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COLOUR PLATES

Front cover:

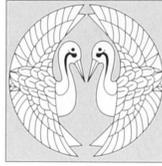
Winding up threads into balls, 17.7×26.5 cm, an illustration to the anonymous manuscript *Higashi Ezo iko*, Manuscript fund of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies.

Back cover:

Plate 1. The Ainu loom, 38.2×26.5 cm, an illustration to the anonymous manuscript *Higashi Ezo iko*, Manuscript fund of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies.

Plate 2. The weaving process (*attush-kar*), 38.2×26.5 cm, an illustration of the anonymous manuscript *Higashi Ezo iko*, Manuscript fund of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies.

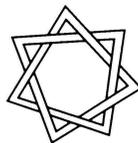
RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES
ST.PETERSBURG BRANCH



Manuscripta Orientalia

International Journal for Oriental Manuscript Research

Vol. 3 No. 1 March 1997



ИВЭСА
St. Petersburg-Helsinki

SYMBOLISM IN PERSIAN RUGS

It is a common mistake to assume that Oriental rugs can be identified by their designs or symbols alone. While it is true that certain symbols are closely associated with specific localities or weaving groups, it would take an exceptionally confident person to identify a rug without confirming their opinion by carefully checking the weave, materials, and dyes. This is especially true today, due to a substantial number of high-quality Persian copies coming onto the market from India, Pakistan, and the Balkan countries. This article attempts to discuss the most common design elements and symbols used in Persian rugs, their meanings, and the region of the origin. This discussion of themes and symbols will hopefully serve as an aid in the identification of Persian rugs.

The symbols and designs of the rug do give information about its weaver. What was she/he wishing to say through the selection of symbols and design? Were they selected purely for aesthetic reasons or were they influenced by factors in his/her personal life, culture, or religion? Or, perhaps, the weaver was trying to connect to the past by using symbols that hold ancient, traditional meanings.

Over the years many different design elements and motifs have been used in Persian rugs. Some have had special symbolic significance attributed to them. The mystique of Persian rugs owes a lot to the tales and fables that have been built up around the different design elements. Even though designs, motifs, and colors have little or no particular significance today, there are traditional interpretations associated with them. According to early historians [1], the tribes from whom the Saljūqs were descended used heraldic devices derived from zoomorphic and totemic motifs, as well as the *tamgha* (brand mark) employed by each tribe to identify their flocks.

Religious and political turmoils have had significant influences on the design and symbols of the Persian rugs. Symbols with a deep religious meaning for one group or sect may have a completely different meaning for another. A human or animal figure was rarely woven into a rug made by Sunnite Moslems; they were strict in their interpretation of Koran law forbidding the use of figures that represent living creatures [2]. However, D. Black argues that this is a misconception and although the ban is influenced by religion, it is rare, but not unknown, to find living forms represented on rugs made for use in the mosque. By contrast, the Shiite Moslems freely used figures of humans and animals woven in the prayer rugs used in the mosques.

The above analysis suggests that form, as well as the most basic organization of the rug, is influenced early on by theme.

One of the most common themes in Persian rugs is **Floral**. The image of a lush garden is one that is deeply rooted in both the religious and cultural heritage of the Persian design. In a region of the world where water is a precious commodity, it is perhaps not surprising that the garden, with an abundance of flora and fauna, is the Muslim symbol of paradise. The weavers were further inspired by their belief in the Islamic afterlife [3], which promises that the faithful will dwell in paradise. Floral themes are generally divided into three categories of **All over floral**, **Garden**, and **Panelled** design [4]. **All over floral** designs feature floral forms without the addition of a medallion, vase, or other primary motif. The **All over floral** design is not, strictly speaking, a design. Rather, it is the name used to describe any pattern that has no focal point. **Garden** design is usually based on the formal gardens of ancient Persia with their abundance of flora separated by pathways and ornamental panels. In **Panelled** design the field is divided into panels or compartments containing individual motifs.

The **Herati** design derives its name from the town of Herat (now in Afghanistan), where it is said to have originated. It is composed of a single floral head within a diamond framework flanked by four outwardly curling leaves. It is a motif widely used in Persia, and it is thought to symbolize the small fishes that, at the time of the full moon, come up just beneath the surface of the water to swim in the moon's reflection [5]. It is sometimes referred to as **Mahi** (Persian word for fish). The motif is usually employed in either an all over medallion-and-corner format. Rugs with **Herati** theme are made by numerous workshops throughout Persia, but are most closely associated with those from Khorassan, Kurdistan, Farahan, Hamadan, and Tabriz.

One more design, originated in Persia, is called **Boteh**. Its origins are extremely obscure, and there is still considerable debate as to whether it was first used in Persia or India. A. Jerrehian [6] suggests that it may have come to Persia via ancient Egypt as an ear of wheat, representing immortality. The **Boteh** motif is commonly used across the base of the prayer arch together with flowers as part of the symbol for the garden of paradise. In the green highland area of Seraband, located in the West-southwest of Persia, weavers seldom use any other pattern, so that the name Seraband has come to be used not only for pieces produced in this

region, but to describe the all-over **Boteh** design [7]. It derives its name from the Persian word for "a cluster of leaves" which it only partially resembles. Some researchers have suggested that it represents a stylized version of such diverse objects as a pine cone, a cypress tree, a leaf, a foetus, a male sperm and Zoroastrian flame [8]. We see the design in western tie, and there is no denying its international appeal.

Prayer rugs have been used in Muslim countries for centuries and are an integral part of the religious experience of the Islamic world. An orthodox Moslem is expected to pray 5 times a day on a clean spot facing the Holy city of Mecca. The design affords an extremely convenient way of ensuring that this direction is obeyed. In its simplest form the prayer rug is a rectangle design woven parallel to the edges of the rug. The most common version has its corners angled off at one end to form a pointed arch, a mihrab. Prayer rugs made by nomadic tribes or in small Persian villages often have centers which are either plain and undecorated or are filled with small stylized flowers and stars, or they may have a stylized tree of life, symbolic of the garden of paradise. According to Bosley, the **tree of life** represents eternal life [9]. This design is woven mainly in the towns of Isfahan, Qum and Tabriz where they produce remarkably lifelike trees. The trees grow from the base of the rug, starting just within its borders and continuing to fill the entire field. The leafy branches are spread and dotted with flowers and birds. Often there will be a stream or pool at the foot of the tree and, perhaps, a few small animals. The tree-of-life is based on one of the oldest and most universal of all religious and mythological symbols, pre-dating both Islam and Christianity [10]. References to a "tree-of-life" as the connecting link between the human and heavenly worlds are found in diverse cultures throughout Europe and Asia. In Islam it symbolizes the bridge between paradise, the world of men and the world above [11], and still retains a religious significance.

Vase is applied to a number of compositions using a vase or group of vases as the principal design element. The motif was probably introduced into Persia from China [12], where it had been used for centuries as a symbol of peace and tranquility and has subsequently been adapted intact by the Islamic weaver. It is a "one way" design, and the vase is shaped like a Grecian urn [13] which may or may not have handles. The vase is at the foot of the rug beneath an archway and is filled with flowers, usually with roses, with the tallest flower in the center reaching up towards the top of the arch — a variation of the tree-of-life design. Vase symbols generally are found in two forms, **Floral Vase** or **Zel-i Sultan**.

The depiction of people and animals is far less common in the East than it is in the West. **Pictorial** designs based on scenes taken from life, history, or mythology are largely confined to workshop rugs from Persia, in particular, Kerman, Tabriz, and Kashan. **Hunting design** features either human figures engaged in a formal hunt or predatory animals pursuing their prey and is frequently found in Qum and Isfahan rugs.

A **Medallion** design can be anything based around a dominant central form and is the most frequently encountered scheme in rugs. It is used in every conceivable shape and is perhaps the most popular single element in the Oriental rug repertoire. According to J. Summers [14], the center point of the medallion represents the eye of an all-

seeing deity. It is believed that the design is based on the lotus flower which has always been regarded as sacred, growing as it does with its roots in rank mud and its blossom turned to heaven.

Considering the theories concerning the origin of medallion, the solar symbols seem to be the earliest, together with certain zoomorphic signs. As D. Black believes [15], the traditional Asian ideas about the Universe seem to have developed quite naturally from simple observation. He argues that in very early times men, who watched the sun rise in the east and then pass overhead from east to west, acquired a sense of direction. Then, as they faced the rising sun at dawn with their arms outstretched in anticipation of a new day, the bilateral symmetry of their bodies would have made them aware of the other principal directions, north and south. This led to the drawing of cross-shaped designs to represent the four Directions and, by extension, the World itself. Then, later, when they thought of the four intermediate directions, the X upon the cross gradually developed into the symbol of an eight-petalled flower which has been used at the center of rug medallions to mark the focal point of Creation.

U. Schurmann [16] divided the medallions into two broad categories: medallion-and-corner and Amulet/medallion. **Medallion-and-corner** is sometimes referred to as the "book-cover" or Koran design evolved during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from leather covers used to bind the Koran [17]. This type of medallion was inspired by the inside of a mosque dome. **Amulet** possesses an overtly heraldic quality and appears to come from some ancient tribal emblem [18]. The Amulet Medallion is distinguished from medallion-and-corner schemes by the totemistic quality of the forms and frequent repetition of the dominant motif.

Following are the meanings of some of the symbols used in Persian rugs, meanings which have been passed down through thousands of years [19]:

The resting eagle — the high-mindedness of the spirit;
 The eagle in flight — good fortune;
 The hunting-dog — glory and honor;
 The leopard — bravery;
 The lion — power;
 The peacock — Divine protection;
 The phoenix — immortality;
 The sun — radiant light, lucidity;
 The tree of life — understating, truth;
 The blade of the sword — strength, virility;
 The heron — Divine grace;
 Feathers or entwined birds — conjugal happiness;
 The fish — undying love;
 The dove — peace;
 The camel — wealth, happiness;
 Cypress tree — life after death.

P. Liebetrau [20] suggests that many of these symbols may have held a particular meaning long ago, but, in all probability, they were simply meant to represent animals, flowers, fruits, and plants. The scholar further implies that with innumerable repetitions throughout the centuries, most of these motifs have lost any originally intended meaning they may have had. Each weaver changed them little by little to serve his/her own purpose. However, there are those, among the students of the symbolisms in Persian rugs, who take a different view.

Historians like Wilhelm von Bode [21] and Arthur Upham Pope [22], agree that the symbolism in rugs is almost unintelligible. As with all ideographics, the meanings contain variations and ambiguities. Each sign taken by itself can be translated after a fashion, but the association and combination of many of them, according to the mode in which they are set, is practically a lost language.

It should be added that nowadays a nomadic or a semi-nomadic weaver would tend to weave either what he/she sees, translating it into characteristic formats, or what he/she has been taught. The village weaver, on the other hand, typically weaves what is ordered, according to the cartoon. Each rug is a separate work of art and should be considered individually.

Notes

1. See *The Macmillan Atlas of Rugs and Carpets*, ed. D. Black (New York, 1985), pp. 26—41.
 2. J. Summers, *Oriental Rugs: The Illustrated Guide*, (New York, 1978), pp. 37—811.
 3. H. Haack, *Oriental Rugs: An Illustrated Guide* (London, 1960), pp. 32—9.
 4. L. Allane, *Oriental Rugs: A Buyers Guide* (New York, 1985), pp. 81—9.
 5. C. Bosley, *Rugs to Riches: An Insiders Guide to Oriental Rugs* (New York, 1980), pp. 68—77.
 6. A. K. Jr. Jerrchian, *Oriental Rug Primer* (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 37—8.
 7. See Bosley, *op. cit.*
 8. *Idem.*: U. Schurmann, *Oriental Carpets* (London, 1979), pp. 15, 27—8.
 9. See Bosley, *op. cit.*
 10. Allane, *op. cit.*
 11. See R. De Calatchi, *Oriental Carpets* (Secaucus, 1967).
 12. See Allane, *op. cit.*
 13. Bosley, *op. cit.*
 14. J. Summers, *Oriental Rugs: World Buyers' Guide* (New York, 1994), pp. 33—43.
 15. See *The Macmillan Atlas*.
 16. Schurmann, *op. cit.*
 17. Summers, *Oriental Rugs: World Buyers' Guide*.
 18. Schurmann, *op. cit.*
 19. De Calatchi, *op. cit.*; Summers, *op. cit.*; *The Macmillan Atlas*.
 20. P. Liebetrau, *Oriental Rugs in Colour* (New York, 1980), pp. 18—9.
 21. W. von Bode, *Antique Rugs from the Near East* (Braunschweig, 1958), pp. 81—2.
 22. A. U. Pope, *A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (London—New York, 1938), iv, pp. 112—3.
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