

ORIENTAL

RUGS

From the Victoria & Albert Museum

## Introduction

The collection of oriental carpets in the Victoria and Albert Museum is one of the richest in the world and it includes a number of very important carpets from the 16th and 17th centuries. Many of these are too large and most are too fragile to be sent away from the Museum. The rugs chosen for the present exhibition range in date from the late 16th to the end of the 19th century and are intended to give some impression of the most important groups. A selection of twenty-six rugs to represent all types and every period must necessarily be arbitrary and incomplete, and the photographs which accompany the exhibition are intended to supplement the historical background. The earliest carpet is only a fragment (No. 1), but from its colouring and its design it can be seen to be of the finest quality. It is typical of the many rugs imported into Europe in the 16th and early 17th centuries—the kind of rug ordered by Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey through Venetian merchants. Thus in the portrait of Henry VIII by a follower of Holbein, the king is standing on a rug similar to the one in the exhibition.

The early history of carpet weaving is not easy to reconstruct very accurately. Looped pile was used very effectively for decoration in Egypt, but the pile was made from a looped weft—a different construction from the true knotted carpet. Pile woven fabrics for warmth seem to have originated in Central Asia, their development encouraged by the hard climate, the breed of sheep and the nomadic life of the inhabitants. The earliest complete carpet to have survived is the one found in the tomb of a chieftain at Pazyrik in the Altai mountains, which may date from the 5th-4th century B.C. This carpet had been preserved under many feet of ice and was in excellent condition when discovered. Its technique is very nearly identical with that of a 19th century oriental rug. The design of naturalistically rendered animals is, however, quite unlike the more formal decoration of later centuries. From Central Asia the weaving of carpets appears to have spread to Asia Minor and to Turkey and then to Persia, and finally to India through the influence of the Mogul emperors.

Oriental rugs were imported into Europe by Italian merchants trading with the Levant. From the 13th century onwards rugs begin to

appear in Italian paintings, and the accuracy of their appearance can be tested against the few fragments which have survived from the 14th-15th century. For the most part these fragments have been preserved in remote Swedish churches untouched by the destructions of the Reformation in other parts of Europe. Italian merchants traded with northern Europe, and thus from the 15th century onwards Anatolian carpets can be seen in Flemish paintings. Memling, for example, painted a number of carpets very similar to those appearing in contemporary Italian works. By the early 16th century enthusiasm for oriental rugs was being shown by the richest patrons in England and it is at this point that the exhibition begins. It should be emphasised that while the steps leading up to the throne of the Virgin in a painting might be covered with a rich oriental carpet and while Henry VIII was painted standing upon one, it was not normal to use such carpets as floor coverings but as table cloths, for they were rare and precious.

Since rugs from Turkey were the first to be imported into Europe the generic name of "turkey work" was given to all pile carpeting, and in the 17th century was used especially for the upholstery made in England in the same technique. The first carpets made in England were very similar to contemporary Ushak rugs and carpets. The earliest European knotted carpets were those made in Spain in the 15th and 16th centuries and their designs were also copied from Anatolian rugs. The method of knotting Spanish carpets was, however, rather different.

Rugs from Turkey in the exhibition include a rug dating from the late 17th or early 18th century of an exceptionally striking design. Two prayer rugs of different types are included. These were intended to be used by a Mohammedan in his daily prayers when the worshipper laid down his rug with the niche pointed towards Mecca. Rugs from particular regions—Ghiordes, Kula and Ladik, for example—developed their own characteristic patterns. The stylised tulips of the Ladik rug in the exhibition (No. 3) may be found in many other rugs from this district. Prayer rugs became a popular export to the European market in the 19th century and today designs based upon the niche, with its columns and lantern, may be found on many rugs and carpets not intended to be prayer rugs.

Some of the most prolific weavers of rugs during the 19th century were the different

Caucasian tribes. Rugs from the Caucasus generally have brightly coloured geometric designs with, occasionally, small birds, animals or men scattered in the field. The stars of the rug (No. 7) and the hooks of the rug (No. 6) which surround each small panel are motifs which occur very often. These rugs tend to be fairly coarsely woven with Turkish knots, wool and dyes of good quality, with designs which, although they are based upon a simple colour scheme and make use only of geometric forms, are nearly always extremely effective.

While there are literary references to carpets in Persia in earlier centuries, the oldest surviving carpets are thought to date from the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The mid and later 16th century saw one of the classic periods of Persian art. The Sefavid dynasty and especially Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) employed at their court at Ispahan a number of the greatest artists of their day in every field. Miniature painters were especially influential so that the designs of many carpets may be compared with the decoration of contemporary manuscripts. Carpets made at this time include the two great carpets for the Mosque at Ardabil, datable to 1540, of which one is in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the other in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The "Chelsea" carpet found in a London antique dealer's shop at the end of the last century is one of the finest of the classic period. A photograph of this has been included with the exhibition, but this can hardly do justice to the rich and subtle colouring of the original. These carpets were extremely finely woven with as many as 470 knots to the square inch. The designs of Persian carpets of this period show many elements borrowed from Chinese art: cloud bands, elaborate vases, palmettes and other floral decoration. Medallions containing finely drawn arabesques and animals hunting down their prey are decorative motifs which originated in the carpets of this period and have been copied in many later reproductions. One of the earliest carpets in the exhibition (No. 16) dates from the late 16th or early 17th century, and although it is now rather worn it gives some impression of the great carpets of the time. Another rare group of the early 17th century is represented by the silk carpet (No. 17). These were often brocaded with silver and gold thread, and because they were sometimes woven to order for notable Polish families with European coats of arms they are known as "Polonaise" carpets. Owing to the disturbed

political conditions in Persia from the late 17th to the late 18th century few carpets have survived from these years. The design of the carpet (No. 18) is, however, based upon the "garden carpets" of an earlier period. The trees and flowering shrubs within each square were meant to simulate those of a formal garden divided by paths. Some carpets of this type have fountains and streams to divide the ground. By the 19th century the different regions of Persia had developed their own characteristic designs and their technical features—so many wefts between each row of knots, a certain way of overcasting the selvedge, a certain colour of warp thread and so on. These often help in the identification of carpets dating from the 19th century. Variations of the small floral design linked with a diamond lattice of stems occur on many Sehna carpets. Equally typical are the rows of rather square cones on the rug from Shiraz (No. 22) and the large palmettes on the rug from Kurdistan (No. 19). In the late 19th and 20th centuries patterns from one region have been woven by another according to the current demand of the market.

Some of the finest rugs made by the Turkoman tribes, who lived around the Marv oasis, were produced in the middle of the 19th century. These tribes were nomads and their rugs were generally made as part of objects for their own use—*torbas* or small tent bags; *juvals*, large tent bags or saddle bags; together with the larger rugs forming the door to a tent and an occasional prayer-rug, such as the Bulchi rug (No. 15). Baluchi and Afghan rugs are closely related to this group, although widely separated from the Turkoman tribes geographically. The *juval* made by the Salor tribe (No. 11) is especially fine. The rug is woven with about 280 Persian knots to the square inch and some details of the design are carried out in dark blue silk used with great restraint. The rich deep red, high quality wool and sensitive drawing are typical of the best of these rugs. Nearly all the rugs of the Turkoman group use an octagonal "gul" for part of their decoration. The motif is one of the oldest used in the design of carpets. Each Turkoman tribe had its own distinctive pattern, easily recognisable in older rugs. These tribes continue to make rugs today, some in the U.S.S.R. and some in Pakistan, but the colours used are cruder, the quality less good, the designs sometimes rather coarse. A pattern which was originally quite large may be reduced to a very small scale on a small rug.

# Catalogue

It would, moreover, be difficult to assert positively which pattern was made by which group.

Less is known about Chinese rugs than about any other group, although they have been woven since the 18th century if not before. Rugs from Chinese Turkestan, both in colouring and in design, share some of the characteristics of the Turkoman group, but usually have a long silky pile. Rugs from China, unlike other oriental rugs, have designs which are very close to other decorative arts. Instead of a special range of decoration reserved for textiles there are the same lotus blossoms, vases and dragons which can be found on lacquer or ceramics. The two pillar carpets in the exhibition are designed so that their dragons curl neatly around the columns they adorn when the

carpets are in position. It is interesting that they bear inscriptions from which they can be dated to about 1765. A number of silk rugs were made in China and the blue and yellow colouring of the one in the exhibition (No. 12) is typical.

The techniques of hand-woven carpets are comparatively simple, although the weave of a particular carpet may be very fine. Accompanying the exhibition there is a model showing the Persian and Turkish knots and the technique of Soumaq. In general the knot chosen indicates whether a tribe is of Persian or Turkish descent; thus some tribes in Persia use a Turkish knot and some Turkoman tribes a Persian knot.

OPPOSITE *Catalogue No. 25*

BELOW *Catalogue No. 7*

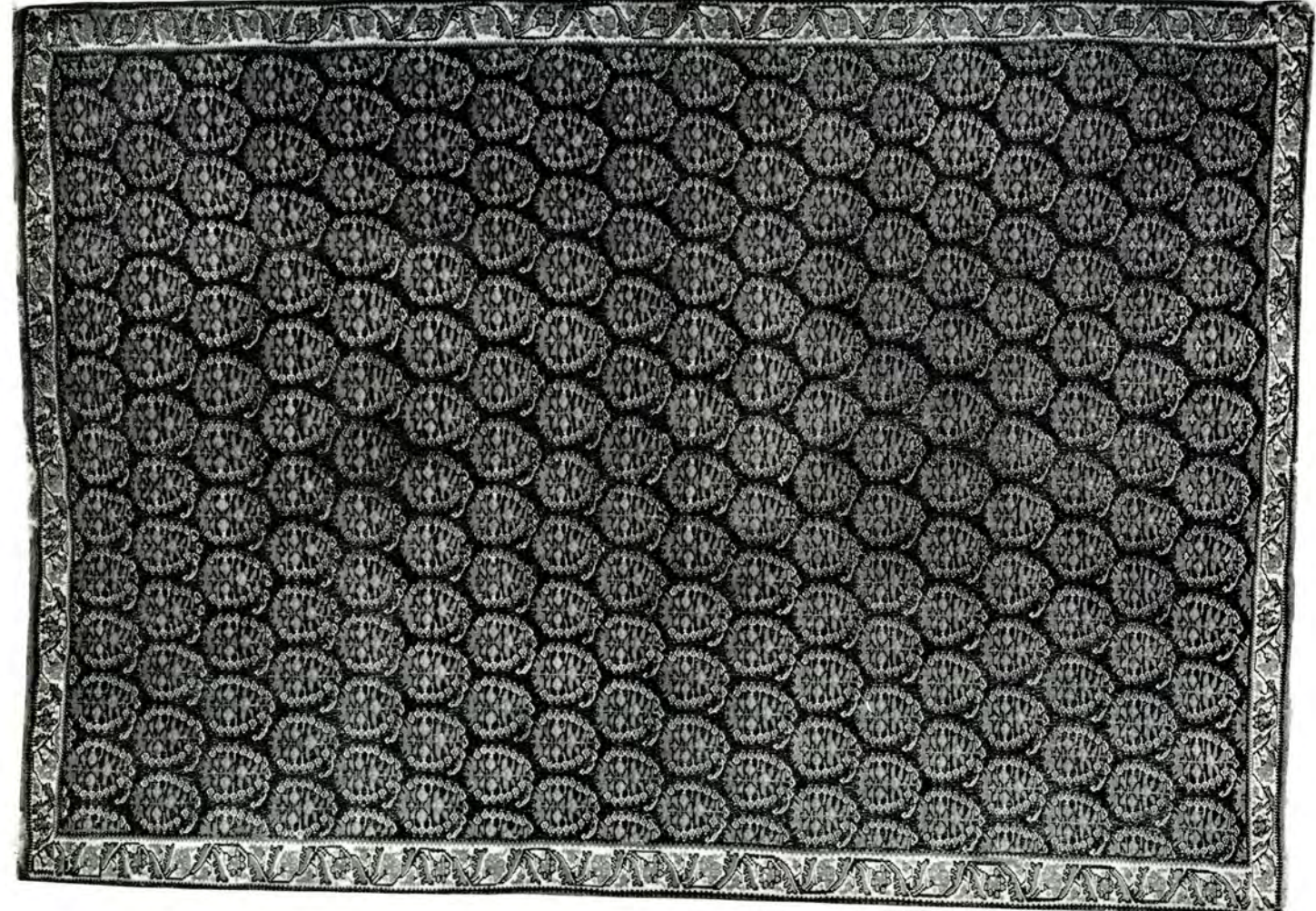
## Turkish and Caucasian

- 1 **Fragment; TURKISH (USHAK); 16th century**  
Woollen pile, c.86 Turkish knots to square inch, woollen warp and weft  
L 9'6" W 5'6"
- 2 **Prayer Rug; TURKISH (KULA); 18th-19th century**  
Woollen pile, 96 Turkish knots to square inch, woollen warp and weft  
L 6'2" W 3'10"  
Given by Henry Bergen, Esq.
- 3 **Prayer Rug; TURKISH (LADIK); 19th century**  
Woollen pile, c.88 Turkish knots to square inch on a cotton warp and woollen weft  
L 6'4½" W 3'8"  
Given by Henry Bergen, Esq.
- 4 **Rug; CAUCASIAN (KAZAK or TCHERKESS); 19th century**  
Woollen pile, c.54 Turkish knots to square inch on a woollen warp and weft  
L 6'11" W 3'9"
- 5 **Rug; CAUCASIAN (SHIRVAN); 19th century**  
Woollen pile, c.76 Turkish knots to square inch on a woollen warp and weft  
L 7'7" W 3'9"

- 6 **Rug; CAUCASIAN (KAZAK); 19th century**  
Woollen pile, c.67 Turkish knots to square inch on a woollen warp and weft  
L 7'2" W 4'2"
- 7 **Rug; CAUCASIAN (SHIRVAN); mid 19th century**  
Woollen pile, c.68 Turkish knots to square inch on a woollen warp and cotton weft  
L 5' W 3'4"
- 8 **Rug; TURKISH; 17th-18th century**  
Woollen pile, c.52 Turkish knots to square inch, woollen warp and weft  
L 8'1½" W 4'0½"  
Given by Mrs. Murray Graham

## Turkoman, Chinese

- 9 **Rug (Namazlyq); TURKOMAN (Yomud); 19th century**  
Woollen pile, c.170 Turkish knots to square inch, woollen warp and weft  
L 5'6" W 4'
- 10 **Tent-bag (Torba); TURKOMAN (YOMUD); 19th century**  
Wool and silk pile, c.280 Persian knots to square inch on woollen warp and weft  
L 1'4" W 3'8"



11 Tent-bag (Juval); **TURKOMAN (SALOR); 19th century**  
Wool and silk pile, c.280 Persian knots to square inch, woollen warp and weft  
L 4'8" W 2'11"

12 Rug; **CHINESE; 19th century**  
Silk pile, 68 Persian knots to square inch on cotton warp and weft  
L 5'2" W 3'2"  
Bequeathed by Lt.-Col. Croft Lyons

13 Pair of Pillar Carpets; **CHINESE; datable to 1765 from inscription**  
Woollen pile, 38 Persian knots to square inch on cotton warp and weft  
(a) H 6'3" W 3'8"  
(b) H 6'4" W 3'8"  
Given by J. Highfield Jones, Esq.

14 Rug; **TURKOMAN (ERSARI); 19th century**  
Woollen pile, 82 Persian knots to square inch, woollen warp and weft  
L 5' W 3'8½"

15 Prayer Rug (Namazlyq); **BALUCHISTAN; 19th century**  
Woollen pile, 56 Persian knots to square inch on woollen warp and weft  
L 4'7" W 3'

**Persian**

16 Rug; **PERSIAN (East or Indo-Persian); 16th-17th century**  
Woollen pile, 144 Persian knots to square inch on cotton warp and weft  
L 6'5" W 4'5"

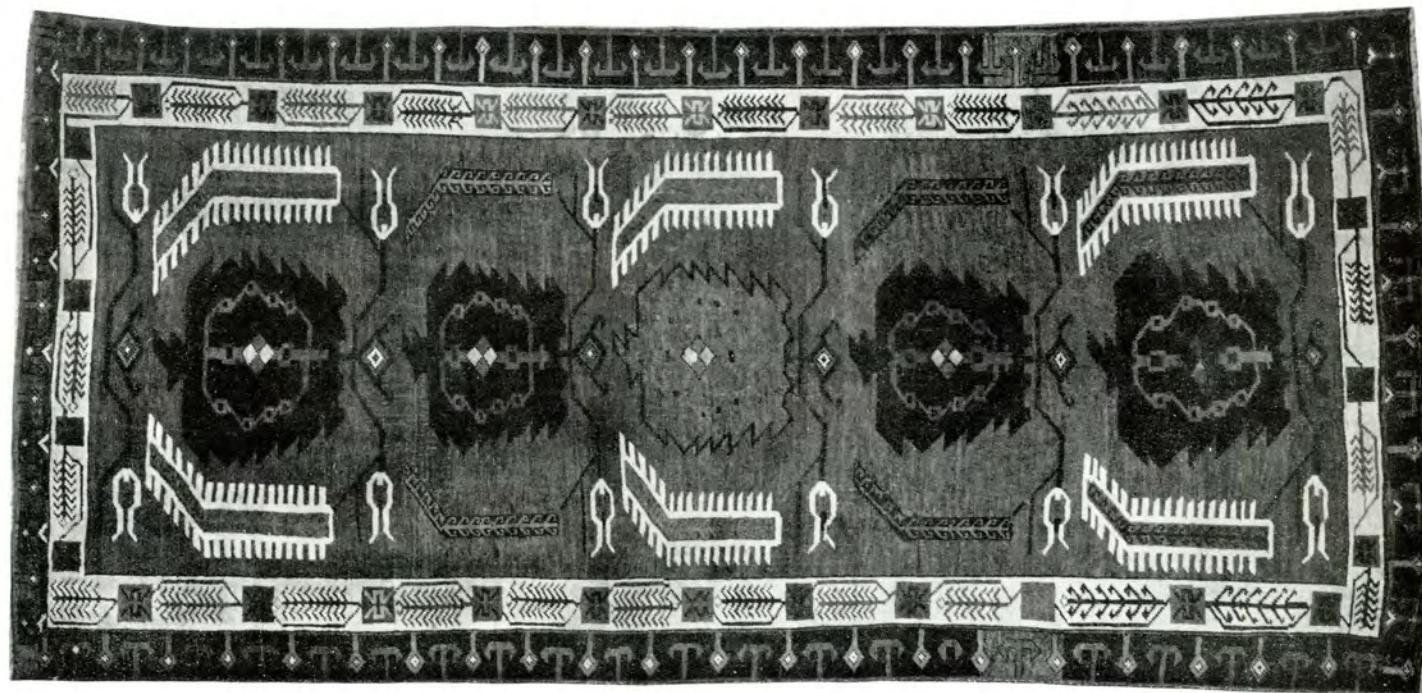
17 Rug; **PERSIAN "Polonaise type" (probably Kashan); First half of 17th century**  
Silk pile, 195 Persian knots to square inch on cotton warp and weft  
L 6'9" W 4'8"

18 Carpet; **PERSIAN (BAKTIARI); 18th-19th century**  
Woollen pile, 154 Persian knots to square inch on a cotton warp and weft  
L 7'11" W 4'11"  
Given by Sir Charles Marling

19 Carpet; **PERSIAN (Kurdistan); 19th century**  
Woollen pile, 68 Turkish knots to square inch on woollen warp and weft  
L 8'10" W 6'6"

20 Carpet; **PERSIAN (Feraghan); dated A.H. 1232 or A.D. 1817**  
Woollen pile, 165 Persian knots to square inch, cotton warp and weft  
L 9'6" W 4'8"

OPPOSITE *Catalogue No. 18*  
BELOW *Catalogue No. 8*



21 **Rug; PERSIAN (Khorassan—made at Ghain); 1876**  
 Woollen pile, 280 Persian knots to square inch,  
 cotton warp and weft  
 L 8'8" W 4'4"  
 Given by the Shah of Persia

22 **Rug; PERSIAN (Shiraz-Niris); 19th century**  
 Woollen pile, 70 Persian knots to square inch on  
 woollen warp and weft  
 L 7'4" W 4'8½"

23 **Rug; PERSIAN (Sehna); 19th century**  
 Woollen pile, 475 Turkish knots to square inch on  
 silk warp and weft  
 L 6'4" W 4'1"

24 **Rug; PERSIAN (North-West); 19th century**  
 Soumak woven in wool  
 L 5'2" W 4'8"

25 **Rug; PERSIAN (North-West); mid 19th century**  
 Kilim, woven in wool  
 L 5'5" W 3'11"

### Photographs of Carpets in Pictures and other Historic Carpets

1 Looped pile hanging; Coptic. 5th-6th century A.D.  
 438-1889

2 Knotted wollen carpet; Central Asia. Altai Moun-  
 tains (PAZYRIK tomb) 5th-4th century B.C.

3 Detail of painting: "The Marriage of the Virgin",  
 Niccolo di Buonaccorso. 1348. London. National  
 Gallery

4 Knotted carpet; Anatolian. 15th century.  
 Stockholm. Statens Historiska Museet.  
 (This carpet, although later in date, is similar to one  
 shown in painting by Niccolo di Buonaccorso)

5 Detail of painting: "The Annunciation", by Carlo  
 Crivelli. London National Gallery. 15th century.  
 (The painting shows a typical carpet from Asia  
 Minor)

6 So called "Holbein carpet"; Staatliche Museen in  
 Berlin. Islamische Kunst Abteilung. Anatolian 16th  
 century.  
 (Illustrated in Bode und Kühnel, "Antique Rugs  
 from the Near East". 1958 edition: either carpet  
 facing p. 32 or carpet on p. 34)

7 Knotted carpet; Spanish 15th century.  
 (This carpet is a close copy of an Anatolian rug)

8 Knotted carpet; Persian, 16th century. "The Chelsea  
 Carpet" 589-1890.  
 (One of the finest carpets of the classic period in the  
 V. & A.)

9 Frans van Mieris the Elder. "Woman with Dog",  
 Leningrad, Hermitage. Illustrated in Eduard  
 Plietzsch, "Hollaendische und Flaemische Mater",  
 17th century. Plate 65 (1960).  
 (The carpet on the table in this picture is similar to  
 the carpet No. 16 in the exhibition)

10 "Henry VIII" by follower of Holbein. Walker Art  
 Gallery, Liverpool. Illustrated in Ellis Waterhouse,  
 Painting in Britain. 1530-1790. Plate 5.  
 (The King is standing on an Ushak carpet similar to  
 the carpet No. 1 in the exhibition)

11 Knotted carpet; English. 1585. The property of the  
 Duke of Buccleuch.  
 (The design of this carpet is copied from that of an  
 Ushak carpet of the same date)

12 Silk carpet; "Polonaise", Persian 17th century. The  
 property of the National Trust: Hardwick Hall

13 Knotted carpet; Mamluk. (Cairo) 16th century

14 Knotted carpet; Ottoman, 16th-17th century. In  
 Musee des Arts Decoratifs, Paris, illustrated p. 77  
 Bode und Kühnel

15 Knotted carpet; Turkish, 17th century. One of the  
 following "Badge of Tamerlane" pattern. "Bird  
 Pattern" rug cf. p. 51 Bode und Kühnel.

16 Painting: 17th-18th century, showing one of the  
 above types of carpet in use. Perhaps Robert Feke:  
 "The Family of Isaac Royall" 1741 Harvard Univer-  
 sity  
 (In the latter there is a Transylvania carpet on the  
 table around which the family are gathered)

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