

Visual study of carpets in the Safavid era: A case study in Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili's tomb

Un estudio visual de las alfombras en la era Safávida: un estudio de caso de la tumba Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili

Samira Karami Robati*
University of Tehran - Iran
s.karami1368@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article studies and visually analyze motifs of carpets in the Safavid era, especially the carpet in Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili's tomb. Ardabili carpets have very special designs and motifs. The method of study is based on visual analysis, which ultimately aims to achieve important and dynamic points in the composition of the designs and the proper geometry in this carpet. The result of this study shows that in the past designers have drawn the motifs on a geometric background, considering geometry as the main basis of carpet design. In the design of Safavid carpets, like other arts, special proportions have been used in the size of frames, elements as well as interior parts of the frame.

Keywords: Carpet, Safavid Era, Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili's Tomb

RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia y analiza visualmente los motivos de las alfombras en la era safávida, especialmente la alfombra en la tumba de Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili. Las alfombras Ardabili tienen diseños y motivos muy especiales. El método de estudio se basa en el análisis visual, que en última instancia tiene como objetivo lograr puntos importantes y dinámicos en la composición de los diseños y la geometría adecuada en esta alfombra. El resultado de este estudio muestra que en el pasado los diseñadores han dibujado los motivos sobre fondo geométrico, considerando la geometría como la base principal del diseño de alfombras. En el diseño de las alfombras Safavid, como en otras artes, se han utilizado proporciones especiales en el tamaño de los marcos, elementos y partes interiores del marco.

Palabras clave: Alfombra, Era Safavid, Tumba de Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili

*Department of Art, Kish International Campus, University of Tehran, Kish, Hormozgan Province, Iran

Recibido: 06/06/2019 Aceptado: 14/09/2019

Introduction

During the Safavid era, the court, especially the king himself, was very attentive to art and always welcomed a variety of artists, both domestic and foreign. During this period, art reached its peak in every field, changed from an individual work to an advanced industry. In the meantime, the art and industry of carpet weaving had a special place. Of course, people like Henry Focillon, head of the Museum of Fine Arts in Lyon, have described Iranian art in the Safavid era more as a vast and traditional world. These carpets were expensive and large, in enormous sizes beyond the capacity of ordinary and small rural and nomadic looms, beyond the need of ordinary people and only fit for royal palaces and halls, they were woven sometimes of silk and sometimes of golden and silver yarns in the kings' court workshops. Large court workshops for this purpose were set up in major cities of the country, and carpets nowadays held in the museums of the world in the name of exquisite Iranian carpets and showing Iranian masters in motif and texture are generally the product of efforts of weavers, designers and dyers of this era (Stead, 1974)

The history of world's carpet weaving mentions Iranian carpets as an artistic work and important commercial product. Phrases like "Iranian Carpet" and "Oriental Carpet" in some cases have a synonymous meaning, and of course the artistic and historical significance of the Iranian tradition has proven to everyone. The rich and unique design and motifs of Iranian carpets in the form of beautiful combinations and pleasing colors have always amazed audiences. This can be due to the Islamic law (prohibition of illustration) in the Safavid era. At this point, the designers gave up the true drawing of the elements and, while separating from the real world, sought the equivalent of it in the realm of spirituality and achieved it to the fullest (Rizvi, 2017).

Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili Shrine Ensemble, Government Mansion of the Safavid Kings in city center of Ardabil in Ali Qapavi Square, which includes various sections such as Teahouse, Pantry, Allah Allah Dome, Jannat Sara and Tombs of the Safavid dynasty, is considered one of the ten important historical monuments in Iran. Ardabil carpet is one of the most famous carpets of the Safavid era (Hoseini, 2019)

In this study, the carpets of the Safavid era are studied. The number of carpets and designs in the Safavid era is very high and varied. For this reason, we visually examine the carpets in Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili's Tomb. Some of the carpets of this monument have been placed in major museums around the world, including the Museum. Based on the images of the carpets in this ensemble, a visual analysis of the main carpet, Ardabil Carpet, will be presented. The main difference between this work and other carpets of the Safavid era will also be mentioned.

Carpet motifs in the Safavid era

Serious studies and research on Safavid carpets have been started by non-Iranian scholars since about 120 years ago and so far many books and articles on this carpet have been published. The Safavid era is regarded as the peak of the excellence of Iranian art, also they are unanimous that the carpets of this period are masterpieces of Iranian carpet weaving. This unanimity is to the extent that all or most of the Safavid carpets that have remained until now are recognized as not only the glory of Safavid carpet weaving, but also the history of Iran. But no one has mentioned the reason for this greatness and glory, as if whatever they consider as carpet and the product of the Safavid era is the peak of Iranian and Safavid carpet weaving. Considering the visual study done on about forty images of these carpets and gathering their texture characteristics and the possibility of examining the three samples in the carpet museum and considering the recommendations and the guides that were made, the reasons for this greatness and glory can be the Safavid kings' attention and support for carpet weaving, attention to the maintenance of weaving techniques and practices and the symbolism of the Iranian carpet among countries. Safavid carpets can be divided into categories of medallion corner, overall flower, *vagirei*¹, prayer niche, vase, garden, hunting, composite and a type known as Polish (Issawi, 1971).

The carpets left remained from the Safavid period are divided into two distinct groups according to their predominant coloration; a group of these carpets, which are similar to woven carpets colored according to Iranian foundations, with the dominant colors of: cream, red, and navy blue and often red color, named Gheyre Shahi (non-royal) carpets and another group that have departed from the traditional coloration foundations of Iranian carpets and are very different carpets called royal (Shahi) carpets with the dominant colors of yellow or green, orange and blue. In the coloration of shahi carpets, it is noticeable that in some of them the colors such as blackish dark navy blue and dark brown are widely used as margins and the text color, while this color in general has not been used in any period in the Iranian carpet and like other dominant colors in this group, the use of black is limited to some of these carpets. Also no sample is found in contemporary carpets (Zadeh, M. M. and S. Noori, 2017). Of the factors affecting the Safavid carpet, the factor with the most effect on the Shahi carpets has been the court's taste, meaning that the king's courtiers, according to their aristocratic and luxurious nature, had tendency to bright colors such as yellow with its high glitter (Canby, 2002)

¹ Vagire means to repeat a small pattern in the length and width of a carpet.

Research background

Ardabil carpet is one of the oldest, most important and exceptional carpets in the world. Of course, the importance of Ardabil carpet is not only because of its age and beauty, but also because of the narrative of one of the most important historical periods of Iran. Ardabil carpet, currently on display at the Victoria Albert Museum in England, is actually a pair of carpets that used to adorn Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili's tomb. Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili was a Sufi elite who had many disciples. He was one of ancestors of Shah Ismail the first king of Safavid dynasty. He passed away and was buried in Ardabil many years before the Safavid dynasty was formed. In the Safavid era, the tomb of Sheikh Safi as a shrine was so welcomed by people that Shah Tahmasb made an order for weaving a pair of exquisite carpets. The two carpets were laid next together in Sheikh Safi's tomb. In this carpet, wool is used more than silk because wool gets the color better (Flood, 2012).

There have been many studies on this carpet. Due to being the symbol of Iranian carpet glory, this carpet has been the subject of much attention by all scholars and has been always studied in the Persian carpet study books as one of top 10 Iranian carpets (Fahime, 2019). Rexford conducted a study under supervision of the California Museum that pointed to a careful examination of the carpet and its effect on the exchanges. Garthwaite et al. also studied prominent Persian works of art and considered this carpet to be one of the most prominent motifs of Iranian weaving art (Garthwaite, 2008).

Research Methodology

In this research, it has been attempted to collect motifs of the carpet of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili's tomb by relying on documentary and library studies, using visual comparison and case study, thereby analyzing aesthetic principles of the motifs, color and composition of Tabriz's contemporary carpets.

Visual analysis

Visual research is a term that is based on data collection and analysis using images (drawing, painting, photography, film or video images). Visual productions are the product of the time and place that they are recorded in and, on the other hand, represent the position of the particular time and place. Thus, they can be used methodologically as materials for studying and understanding human life in specific periods, and to help researchers gain a more accurate and deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon or period of history, society, culture. Paul Mason stated that the use of image in social research has a long history, and the disciplines, or more precisely the sub-disciplines that have developed image-based research, are visual anthropology and visual ethnography. But for Banks, methodological perspectives in these disciplines are scattered or defined for specific areas, such as ethnographic film. Image in anthropological research has traditionally been used to illustrate textual narratives. But today, the focus is on the interpretation of image in disciplines such as visual anthropology, which focuses primarily on understanding visual representation of culture. In visual ethnology and anthropology, image and visual material are recognized as phenomena that are worthy of analysis and not merely illustrators of narrative. In visual research, research methods and strategies are tailored to the type of visual data. Marcus Banks discusses the classification of visual research methods and divides visual data into two categories:

1. Visual documents produced by the researcher
2. Visual documents produced by those on whom the research is being conducted

In recent years, with the collapse of the duality between observer and observee, a third type of visual data has emerged, called participatory representation. However, it is worth saying that these visual images or data have been discussed in most of the existing methodological sources from the perspective of their function in social research, but it is clear that they can also be used from a methodological perspective in artistic research [13, 14].

Ardabil carpet

Ardabil Carpet (Figs. 1 and 2) is a pair of famous Iranian carpets placed in the tomb of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili. In terms of design and texture, this carpet is considered to be one of the most exquisite and most famous carpets throughout the world, which has been included in the list of 50 selected artistic masterpieces of the world. Art experts consider this carpet to be a unique abstract artwork with its beautiful designs and motifs that is equivalent to the abstract paintings of the present century in terms of artistic level (Stead, 1974).

According to the writings, some sources reinforce the possibility that Shah Tahmasb I ordered weaving the carpet in 930 AH (1524 AD) and that the carpet was woven by Maghsoud Kashani, master of carpet weaving, alone in sixteen years. The pattern of the carpet is designed based on the image of the candelabrum house (Ghandil Khane) ceiling, and those who entered the room would see the floor and ceiling of the hall in one design that evokes the mentality of the Safavid mystics regarding the unity of being, there is one design from the earth to the empyrean.

In the design of the main carpet pattern, there is a sea of delicate shank and leaf motions using Shah Abbasi colors. In the carpet pattern, some mental and spiritual states are felt, including in the navy blue color of its text, that would make the shrine have a sacred state. The presence of two petals on the carpet demonstrates its sacredness and validity, and the carpet medallion containing 5 oval pendants is considered as a sign of the sun. On the margin of the carpet there is a series of frames that also still exist in the tile-work of the monument's ceiling. The use of Turkish knots and wool of Azerbaijan in weaving the carpet and also the necessity of its supervision by the then king who ruled in Tabriz make the possibility of weaving the carpet in this city get close to certainty. The couplet "Save Thy threshold, my shelter in the world is none. Save this door, my fortress-place is none." and the phrase "Work of your servant Maghsud Kashani 946 AH (1540 AD)", which is woven on the carpet, indicate that the weaver is Maghsud Kashani. This carpet is a special milestone in the history of Iranian carpet weaving industry, as it has been woven for the complex and a kind of innovation has been used in its design. The carpet's pattern is absolutely innovative due to the lack of use of geometric shapes that were common in most carpet of Iran at the time. As the years go by, every carpet woven into this motif is still called Sheikh Safi pattern (Jackson, 2016).



Figure 1- Ardabil Carpet in Jamel Gallery



Figure 2 - Ardabil Carpet, Iran c1540 CE, AH 946, Los Angeles County Museum of Art [16]

Ardabil carpet is as a masterpiece of Iranian carpet weaving which has three main characteristics. The first characteristic is that it was woven in the Safavid era, which was the period of development of and attention to the arts, especially the Iranian carpet. On the other hand, in the pattern of this carpet an evolved medallion has been used and finally it has the date of weaving and the name of the master weaver on it. The symmetry and balance in the elements of Ardabil carpet resemble miniature and illustrated manuscripts, and the top and bottom of its medallion is a cryptic motif of the candelabras (Ghandil) that once lighted the sheikh's shrine. Due to the presence of the common motif of the northwest medallion carpets in this carpet (Fig. 3), it is considered to be of this category (Maghsoudi, 2013).

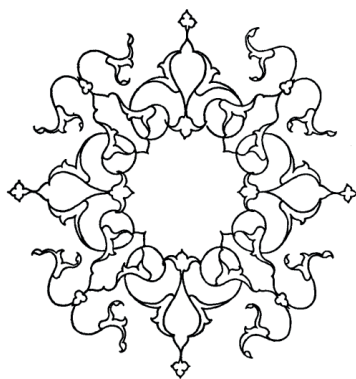


Figure 3. Schematic of the Northwestern Medallion Carpet of Iran (Stead, 1974)

The wool yarns used with Sehna or Persian knots on the carpet and near the candelabra on the silk threads give this carpet an extraordinary design. Aside from the outer boundaries and part of the olive ground in the Los Angeles Ardabil carpet, the overall size of which has been shrunk, the carpets are almost identical. Weaving important carpets in pairs (two cases) in the 16th century in Iran was common. While some features and placement of, for example, central sunflower medallions are exactly identical in both works. There are changes in weaving technique and wool quality, along with minor changes in design. The warps and wefts are the same: both are of silk without fat, with twisting Z-spun, S-ply and weft in three boughs- each coupled bough that ends. Significant and confusing differences are found in the number of knots, the texture and the length of the candelabrum, curious enough. In London works, there are seventeen to eighteen manual knots per inch, while the Los Angeles carpet has nineteen to twenty knots on average. As a result, there are 297 to 324 knots per square inch in the London Ardabil carpet and 380 to 420 knots per square inch in the Los Angeles carpet. In general, the quality of candelabrum in London carpet is harder, shorter, stronger and denser in packing. However, Marjani Ardabilis have a multilevel design that presents an almost three-dimensional image to the viewer. As a result, there are 297 to 324 knots per square inch in the London Ardabil carpet and 380 to 420 knots per square inch in the Los Angeles carpet. In general, the quality of candelabrum in London carpet is harder, shorter, stronger and denser in packing. However, Marjani Ardabilis have a multilevel design that presents an almost three-dimensional image to the viewer. This is due to the Fugue-like complexity of the original design in which the original medallion is with sixteen Oygol. The flower ground all is different against the vibrant blue background and the beat and tonality. The bold and unique use of the Safavid dye affects the whole carpet. Ten colors have been used in design of Ardebil. Except for areas with white backgrounds, it has been taken from the color of natural materials perhaps all vegetables. Age, weather conditions and exposure to light inevitably lead to color fading (Zadeh, 2017).

In some areas, such as the green part, knots of the carpets are more visible. It can be surely assumed that some of the origins of the traditional dyes known in Persian carpets are related to Ardebil. Therefore, the three shades of blue are probably derived from indigo, as in fact repeated immersion probably produces black Ardabil as well. Although the green color of Ardabil may be the result of meeting between blue and yellow, this color can be obtained from ripe turmeric. Pomegranate extract was probably used for making yellow, although saffron is also a source of yellow. White or cream areas are not of natural wool. The three reds used may have a wild base (Rudner, 2011)

The main design element in the Ardabil carpet is the large central medallion, a yellow light with decorative beams of red, green and dark cream (Figure 4). The medallion is covered with blue rose motifs, which in turn provide a uniform yet symmetrical shape. These are like ashes scattered in the wind. There are also Chinese cloud knot motifs brought to Iran by the Mongols. At the center of the medallion, it is not immediately recognizable because it is almost as a large internal medallion (Fig. 4). These ornaments, which look magically below the water's surface, have been enhanced on the surface of bright blue and floating lotus blossoms. This picture with flowering plants is on an edged background (Armstrong, 2018).

In many northwest medallion carpets of the 16th century, the bar and pendant knot above and below a longitudinal axis in the central medallion appear very much like the cover of books in this period. The main and most creative design feature of this carpet is that it changes this frame with a completely different approach that has never appeared in any other Iranian carpet of this period. Instead of pendant knots and pendants, candelabras of various styles have been used in the form of pendants at the highest and lowest levels of sharp panels, which in turn are aimed at the outside of the lotus blossoms (Junod, 2012).



Figure 4- Central Medallion of Ardabil Carpet

The main parameter considered by researchers to study the carpet in order to justify the carpet's pattern is the place for which the carpet has been woven. Ardabil carpet has been woven for the tomb of Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili. These candelabras are, in fact, the embodiment of verse 35 of the Holy Surah Nur: Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, The lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star, Lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, there are small medallions designed around the main medallion and on each side of that there is a candelabrum that symbolizes the sacredness of the carpet and a quarter of the main motif of the carpet is woven on the four corners of the carpet.

Ardabil carpet background is dark blue and its flowers and arabesque designs are woven in red, green and yellow and consist of buds and foliage, arabesque knots (band), Shah Abbasi flowers that are woven masterly and despite the simplicity, the motifs are scattered throughout the carpet in such a way that the viewer perceives an endless wealth and a comfortable life full of blessings from it (Schapiro, 1938).

This basic design element has been used on a blue and azure deep field with a dark color. A dominant tonality with a large number of blossoms, consisting of curveless crowns and intertwining leaves. The blossoms are a typical Persian motif of the sixteenth century: a traditional Sassanid lotus, crossed with Chinese peony. In some cases, these Safavid creativities seem to be completely disorganized and in some others sprout barely comes out of the figure. These are balanced with astounding accuracy - no difficult arrangement - they seem to be scattered in the field. Crenate leaves have not been observed botanically from the plant point of view as shown. In this carpet, these leaves are similar to rose leaves (Soleymani, 2014).

Conclusion

Ardabil carpet has a history of about 500 years. The carpet was woven in the first half of the 16th century by a team of weavers working under the supervision of a weaving master at the court of Shah Tahmasb Safavi. The Ardabil Carpet existing in London is as an artwork obtained from two original carpets rebuilt for a nineteenth-century art market that makes the complete masterpiece valuable. This carpet has been used in cultural policies between East and West. Its replica has been used as a model for the consumer in the global carpet production system. The glory of this carpet has been endorsed by professionals every decade. Each of these transfers has risen issues that have contributed to the progress of "Oriental" discourse. Nevertheless, this carpet has had its own independent life and has followed its path.

Finally, in a sentence, we can say that the unique design of these carpets observing special visual principles and qualities along with the artistic coloring, while paying attention to the aesthetic factors, is the main factor of their durability and beauty. Visual analysis also showed that this carpet, even in the eyes of ordinary people, is different from all other carpets. The significant difference between this carpet and its uniform reflects the genius used at the time of its design, which is still used as an eye-catching motif in modern design.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Armstrong, D., (2018). *Inventing the Ardabil Carpet: A Case Study in the Appropriation and Transformation of a Persian Artifact*. Iran, p. 1-21.
- Canby, S.R. (2002). *Safavid art and architecture*. British Museum Publications Limited.
- Davodi, H., Iravani, H., Fami, H. S., & Ameri, Z. D. (2017). Affecting Factors on Water Resources' Sustainability in case of small holding farmers, Alborz province, Islamic Republic of Iran. *Advances in Bioresearch*, 8(3).
- Fahime, S., et al. (2019). Industrial clusters in the developing economies: insights from the Iranian carpet industry. *Strategic Change*, 2019. 28.
- Flood, F.B. (2012). From the Prophet to postmodernism? New world orders and the end of Islamic art. *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2012(6): p. 0_1.
- Garthwaite, G.R. (2008). *The Persians*. Vol. 6. 2008: John Wiley & Sons.
- Goswami, K. (2018). Developments in handmade carpets: design and manufacture, in *Advances in carpet manufacture*. Elsevier. p. 269-350.
- Hillyer, L. and B. Pretzel. (2005) *The Ardabil carpet: a new perspective*. *V & A conservation journal*, (49): p. 11-13.
- Hoseini, S. and F. Barmaki (2019). The Etymology of the Mention of "Allah, Muhammad, Ali" in the Collection of Sheikh Safi Al-Din Ardebili.
- Issawi, C. (1971). *The economic history of Iran, 1800-1914*. 1971: University of Chicago Press Chicago.
- Jackson, C. (2016). Persian Carpets and the South Kensington Museum: Design, Scholarship and Collecting in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain. *Journal of Design History*. 30(3): p. 265-281.
- Jaramillo, L. E. S. (2018). Malware Detection and Mitigation Techniques: Lessons Learned from Mirai DDOS Attack. *Journal of Information Systems Engineering & Management*, 3(3), 19.
- Junod, B., et al., (2012). *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-first Century*. Saqi London.
- Kadoi, Y. (2002). Arthur Upham Pope and his 'research methods in Muhammadan art': Persian carpets. *Journal of Art Historiography*. 6(2).
- Kakuee, O., et al., (2019). Investigation of mordants for dyeing of yarns in ancient Persian carpets (15th–17th century) by IBA methods. *Nuclear Instruments and Methods in Physics Research Section B: Beam Interactions with Materials and Atoms*. 450: p. 294-298.
- Luo, C., Li, M., Peng, P., & Fan, S. (2018). How Does Internet Finance Influence the Interest Rate? Evidence from Chinese Financial Markets. *Dutch Journal of Finance and Management*, 2(1), 01.
- Maghsoudi, T., Davodi, H., & Hekmat, M. (2013). Agricultural production cooperatives, entrepreneurship and education in Iran. *African Journal of Business Management*, 7(18), 1806-1813.
- Murzinova, K. E. A., Koblanova, A., & Ansabayeva, D. A. (2018). Prosodical means applied in communicative relations. *Opción*, 34(85-2), 61-96.
- Puspitasari, L., In'am, A., & Syaifuddin, M. (2019). Analysis of Students' Creative Thinking in Solving Arithmetic Problems. *International Electronic Journal of Mathematics Education*, 14(1), 49-60. <https://doi.org/10.12973/iejme/3962>
- Rad, A.B., and Divandari, J. (2018). Reading Carpet and Architectural common aspects. *Journal of Advanced Pharmacy Education & Research* | Oct-Dec, 2018. 8(S2): p. 149.
- Rashidi, R. and S. Shokrpour, (2017). *The Study of the Influence of the Safavid Era Carpets on Animal Motifs in Murals of the Pirnia House*.
- Rizvi, K. (2011). *The Safavid dynastic shrine: Architecture, religion and power in early modern Iran*. Vol. 5. IB Tauris.
- Rudner, M. (2011). The Modernization of Iran and the Development of the Persian Carpet Industry: The Neo-Classical Era in the Persian Carpet Industry, 1925–45. *Iranian Studies*. 44(1): p. 49-76.
- Schapiro, M., A (1938). *Survey of Persian Art. From Prehistoric Times to the Present: Arthur Upham Pope, Editor; Phyllis Ackerman, Assistant Editor*, New York, Oxford University Press. 6 Volumes (3 Volumes of Plates). Taylor & Francis.
- Soleymani, M., Nezhadali, L. H., & Mohammad, B. Z. (2014). Effective indicators in Bank customer satisfaction, *UCT Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, 2(1): 1-7.
- Sorkhe, R.S. (2014). The role of aesthetics in pictographs of Persian Carpets. *Advances in Environmental Biology*. 8(12): p. 321-327.
- Stead, R. (1974). *The Ardabil Carpets*. Getty Publications.
- Tillinghast, R., *Islamic Art at the V&A*. (2007). *The Hudson Review*. 60(2): p. 293-298
- Zadeh, M. M. and S. Noori. (2017). Study of Structure and Viewing Angles of Persian Garden in Persian Garden Paintings and Garden carpets in Safavid Period. *BAGH-E NAZAR*. 14(52): p. 31-42.