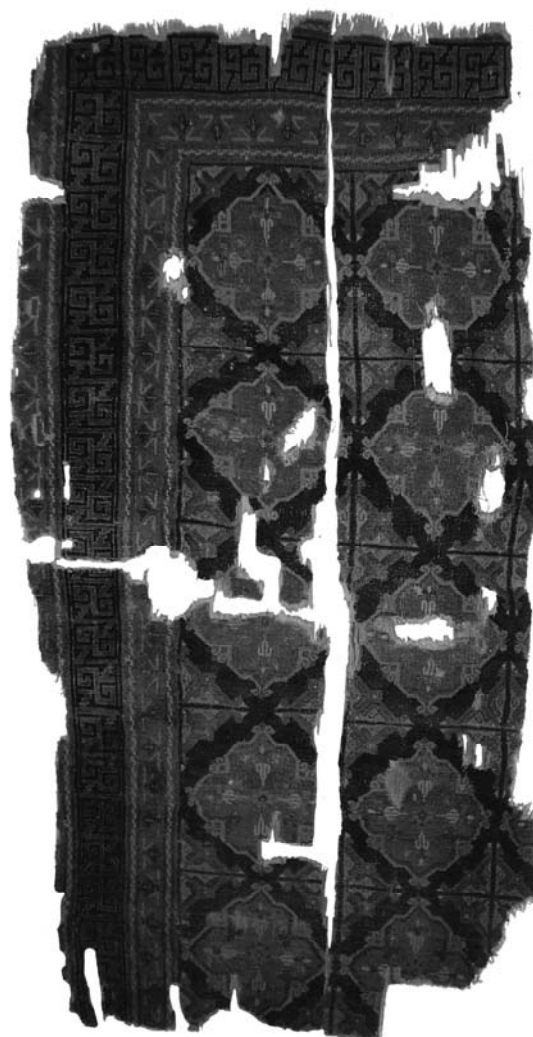


Figure 16

Another Italian painting by *Dominica Ghirlandaio* shows the Virgin Mary and Jesus among angels. A rug can be seen in the painting that beholds broken patterns, an association of *Kufic* writing on the borders and two medallions in the center (Figure 17). The method of putting two medallions on the center of the carpet is derived from the rugs woven by the *Qashqaii* tribes in the Persian Gulf district of Iran, which implies two medallions among

various rhombic borders (Figure 18). The reason of choosing such rugs over the luxurious-made rugs of the *Timurid* and *Safavid* carpets of the Persian court is the fact that Iranian tribes also began fabricating exquisite rugs, many of which, are among the very best of tribal rugs. These rugs were imported to Europe alongside court rugs and became of high interest.

The enforced colonization by Shah Abbas 1 of entire segments of the Armenian population during the first few years of the 17th century as indicated, was not restricted to Isfahan/New *Julfa* alone. The migration of large family groups led from Tabriz and Isfahan south in to the *Qashqaii* desert regions and the *Afshari* territories, and later from there on to Meshed, the Kabul region, and to Baluchistan. The south- western Persia had already once been settled, 1000 years prior to this, by Armenian artisans at the decree of the Saassanids. They were then forced to establish a textile industry there.

The early material which has survived from this region is still less ordered and less accessible than have been the carpets from most of the other groups. This is perhaps in part due to the fact that no large collections from this special region have yet come to light. With regard to the quantity of carpets from the 19th century, we can conclude that there must have been a fairly large industry there during the 17th and 18th centuries.



Figure 17



Figure 18

As mentioned before, the use of many patterns such as cross, star and broken patterns, applied in Italian paintings is stemmed from Iranian art which is best reflected in Persian paintings.

In a painting by the female Italian painter, Sophonisba Anguissola dated back to 1555, the image of three sisters playing chess is seen. The rug under the chess board is decorated with broken patterns and an eight-sided medallion in the center (Figure 19). The main rug to which this painting resembles dates back to years before. The rug was revived by applying the *sumak* technique (flat weaving without fuzz). Around the rug, stars and crosses can be seen; moreover, on the border patterns similar to the *Kufie* writing can also be depicted (Figure 20). This rug is currently preserved in the Textile Museum in Washington D.C.



Figure 19



Figure 20

Conclusion

In sum, the arrival of Europeans contributed to the expansion of trade, politics, and culture. They were the gateway for the transfer of noble features of Islamic art to Europe.

Italy, in centuries, especially in the Ilkhanid and Safavid era, developed its political and trading links with Iran. Many valuable goods and lavish items among which Persian silk was of least value were imported from Persia to Italy. One of luxurious items which Italians were fond of rugs. They applied these rugs in various ways such as covering tables, hanging

upon walls, covering stairways, or simply as a decorative item on the floor. Therefore, in the paintings of these eras, the existence of rugs in the background or beside the main subjects is common.

Therefore, according to the main aims of the paper, the similar features of Persian rugs of the 14-17 centuries have primarily been the themes of the Italian paintings. A vast collection of Italian painting have been ornamented with western rugs. The patterns consist of a variety of flowers, medallions, and geometrical patterns.

List of Illustrations:

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3. Madonna and child enthroned, Domenico Ghirlandaio, ref, no 27.
4. Silk medallion rug, *Kashan*, Second half of 10/ 16 century, ref, no 5, p. 57.
5. Husband and wife, Lorenzo Lottos, Safavid era, ref 3, no 27.
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20. Carpet with *Saumak* technique, Textile Museum, Washington, ref no 8, p.174.

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انعکاس و تطبیق نقوش قالی‌های ایرانی سده‌های ۱۷-۱۴ بر نقاشی‌های ایتالیایی

مهناز شایسته‌فر^۱

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قالی بافی هنر چند هزار ساله ایران، دارای پیشینه تاریخی چشمگیری است. این هنر دیرینه با توجه به کاربرد چند جانبه هنری و مصرفی، به تدریج جایگاه خود را در جهان پیدا کرد و چنان در سایر هنرهای دیگر تأثیرگذار بوده که شاهد تجلی تزئینات آن در دیگر آثار هنری همچون نقاشی می‌باشیم. لذا در این مقاله سعی می‌شود که با توجه به روابط گسترده هنری ایران و ایتالیا در سده‌های ۱۷-۱۱/۱۴ به مقایسه نقوش قالی‌های ایرانی این دوره در نقاشی ایتالیا، پرداخته شود. سئوالاتی که این مقاله در پی پاسخ دادن به آن‌هاست به شرح ذیل است:

۱. زمینه‌های فرهنگی، سیاسی و تجاری انتقال فرش‌های ایران به ایتالیا در قرون ۱۷-۱۴ چگونه بوده است؟

۲. نقوش مشترک قالی‌های ایرانی سده‌های ۱۷-۱۱/۱۴-۸ و فرش‌های انعکاس یافته در نقاشی‌های ایتالیا کدامند؟

گردآوری مطالب و داده‌های این مقاله نیز با استفاده از اسناد تاریخی و تصاویر موجود صورت گرفته است. برای تنظیم مقاله و بررسی فرضیات نیز از روش تطبیق، تفسیر و توصیف استفاده شده است.

واژگان کلیدی: قالی‌های ایرانی، نقاشی‌های ایتالیا، نقش و رنگ، تطبیق و مقایسه، سده‌های

۱۷-۱۴.

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