



# BESTOWING BEAUTY

Masterpieces from Persian Lands — Selections from the Hossein Afshar Collection

Edited by Aimée Froom

With essays by Walter B. Denny, Aimée Froom, Melanie Gibson, and David J. Roxburgh  
and contributions by Robert Hillenbrand, Mary McWilliams, Janet O'Brien, Marianna Shreve Simpson,  
Eleanor Sims, Margaret Squires, and Julie Timte

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Distributed by Yale University Press  
New Haven and London



## Contents

FOREWORD	9
Gary Tinterow	
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	II
Aimée Froom	
NOTE TO THE READER	13
MAP	14
INTRODUCTION	17
Aimée Froom	
<hr/>	
The Art of Writing and Its Collection in the Islamic Lands	22
David J. Roxburgh	
Ceramic Production in Iran: Style and Innovation	28
Melanie Gibson	
Textile Art and Artistic Commerce in Seventeenth-Century Iran	34
Walter B. Denny	
<hr/>	
SELECTIONS FROM THE COLLECTION	43
I. Faith and Piety	45
II. Art of the Word	73
III. Love and Longing	107
IV. Banquets and Battles	143
V. Kingship and Authority	207
VI. Earth and Nature	245
<hr/>	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	283
GLOSSARY	295
INDEX	296
PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS	304

# TEXTILE ART AND ARTISTIC COMMERCE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY IRAN

Walter B. Denny

The culture, society, and economy of Safavid Iran in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century were in many ways mirrors of the complexities of its ruler Shah 'Abbas I. He was at once a patron of the arts, and yet a paranoid murderer of his own children; military planner and diplomatic architect of foreign alliances, and yet a sybarite in a court of decidedly un-Islamic pleasures, including music, dancing, and the drinking of wine; an extravagant builder of expensive monuments and lavish giver of gifts, and yet an economic strategist who sought new markets and trade routes for Persian goods. All these apparent contradictions are to one extent or another reflected in the artistic record of a remarkable man, whose patronage legacy was continued by his seventeenth-century successors. The Hossein Afshar Collection offers us a number of perspectives on the luxury arts of this time, and on their destiny as artistic commodities, since many of the examples are works of art intended or destined to be sold and bought, often again and again over their subsequent history.

Iran's strategic position in the Middle East had depended to a crucial extent on commerce in silk for well over a century and a half before 'Abbas I took the throne. Geography posed a cruel dilemma for Iran: it provided in the mulberry groves of the southern Caspian littoral some of the best silk in the world, much in demand in wealthy European countries with an abundance of gold and silver with which to buy it. But positioned between producer and market was the Sunni Ottoman Empire, not only a strategic and religious competitor of Shi'i Iran, but an economic competitor as well. The traditional overland route taken by Iranian silk to European markets led either through

Anatolia to Ottoman Bursa, which from the fifteenth century onward was a principal entrepôt between the East and West, or via a more southerly path toward Aleppo in Mamluk Syria, part of the Ottoman Empire after 1516.<sup>1</sup>

Taxation of silk commerce was a major source of governmental revenue in both the Middle East and Europe in the early modern period. Especially in the Islamic world, taxing silk was a significant source of governmental income, while at the same time appearing to be an act of religious piety, a "sin tax" not unlike today's taxes on alcohol, perfume, tobacco, and other luxury goods; had not the Prophet himself declared that "he who wears silk in this world will not enjoy it in the next?"<sup>2</sup>

Silk commerce involved the commodity in various stages of development. Cocoons harvested from mulberry trees constitute the basic product; the fiber is coated with sericin, a gummy substance that actually protects the cocoon's single filament. Silk with sericin is termed "raw silk"; degumming silk is a process that usually occurs before dyeing. Cocoons were a staple of silk commerce, especially in the east-west trade between Iran and the Ottoman Empire. The next stage, filature, involves the reeling of fibers from multiple cocoons to combine them into a raw silk thread. Since spinning—a process that turns short cotton, wool, or linen fibers into long threads or yarns—is not necessary (each cocoon contains a single filament up to three thousand feet in length), only a modicum of twisting of multiple filaments is sufficient to create a self-contained silk thread. Silk thread—raw or degummed, dyed or undyed—is easier to transport than cocoons, especially after the gum is removed. Dyed silk thread is yet a more valuable product, and finally silk



FIG. 1. *The "King Umberto II Polonaise" Carpet* (detail, cat. 77), Iran, probably Isfahan or Kashan, early 17th century, cotton warp and weft, silk weft and pile, with metal-wrapped thread; asymmetrically knotted open to the left, The Hossein Afshar Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

textiles—yard goods—woven from dyed silk threads represent both the technological and the artistic summit of the process of fabric creation. The final destination of silk fabric, of course, is the crafting of fabric into furnishings—pillows, curtains, hangings, upholstery—and costume. The vast majority of silk fabric exports from both the Ottoman Empire and Iran appears to have consisted of one-color satins, maximally adaptable to foreign fashions, but without any decoration, either woven, printed, or embroidered (and consequently both anonymous and unrepresented in museum collections except when turned into costume or furnishings). Each stage in the process and addition to the product results in a higher value, a higher price, and, notionally, higher profits. The paradox, however, is that for silk-producing areas such as Iran, while the component parts of the process provided enrichment for the local economy in the form of wages, sales revenues, and what is in effect an early form of value-added taxation, the versatility of the product in terms of end use and marketability often appears to have diminished simultaneously.

Woven fabrics reflect local and temporal tastes and fashions, which are notoriously prone to change; finished garments have an even more ephemeral appeal. And those who controlled the shipment of the product at any stage (remember that sea commerce in seventeenth-century Iran relied very heavily on European companies for shipping, while land routes often ran through hostile territory) were in a position to take a very large share of the profit to be made. Furthermore, from later medieval times onward, Europeans had both the economic incentive and the technical means—drawloom technology—to create their own woven products out of raw silk or undyed silk thread sourced from west Asia.

Competition over the significant governmental revenues to be had from taxing silk commerce was a continual source of friction between Ottomans and Iranians; in the second half of the fifteenth century the Ottomans and their Iranian neighbors to the east, the Aq Quyunlu Turkmen, repeatedly clashed over the taxing of silk in eastern Anatolia, fighting over control of the important weighbridge (a customs post where silk in transit was taxed based on its weight) at the city of Tokat.<sup>3</sup> In the early sixteenth century the obsessive anti-Shi'ism of the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (r. 1504–20) led to the bloody and destructive Ottoman-Safavid conflict, including the sacking of the Safavid capital of Tabriz. Selim confiscated the property of Iranian silk merchants residing in Bursa, and his incorporation of the Mamluk domains into the Ottoman empire created difficulties on the southern silk route through Aleppo. The unintended consequences of Selim's zeal for conquest were profound: in scourging Safavid Iran he all but destroyed the silk commerce that was a major source of his government's tax revenue. Shortly after Selim's death in 1520, his son Süleyman I (r. 1520–66) moved quickly to restore the confiscated property of the Persian merchants in Bursa so that the revenue stream from taxation of silk and the profits of Bursa silk merchants might be restored, at least until the next Persian war that ensued in 1537.<sup>4</sup>

## Shah 'Abbas: The Man in the Middle

By the late sixteenth century, the Iran of Shah 'Abbas had two large and powerful neighbors, both of them adherents of the majority Sunni or "orthodox" branch of Islamic belief, which

held that in the Islamic community legitimate rulership could be exercised without regard to a ruler's descent from the Prophet. To the west was the Ottoman Empire, a major power on three continents, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Its periodic invasions of Iran were a major factor in the decision to move the seat of Safavid rule first east (to Qazvin) and then south (to Isfahan) away from the Ottoman danger. To the east, the Mughal Empire was rapidly expanding, first under Akbar the Great (r. 1556–1605) and then his son Jahangir (r. 1605–27), and often came into military conflict with the Safavids in the lands between them. For these neighbors, the Twelver Shi'ism of Persia, which posited that a legitimate ruler must be a bloodline descendant of the Prophet, constituted nothing short of heresy.

Shah 'Abbas and his successors were therefore in what military historians term a potential two-front situation, vulnerable to attack on military, religious, and economic grounds from both east and west; at the same time, the location between two enormously powerful and prosperous neighbors had great potential for trade and economic prosperity. On the east, various political accommodations were more easily made than on the west; the major economic headache for any Safavid king was the problem of the Ottomans, both as a military and as an economic competitor.

Like most economies of the time, Iran's was based on silver coinage, used to pay bureaucrats and soldiers and to build monuments and infrastructure. By 1600 the major source of silver worldwide was mines in the New World, which poured their riches into western Europe. To tap into this stream of silver, Iran needed to provide luxury goods in exchange. Shah 'Abbas realized that silk textiles provided the most promising means of trade for silver and that European markets were therefore necessary for Iranian goods. Expertise in overland silk trading was near at hand in the Armenian merchant community settled in New Julfa, directly across the river from Isfahan.<sup>5</sup>

Into all of this native complexity was injected a second element of importance—the arrival of skilled European seafarers. First came the Portuguese, then the Dutch and English, arriving in force in the Indian Ocean after the initial discovery by the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama of the route east around the southern tip of Africa after 1497. European traders, setting up “factories”—trading posts—in Iran, India, and Indonesia, opened up new markets for Persian silk not only in Europe but to the east as well. The Dutch, for example, sold Persian silk in southeast Asia, through their great trading post of Batavia (today Jakarta) in the Indonesian archipelago.<sup>6</sup> The economic potential inherent in trade with Europe, newly rich and always a voracious consumer of spices, dyestuffs, and luxury goods, promised vast profits to be made in luxury goods—chief among them silk textiles, with carpets also highly prominent. This potential hinged on finding ways to get the goods to market

without subjecting them to confiscation or crippling taxation by the Ottomans, whose empire stood between Iran and Europe, and according to shifts in the political winds which could at any time be a huge barrier to trade.

Two options, on the surface at least, looked promising. A northern export path from Iran through Russia, a longtime enemy of the Ottomans and a rich potential market for silk goods, was one alternative. The other was the maritime route around the Cape of Good Hope, using European vessels and companies to carry silk to European markets. In order for these alternatives to succeed, major diplomatic initiatives on the part of Persia were required. And in those times, the heavy weapons of a diplomatic offensive were gifts in the form of luxury goods.<sup>7</sup> As European demand took an increasingly larger role in the Safavid economy, European merchants arrived in significant numbers in Iran, usually to take part in the luxury trade, whether textiles, jewelry, or high-end ceremonial goods such as weaponry, saddles, and animal trappings. Luxury art could serve governmental aims in three ways: in royal courts, it played an essential role in the conspicuous consumption that was a major element of royal propaganda and the projection of royal power; it could be sold for gold and silver, a primary economic purpose of any luxury art at the time; and it could also help to cement political alliances in the form of diplomatic gifts. In earlier times, and especially in royal political systems, the giving and receiving of opulent gifts between foreign powers was a normal part of diplomacy; a recent exhibition, *Gifts of the Sultan*, focused on this phenomenon in the Islamic world.<sup>8</sup>

### Safavid Trade and Market Options in the West

The exhibition *Interwoven Globe* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, along with its excellent scholarly catalogue, helps us to understand the particular importance of luxury textiles, and also of more ordinary fabrics, as the mainstay of international commerce, even well in to the industrial age.<sup>9</sup> Since the invention of the power loom drastically lowered the price of textile production and evened the playing field for this production among countries around the world, we have lost our sense of the importance that woven products once had as titans of international markets. The Safavids faced a complex array of potential customers and competitors in markets where economics, politics, and religion all influenced textile production, trade, and use.

Russia, a country without silk-weaving capabilities but also, by the middle of the sixteenth century under Ivan IV (“The Terrible,” r. 1547–84) a major market for silk textiles, was both a traditional enemy of the Ottomans, but also an avid consumer of Ottoman luxury products; the northern or Russian option appeared at first to be an attractive route to get Iranian silk to

Russian as well as to central and western European markets. Persian silk garments surviving in the Kremlin museums appear to indicate that the tsars were the recipients of Persian royal gifts from at least as early as the mid-sixteenth century, and this tradition continued well into the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup>

Persian relations with Poland to the west of Russia were, like those with Russia, built on the oldest of tactical principles: “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Carpet-weaving workshops apparently founded by Shah 'Abbas flourished under royal control in seventeenth-century Persia, producing among others a luxurious group of carpets with a silk pile and areas of brocading in silver and silver-gilt thread. These flashy and expensive items, apparently created primarily to be given away as royal gifts, were eventually termed “Polonaise” carpets, due to the fact that some incorporated what appear to be Persian versions of Polish coats of arms and were evidently given as gifts from the shah to his Polish allies.<sup>11</sup> Similar carpets were much in favor in France during the beginning of the reign of Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715). A particularly handsome example from the “Polonaise” group has come down to us in the Hossein Afshar Collection (fig. 1, cat. 77).

But why did the Persians develop this particularly close relationship with Poland? A look at the seventeenth-century political map provides us with the answer. In the seventeenth century the elective monarchy of Poland had brought the country to military prominence in eastern Europe, where the Poles were major adversaries of the Ottomans and served as a check on Ottoman expansion. It was a Polish army under King John Sobieski that in 1683 mounted a surprise attack on the Ottoman camp during the Ottoman siege of Vienna, resulting in a rout that by 1701 had driven the Ottomans back into the Balkans. Polish court culture was strongly influenced by both Ottoman and Persian luxury goods; evidence from Polish collections, as well as from documents and Polish paintings, shows us the impact of Islamic luxury goods on Polish furnishings, textiles, and costume.

Examples of the woven silk *kontusz* or “Polish sash,” an essential aspect of Polish upper-class male costume in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were created for Polish markets in Poland itself, in Ottoman Istanbul by Armenian silk-weavers, as well as in Persia (fig. 2).<sup>12</sup> This underscores an important fact: luxury goods in Europe in Baroque times, both in raw materials and in terms of finished craftsmanship, were, then as now, produced across a wide spectrum of sources for an equally wide spectrum of markets. In the eyes of a Polish nobleman whose essential “Polishness,” as well as his noble status, were expressed by wearing an article of clothing either woven in Ottoman Constantinople by Armenian craftsmen or in Safavid Persia by Iranian or Armenian artisans, there was no more apparent irony than there is today in the ubiquity of Louis XV-style furniture in palaces throughout the Middle East.



FIG. 2. *Kontusz Polish Costume Sash* (detail), Iran, 17th century, silk, silver and gilt metal-wrapped thread; taqueté, brocaded, gift of George D. Pratt, 1933, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 33.80.18.

For centuries Iran had commercial connections with Venice. Marco Polo passed through Persia in the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century, under the rule of the Ilkhanid Mongols and their successors, Iran was the source of impressive silk fabrics, a few of which have survived in European collections as liturgical vestments or burial goods.<sup>13</sup> The Timurids and their successors in fifteenth-century Iran continued patronage of lavish silk fabrics; the few surviving examples of woven textiles and embroideries are of impressive artistic and technical quality.<sup>14</sup> Later in the fifteenth century, Josafa Barbaro, a shrewd merchant-diplomat from Venice and an acute observer, visited the court of the Aq Quyunlu (“White Sheep”) Turkmen ruler in Tabriz and commented on the high quality of luxury goods he found there.<sup>15</sup>

Safavid relations with Venice were unusually complex, as the Venetians were either at war with the Ottomans or attempting to patch things up with the Ottomans from the fifteenth century onward. Periodic sixteenth-century Venetian-Safavid diplomatic and commercial interchange has recently been the



FIG. 3. Rene Antoine Houasse, *The Golden Vessel of Louis XIV and Vases on a Carpet-Covered Balustrade*, from the ceiling of the Salon d'Abondance, 1638, Chateaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, France, Inv. 5374.

subject of an exhibition in Venice, *I Doni di Shah 'Abbas il Grande alla Serenissima*, showcasing various Safavid luxury items of high quality and artistic interest given by Shah 'Abbas to Venice that have survived in Venetian collections.<sup>16</sup> It is apparent that from the later fifteenth century onward, the canny and sophisticated Venetians were well aware of the scope and quality of Safavid artistic goods, and did not shy away from comparing them, usually quite favorably, to goods from the Ottoman and Mamluk domains. Another exhibition, with a wider chronological and geographical view, *Venice and the Islamic World, 828–1797* has helped to shed a good deal of light on Venice's role as entrepôt between East and West.<sup>17</sup>

The flashy and luxurious “Polonaise” carpets were admired in Europe beyond Poland. They were well-enough known in mid-seventeenth-century France to be incorporated into the painted wall and ceiling decoration of the Palace of Versailles as recognizable symbols of French royal opulence (fig. 3), and Louis XIV himself was depicted surrounded by such luxury objects by his court painter Charles Le Brun (fig. 4). A number of Safavid ambassadorial visits to Europe over the seventeenth century resulted in a strengthening of European interest in Persian luxury goods, as well as various types of literary attention. From 1599 to 1602, an embassy sent by Shah 'Abbas, with the purpose of concluding an anti-Ottoman alliance, reached Moscow, Prague, Munich, and Madrid. Between 1609 and 1615, another embassy, in which the Shah was represented by the Englishman Robert Shirley, led eventually to a 1616 Persian commercial accord with the British East India company. Much later, the ambassador Mohammad Riza Beg, accompanied by a large group of retainers, visited the aged Louis XIV at Versailles in 1715; the visit eventually resulted in the establishment of a Safavid consulate in Marseilles. The seventeenth-century contacts with Venice included lavish gifts.<sup>18</sup>

### Beyond “Polonaise” Carpets: The Range of Persian Exports in the Seventeenth Century

In addition to “Polonaise” carpets, other categories of seventeenth-century Persian carpets were much in demand in the West, and their importance is extensively documented in European portrait and genre paintings, where carpets served as indicators of their owners' wealth, power, high level of education, and good taste (fig. 5).<sup>19</sup> One group of carpets, long called “Indo-Persian” due to uncertainty about their place of manufacture,<sup>20</sup> was produced commercially in enormous quantities, and examples frequently appear in European paintings, especially in Dutch genre paintings and interiors of the seventeenth century. Another group of carpets, also produced commercially but today regarded as being of higher technical and artistic quality and importance, came from manufactories located in or near Kirman in central Persia.<sup>21</sup> Kirman carpets of this time were woven in an unusual and specific technique, and it is this technique, rather than any specific designs, that scholars use to attribute carpets to seventeenth-century Kirman. The carpets themselves acquired the name of “vase” carpets because one important group utilized an overall pattern composed of diapered vines and floral palmettes punctuated at intervals by the depiction of tiny vases of flowers. A splendid example of this eponymous group, incorporating this typical “vase carpet” design that gave the broader group its name, is included in the Hossein Afshar Collection (TR:847-2015). It exhibits the fine weave, wide range of colors, and densely packed wefts characteristic of Kirman weaving.

Iranian embroidery has always had a high reputation, and under the Safavids reached new heights in both technical achievement and artistic expression. It is for the most part unclear to what extent these extremely fragile works, which, unlike carpets and bolts of silk from the loom, were less readily adaptable to European use and customs, formed part of international commerce in earlier times. For example, in Safavid and Ottoman courts it was often the custom in the summer to replace heavy wool-pile carpets with lighter and more fragile embroidered floor coverings made with heavily embroidered silk and metallic thread. An especially interesting example in the Hossein Afshar Collection (fig. 6), echoing the design of a pile carpet with its central medallion and contrasting border, shows us a category of luxury object that may have found its way to Europe, only to have disappeared through use over the centuries.

Nostalgia for the glorious artistic accomplishments of sixteenth-century Safavid Iran is manifested over the course of the seventeenth century in works of art that appear to evoke the style and imagery from the earlier period. A particularly interesting example of this may be seen in a splendid carpet

from the Hossein Afshar Collection that incorporates an overall pattern composed of what are in effect “quotations” or direct historical references to animal depictions taken from sixteenth-century Safavid carpets (cat. 97). We should probably not make too much of the unique aspects of this particular carpet among surviving examples. Given the vicissitudes of Middle Eastern history and the perishability of silk and wool, the Persian carpets we know today probably constitute a tiny fraction of those originally produced, and it is possible that, along with countless individual examples, entire groups of carpets may have vanished altogether.

Silk fabrics for furnishings or clothing were even more fragile, and during the later seventeenth century the marketing of Persian silk fabrics, as well as that of Persian carpets, began to encounter a new phenomenon that may have diminished their attractiveness to European consumers. This was the emergence of a distinctive Europe-wide royal and aristocratic taste, largely reflecting the *grand goût* fostered by the French monarchy and epitomized in the architecture, art, and furnishings of

Versailles. It is quite significant that French paintings of the mid-seventeenth century document the extensive presence of Persian luxury goods at the French court, while toward the end of the century the native French manufactories of carpets (at Savonnerie) and silk fabrics (at the Gobelins Manufactory in Paris and in the French silk-weaving center of Lyon) became more fashionable, apparently at the expense of foreign goods. Since silk fabrics were employed in the artistic medium most affected by the fickle and unpredictable tides of taste and fashion—*haute couture* or luxury clothing—they appear to have been even more susceptible to the vagaries of a volatile market.

Added to this was the emergence of India and even of the Indonesian archipelago as competitors in the European luxury goods market, as first the Portuguese and later the Dutch East India Company began to bring quantities of luxury goods to Europe and even to North America.<sup>22</sup> The movement of Persian artists to India under the Mughal Empire created complex stylistic and artistic interchanges. Cheaper Indian carpets from the Deccan were brought in significant numbers by the Dutch to

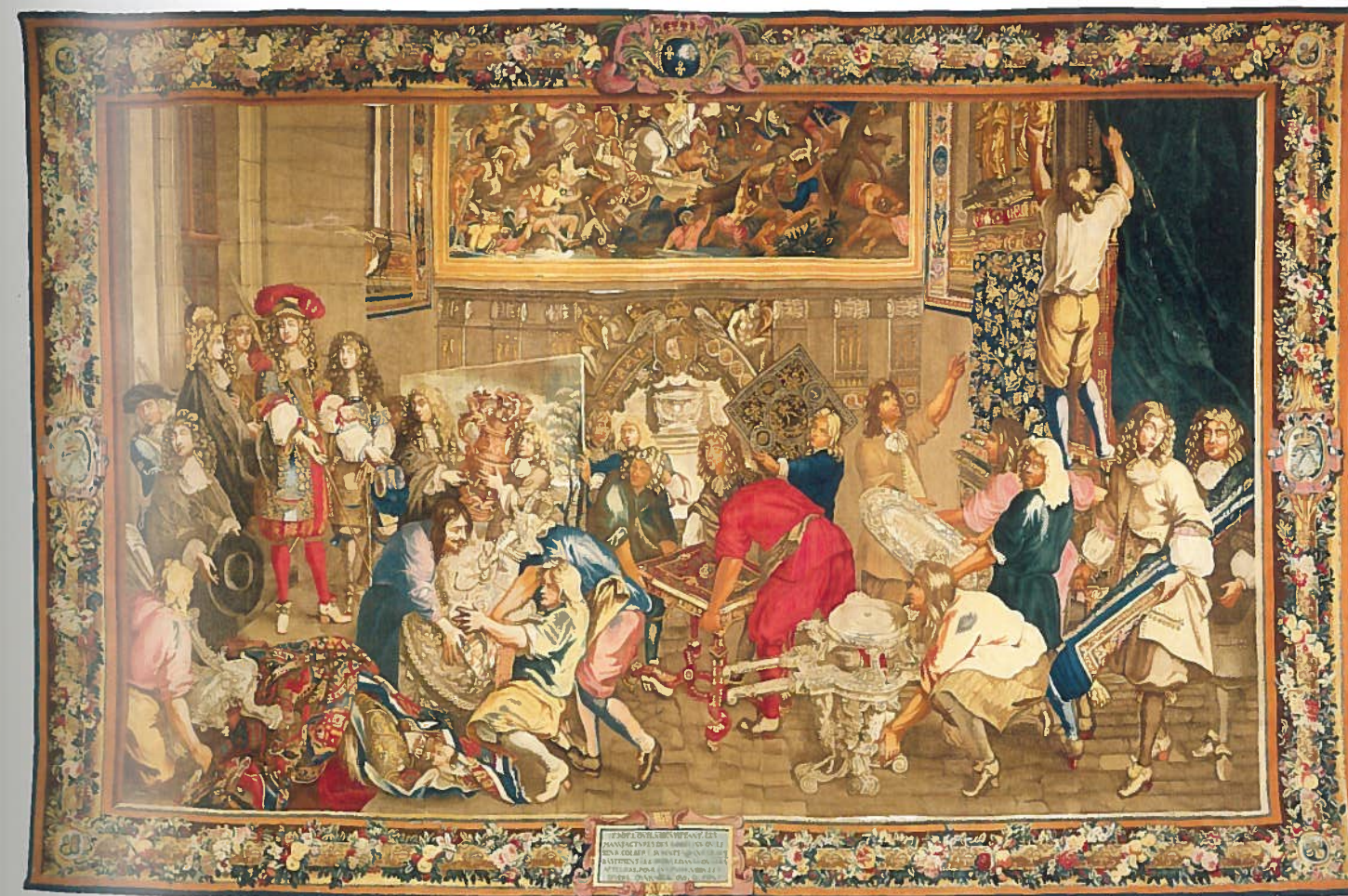


FIG. 4. Studio of Leblond, after Charles Le Brun, *Visit of Louis XIV to the Gobelins Workshop, October 15, 1667*, from *The Series of the History of the King, 1729–34*, Chateaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, France, Vmb14197, GMTT9810, V38412.



FIG. 5. Philippe de Champaigne, *Omer Talon*, 1649, oil on canvas, Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1952.5.35.

Holland (where they were depicted in paintings, but apparently not a single example has survived) and to Japan (where a number of important pieces have survived intact into our own time).<sup>23</sup> And Persian techniques were adopted in India to the extent that scholars today are often uncertain as to whether particular silk fabrics are Persian or Indian in manufacture. Today we believe we can identify “Persianate” carpets woven in India in Persian style,<sup>24</sup> and, as mentioned, the “Indo-Persian” group of carpets has, for the time being, been assigned to Iran.<sup>25</sup> For silk textiles utilizing small motifs in repeat on a satin ground, the situation is far more complex. Apparently there are differences in satin fabrics between the two weaving areas: patterns of what are termed “binding warps” that experts can determine under a microscope. Analysis of metallic thread in Safavid and Mughal velvets has resulted in some defining characteristics of each group.<sup>26</sup>

We have ample evidence of silks, carpets, and ceramics from Iran (not to mention Chinese ceramics) reaching Europe through Portuguese shipping (and later through the Dutch East India

Company), but for various reasons the commerce never quite reached the desired levels.<sup>27</sup> The decline of Portugal as a maritime power, the waning of Iranian luxury goods production after the fall of the Safavid dynasty in 1722, and finally the emergence of the hegemony of French *grand goût* as the Europe-wide standard for royal luxury-goods by the end of the seventeenth century all appear to have contributed to the gradual diminution of the appeal of Persian luxury goods in European markets.

The rise of competitive European production in other media provides yet another reason for the weakening of Persian exports to Europe. Ceramics from seventeenth-century Iran, including blue-and-white wares in Chinese style (cats. 52–55, 71, and 73), enjoyed a vogue in parts of Europe during the Baroque period, but the production of European tableware and decorative tiles such as those produced in Valencia or in Delft eventually proved more flexible in adapting to European needs. After 1708, when the longtime puzzle of making hard-paste porcelain was finally solved by Dr. Böttger at Meissen, there was apparently little demand left in European courts for the ceramic products of the Middle East.

### From Luxury Commodities to Artistic Icons

It is quite likely that the vast majority of Persian goods exported to Europe in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries no longer exist, since they were executed in fragile media or were meant to be used—and eventually worn out—in daily life. Indeed, entire categories of goods from the East, documented in European paintings, apparently vanished entirely in Europe. By the later nineteenth century, as museums of what were sometimes called “decorative arts” were established throughout Europe, ceramics, metalware, carving, jewelry, carpets, and textiles from the Islamic world acquired new respect and new admirers and were collected as works to be exhibited in private homes and art museums. Today we would no longer consider walking on a silk-and-gold Persian carpet or eating from an elegant blue-and-white Safavid *chinoiserie* bowl. Always expensive, and now extremely rare, these iconic works have acquired new artistic respect proportionate to their scarcity as well as responsive to their consummate beauty and artistry. It is primarily to informed private collecting that we owe the survival of these old masterpieces; institutions often lack the access, agility, and financial means necessary in a complex and unpredictable marketplace to acquire great works such as those in the Hossein Afshar Collection. We are therefore doubly fortunate to enjoy this collection both as a scholarly resource and as a delight both to the eye and the intellect. Rare survivors of complex commercial journeys, political vicissitudes, and market transactions, these extraordinary works of art remind us that our world has

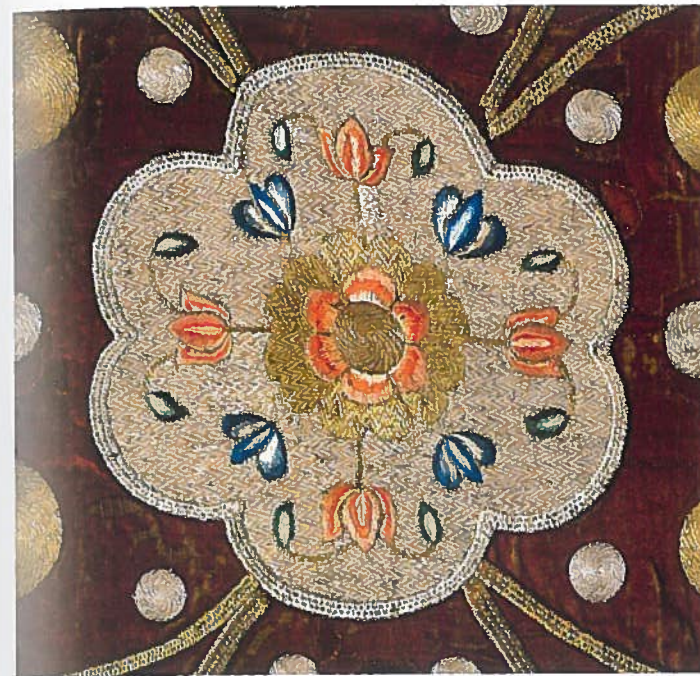


FIG. 6. *Textile* (detail, cat. 34), Iran, probably 17th–18th century, silk velvet; embroidered with silk and metal-wrapped threads, The Hossein Afshar Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

long been a very small and interconnected planet, an “interwoven globe” where beautiful things underwent widespread distribution on the highways and byways of conquest, commerce, gift-giving, and the art market.

1. See İnalçık 2011, pp. 210–18 (Tabriz-Bursa silk road) and 218–24 (Tabriz-Aleppo transit road).
2. See “Harir” (“Silk”) in Fleet et al. 2007.
3. Discussed in some detail in Atasoy et al. 2001, pp. 155–57; see also İnalçık 2011, pp. 225–27 (Silk and Ottoman/Persian political and economic rivalry).
4. Ibid.
5. Mathee 1999 sets out in detail the problems, structures, and implications of this situation for Iranian commerce in the time of Shah ‘Abbas and his successors. Marika Sardar gives a good general overview of the Ottoman and Safavid efforts to obtain silver through the European trade in silk. See Sardar, “Silk Along the Seas: Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran in the Global Textile Trade,” in Peck 2013. See also Denny 2017 for a broader discussion of silk textile commerce, and Willem Floor, “Economy and Society: Fibers, Fabrics, Factories,” in Bier 1987, for the economic significance of textiles in Iran. Linda K. Steinmann offers a general overview of silk commerce under Shah ‘Abbas. See Steinmann, “Sericulture and Silk: Production, Trade and Export under Shah Abbas,” in Bier 1987. The parallel situation for the Ottomans is discussed most recently by Amanda Phillips, “The Localization of the Global: Ottoman Silk Textiles and Markets 1500–1700,” in Schäfer et al. 2018.
6. Rudolph Mathee describes the “other direction” of silk trade eastward toward east and south Asia. See Mathee, “The Dutch East India Company and Asian Raw Silk: From Iran to Bengal via China and Vietnam,” in Schäfer et al. 2018.
7. Gagliardi 2013 deals in particular with a well-documented group of luxury gifts sent by ‘Abbas I to Venice. See also Rota 2009.
8. Komaroff 2011, the catalogue of a splendid exhibition, deals in detail with gift-giving culture in Islamic courts.
9. Peck 2013.
10. Vishnevskaya 2009; see also Atasoy et al. 2001, pp. 176–81.

11. Spuhler 1968 is the classic study of “Polonaise” carpets. The most important recent publication is the chapter on seventeenth-century Iran in Thompson 2006, pp. 197–223.
12. The most recent, technically focused, exhaustive, and important study of all three groups of *kontusz* sashes—Polish, Constantinople, and Iranian (probably Kashan)—is the as-yet-unpublished doctoral dissertation shortly to be presented to Nicholas Copernicus University in Torun, Poland, by Janina Poskrobko, head of the Department of Textile Conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. See also Jasienski 2014 and Beata Biedronska-Slota, “Persian Sashes Preserved in Polish Collections,” in Thompson et al. 2010.
13. See Carboni 2007, p. 320, for a recent reference to the best-known fourteenth-century Ilkhanid textile from the tomb of Cangrande della Scala in Verona.
14. Lentz and Lowry 1989, especially pp. 216–19, and Mackie 2015.
15. The text of Barbaro’s letter may be found in Barbaro and Contarini 1973. A discussion of the “Tabriz question” may be found in Thompson 2006, pp. 104–9 and 124–49. See also Walter B. Denny, “Anatolia, Tabriz, and the Carpet Design Revolution,” in Thompson et al. 2010.
16. Gagliardi 2013.
17. Carboni 2007.
18. A good background to the “artistic politics” of Iran under Shah ‘Abbas is found in Canby 2007. The European embassies have been covered extensively in recent publications, among them Rota 2009.
19. See especially Erdmann 1962 and King and Sylvester 1983. A long series of articles by John Mills appearing in *Hali* deals with the appearance in European paintings of various types of Islamic carpets. The most detailed study involves one area, the Netherlands. See Ydema 1991.
20. Thompson 2006, p. 214, again gives the most recent state of knowledge about the so-called Indo group.
21. Beattie 1976, an exhibition catalogue, contains the most important formulation of the current view on “vase-technique” carpets.
22. See Krohn and Miller 2009 and Rudolph Mathee, “The Dutch East India Company and Asian Raw Silk: From Iran to Bengal via China and Vietnam,” in Schäfer et al. 2018.
23. The “unknown group” problem was set out by Scheunemann (Scheunemann 1959) and resurfaced in the exhibition *Flowers Underfoot* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see Walker 1997, pp. 136–46). Yumiko Kamada’s PhD dissertation (Kamada 2011) solves the riddle of this group of carpets by looking at surviving examples in Japan.
24. See Denny 2012, on the “Trinitarias Carpet” now in Melbourne.
25. Thompson 2006, as cited in note 20 *supra*.
26. See Shibayama et al. 2015 and “Indian or Iranian?” in Mackie 2015, pp. 426–27.
27. The probable causes of the decline in luxury goods trade with Iran discussed here are legion: the distance of Iran from European markets and the intervening Ottoman geographical position; the cost of Iranian goods compared to the sometimes cheaper Ottoman and Indian products, especially carpets; European economic policies that stressed selling goods to the Iranians over buying goods from the Iranians; traditions of production of Iranian carpets in large sizes mainly suitable for floor use, in contrast to the small Ottoman carpets better suited for European tabletop use in seventeenth-century bourgeois dwellings; changes in European taste in the later reign of Louis XIV and the subsequent collapse of Safavid power at the same time that the French rococo Louis XV style gained predominance in Europe; Ottoman political and military decline and growing European economic influence over the Ottomans after 1700 removing the sharp necessity of cultivating through long-distance trade a counter-Ottoman force in the east. Sardar (in Peck 2013) reinforces many of these arguments, while the economics of Iranian trade with Europe is set in stark relief by Mathee’s numerous publications on the subject. Papers presented at two recent symposia, “The Idea of Iran: The Second Safavid Century” (May 11, 2019, SOAS, London) and The HALI London Symposia (June 25–26, Courtauld Institute of Art and the National Gallery of Art, London) make it clear that there is much research in progress and new light about to be shed on the questions raised here.

### 34. Textile

Iran, probably 17th–18th century

Silk velvet; embroidered with silk and metal-wrapped threads

39 3/8 × 27 5/8 inches (100 × 70 cm)

TR:1474-2015

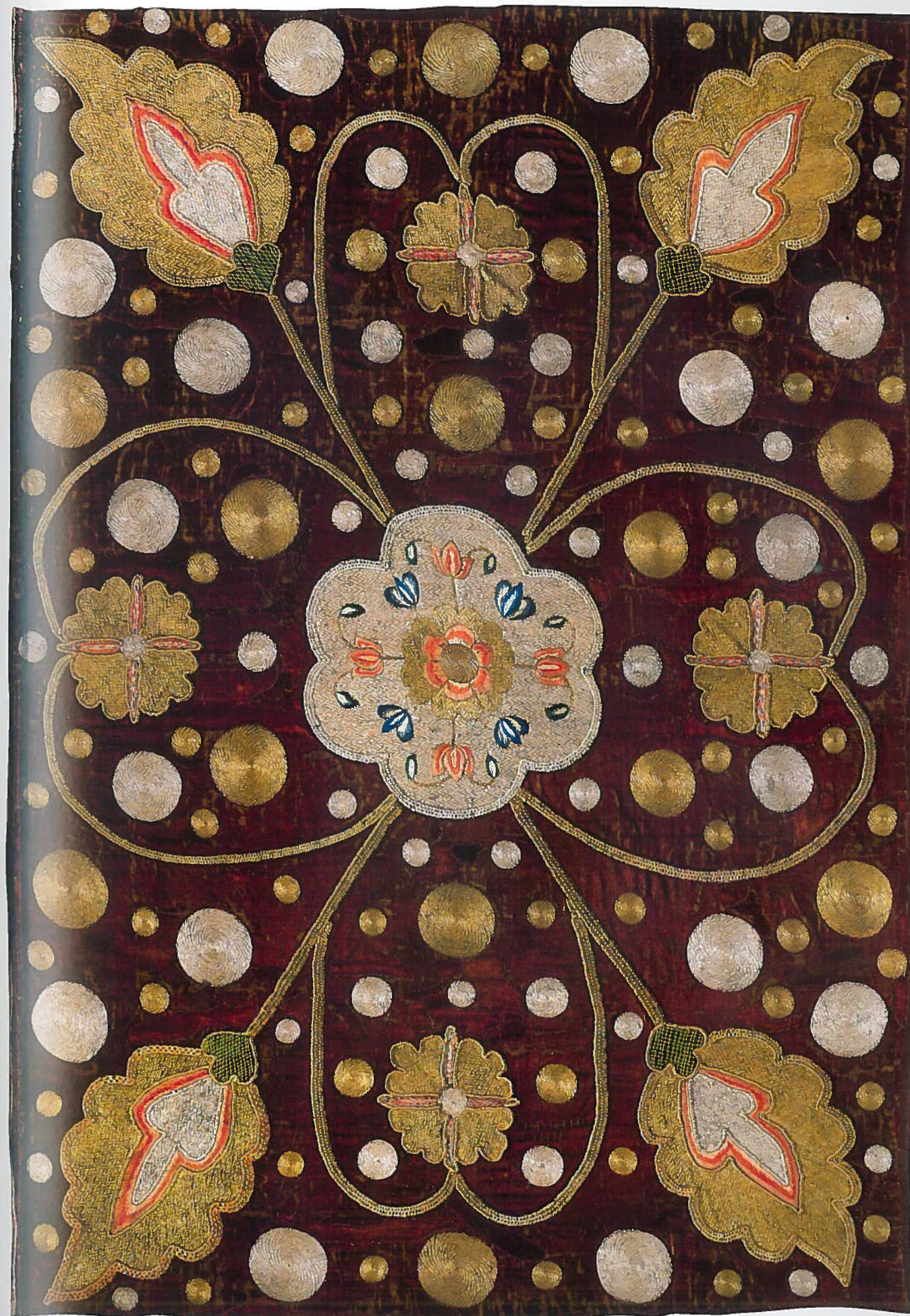
A fairly substantial number of beautiful textiles with various kinds of figural designs have survived from Safavid times; however, these works probably represent only a tiny fraction of the vast production that constituted such an important part of Iranian commerce during this era. The bulk of the output, consisting of Iranian monochrome satins and silk velvets that were frequently shipped abroad, may have ended up in European costumes, where their Iranian origins would have been lost amid European embroidery and tailoring, and, like most costume and furnishing fabrics, they were eventually worn out and discarded. Fabrics that remained and were used in Iran itself are even rarer and all the more to be prized.

This panel may have been a commercial product issuing from an urban workshop and created by male needleworkers, but due to its small size and specific shape, it is more likely to have been a domestic embroidery produced by women in a wealthy Iranian home. Just as wool-spinning and carpet-weaving were gender-specific tasks in villages and nomadic encampments across the Middle East, embroidery—needlework in fine silk and metal-wrapped thread—was a middle- and upper-class activity of women in many different Islamic societies. While a huge trove of domestic embroidery has survived from Ottoman Turkey, works such as this one from Iran are comparatively rare. It has probably been altered slightly from its original size and shape through

the ravages of time and restoration but appears to retain almost all of its original artistic impact.

The predominating technique used here, mostly to define linear elements, is known as a chain or running stitch. The artist has used other embroidery stitches to simulate the effect of woven satin, while still others create a miniscule grid pattern. Sometimes the metallic thread does not actually penetrate the velvet ground but is instead attached to the silk velvet ground fabric by other silk threads, a process known as couching. When embroidering with a needle on a white ground fabric, it was a common procedure for the artist to sketch the outlines of the layout with ink on the white ground. Working with more costly silk velvet required a good deal more confidence and skill on the part of the embroiderer.

The design and layout we see here is typical of domestic embroidery in its mixture of traditional design principles (the centralized bilateral symmetry, large leaf motifs, and six-lobed medallion) and fanciful flights of the artist's imagination, especially the dozens of shiny round coin-like, metal-thread disks of silver and gold in small, medium, and large sizes. The result is as much a delight to the eye today as it must have been when its creator first showed the finished work to her friends and family. WBD



57. Embroidered Panel  
Probably Iran, 17th century

Velvet, cotton, and metal-wrapped thread  
67 × 138 7/8 inches (170.2 × 325.8 cm)  
TR:1480-2015

This splendid embroidered silk velvet panel or cover in medallion format probably was intended to serve as a *nihale* or summer carpet, substituting as a floor covering for a wool-piled carpet during the hot season. It could however just as easily have been used as a furniture cover or wall hanging. The panel demonstrates a standard layout that emerged in sixteenth-century Iran, consisting of a cusped ogival central medallion, four corner-pieces with similar profiles but different arrangements of interior motifs, and a field of stylized lotus blossoms and hexagonal rosettes on curling vines. Pendant elements from the central medallion extend lengthwise in both directions, and the entire field is enclosed in a border of alternating lotus blossoms and rosettes, with guard stripes consisting of reciprocal trefoil motifs. Together with the general layout, all of these design elements are typical of Safavid court art, and are reflected as well in bookbindings, decorative tile panels, and knotted-pile carpets. However, four small details of the design—the fan-shaped carnation blossoms arrayed two each on either end of the ogival medallion—are more commonly identified with the classical Ottoman Turkish style that took form after 1561 in Istanbul; a number of well-known objects in similar technique—heavy metallic-thread embroidery on a ground of velvet and, in some cases, on leather—have sometimes been given an Ottoman provenance.

The technique employed in this panel, usually referred to as metallic-thread embroidery, is in fact a hybrid of embroidery and the so-called appliqué technique, where pieces of fabric of various colors are sewn as ornament on a ground fabric. The metallic threads in the panel consist of a silk thread wrapped with a spiral of extremely narrow and thin silver foil. To put such a thread through the eye of an embroidery needle, let alone to force it again and again through a ground of silk fabric or leather, would immediately tend to strip off the fragile foil. Usually the metal-wrapped threads of heavy embroideries of this type are therefore couched—attached to the ground fabric or leather—with a needle and flexible silk thread, rather than being repeatedly drawn through the ground with a needle.

Apparently not a single work comparable in technique and style to this panel has survived in Iranian collections with a documented Iranian provenance. A few similar works in Turkish

collections today, usually deemed Ottoman, are likewise without iron-clad provenance documentation. By contrast, a considerable number of similar works exist in European collections, many of them works reputed to have been captured in the sack of the Turkish siege camp outside Vienna in 1683. For example, a quiver and a *matara* (canteen or water bottle) preserved in Polish collections, made of dyed leather with metallic embroidery, both demonstrate stylistic and technical affinities with the present panel.<sup>1</sup>

However, the situation is far more complicated. First, a substantial part of the artistic material reputed to have come into European hands after a series of Habsburg military victories over the Ottomans following the end of the Vienna siege, and now preserved in German (notably Karlsruhe and Ingolstadt), Austrian (notably Vienna), and Polish (notably Warsaw and Krakow) collections, is of Safavid, not Ottoman, origin, and even the Ottoman material itself often comes from sources as diverse as Egypt (the majority of the appliquéd tents) and North Africa (banners and other silk textiles). It is clear that the Ottoman generals liked to surround themselves with a cosmopolitan array of luxury objects.<sup>2</sup> Second, Ottoman motifs, especially the distinctive *karanfil* or carnation seen in this panel, do occasionally appear in indisputably Safavid textiles by the seventeenth century, reflecting the wide sharing of artistic ideas among Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals in that time through commerce and royal gift-giving.<sup>3</sup> Third, the technique of heavy metallic-thread embroidery on satin or velvet appears to have been widespread across the Islamic world by the seventeenth century and is evident in European versions as well.<sup>4</sup>

Under these circumstances it should be no surprise that works resembling this panel have been ascribed to Safavid Iran, such as a silver-on-red medallion-layout cover sold at Roseberys London in 2015, or a similar cover on a bi-color ground that appeared at Bonham's London in 2013. On the other hand, an embroidered horse cover, in a shape that has survived in several objects of indisputably Ottoman manufacture in other techniques, was given an Ottoman attribution in a recent Sotheby's London sale.<sup>5</sup>

With all of these factors considered, the unusually large size, notable fluency of design, and Safavid stylistic affinities of this panel make an attribution to Safavid Iran both plausible and



reasonable. In the context of the Hossein Afshar Collection as a whole, this work helps to demonstrate the richness of the wide spectrum of textile arts in Safavid times, as a rare survival of a major artistic tradition that, to be sure, became widely recognized and broadly used in the Islamic world in the sixteenth century and later, but first took form and developed in Safavid Iran. WBD

1. See Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art 1999, entries 94 and 97 (on leather) and 107, 115, and 116 (on velvet). The velvet examples in particular often lack the stylistic elegance of this panel.

2. See for example, Petrasch 1991. Whether they actually arrived in European collections as purchases, captured goods, or royal gifts, some of the best-known Safavid works of art reputed to have 1683 connections include the silk

hunting carpet at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst (MAK), Vienna, the *Anhalt Carpet* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a series of Safavid silk velvet fragments adapted as tent furnishings. See Pope and Ackerman 1967, vol. XI, plates 1023–25.

3. See, for example, the Safavid tapestry-woven horse trappings in Ottoman style in the MAK, Vienna, inv. T 9128 and 9129, which may have been destined as royal gifts from Iran to Turkey. The latter incorporates the distinctly Ottoman *çintemani* motif, but in a markedly non-Ottoman manner.

4. For example, see Petrasch 1991, entries 334–36.

5. "Safavid red velvet and gilt thread embroidered panel, Iran, 17th/18th century," Roseberys, London, 2015, lot 38; "A Safavid metal-thread embroidered silk velvet panel, Persia, 18th century," Bonham's, April 2013, lot 61; and "An Ottoman metal-thread embroidered red-ground saddle cover, Turkey, late 17th/early 18th century," Sotheby's 2017, lot 207.





77. The “King Umberto II Polonaise” Carpet  
Iran, probably Isfahan or Kashan, early 17th century

Cotton warp and weft, silk weft and pile, with metal-wrapped thread; asymmetrically knotted open to the left  
159 1/2 × 70 1/8 inches (405 × 178 cm)  
TR:569-2015

In the early seventeenth century, the Safavid king of Iran, Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629), ruling from his new capital of Isfahan, oversaw a tremendous flowering of artistic patronage, from great architectural monuments to books and works of art on paper created by the artists of his royal court. Textiles were a major element of Safavid art during this time, both because they provided the court with a wealth of beautiful garments and trappings for royal celebrations and ceremonies, and because their export and taxation were lucrative sources of income for merchants and government alike. Carpets such as this were over-the-top examples of conspicuous consumption, made of lavish but impractical materials such as silk pile and metal-thread brocading. With their reflective surface, bright colors, and flashes of gold and silver, they appear to have been woven under royal control, largely to serve as royal gifts, and were often presented to foreign dignitaries. Others were sold at high prices to wealthy foreigners, mainly Europeans, who seem to have had a special affinity for flashy goods.

The term “Polonaise” applied to carpets of this type is a misnomer with an intriguing history. A few surviving examples of such carpets were originally owned by Polish noble families and actually have European coats of arms woven into their designs. Mistakenly once attributed to Poland on this basis, these carpets were commissioned by the shah as gifts to his Polish allies with whom he shared an enemy, the Ottoman Turkish Empire, a clear illustration of the old dictum “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” It appears that these carpets were not very popular in Iran, where they may have been considered a bit vulgar; the overwhelming majority of surviving examples have been preserved and treasured in European aristocratic collections for centuries.

Umberto II of Italy, from the ruling house of Savoy, reigned for a little over a month in 1946, replacing his father Victor Emmanuel III on the throne for a brief interval until Italy abolished the monarchy by vote in June of 1946. This carpet, part of the ancestral possessions of the House of Savoy, appeared on the art market in 1984, along with other items, including a second, smaller “Polonaise” carpet, after the ex-monarch’s death in exile in Portugal in 1983.

The design and layout of the present example are typical for this group, symmetrical both vertically and horizontally. A small central medallion generates the design outward to the sides and ends; large oval loops of flower-bearing vines and leaves stand out in relief against a brocaded background, once silver, now a dark brown-gray. The border consists of a variety of stylized blossoms, split-leaf forms known as *islimi* in Iran, and sinuous motifs borrowed from Chinese art that represent clouds. A combination of variations in exposure to light and the carpet phenomenon known as *abrash*—subtle or not-so-subtle variations within a single color due to the yarn having been dyed in small lots under imprecise conditions—account for the areas of dark green at several places in the border.

Describing condition in “Polonaise” carpets is somewhat tricky since, unlike wool, the silk pile was subject to dramatic fading after long exposure to light, and many colors once brilliant in hue tended to metamorphose into a series of browns and tans; the brocading threads wrapped in silver likewise tarnished to dark gray, and then in many cases succumbed to brittleness and disappeared. This carpet is unusual in the freshness of its colors, and among carpets of this type is in a relatively good state of preservation, with its original edge and end finishes preserved. WBD

**Technical:**

Warp: Undyed white cotton, 4 Z-spun yarns plied S, two levels  
Weft: Undyed and red-dyed silk, one single-ply slightly Z-twisted yarn shot twice, one straight and one sinuous, between each row of knots  
Pile: Silk, apparently 1 ply, spin indeterminate: red, dark blue-green abraded to yellow-green, dark blue, light blue, yellow, pale yellow-green, darker tan, corrosive lighter tan, un-corroded lighter tan, white, corrosive black outlining  
Knot: Asymmetrical, open to the left; 56–57 vertical × 68–72 horizontal per decimeter  
Brocaded areas: Supplementary wefts consist of 3 slightly Z-twisted silk yarns loosely plied S, wrapped in strips of silver or silver-gilt foil; these generally pass over 4–6 warps, under 1 warp  
Ends: Tapestry-woven strip with 7 shots of red and black silk weft, 10–12 cm of cotton warp fringe  
Edges: 2 cables Z of 4 warps each, wrapped in silk weft yarn

