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Carpets worth fighting for

An exceptional Turkish example is among the highlights of an unrivalled exhibition of rugs, says **Ben Timberlake**

Ten years ago Moshe Tabibnia, one of the world's foremost carpet dealers, set himself an awesome challenge. He would acquire the best examples, in terms of age and condition, of all the great classical carpet genres. The task combined painstaking research, breathtaking spending and, often, sheer luck. "I have at times been extremely fortunate," he says.

The fruit of his labour is *Milestones in the History of Carpets*, an exhibition that runs until November 10 at his gallery in Milan. It comprises 30 of the finest carpets in the world, produced between the 15th and 18th centuries.

To understand this achievement, and the man behind it, you need to look at the story behind just one of them: the Karapinar carpet.

It surfaced in 2003 as lot 57 in an auction house in the mountains of western North Carolina. It was catalogued as an 18th century Turkish carpet and valued at \$5,000 to \$10,000. Tabibnia heard about it from his friend Karin Dobbin, a freelance textile expert based in New York. Together they flew to Asheville and went to straight to Brunk Auctions on the edge of town. "It was an amazing rug,"

he recalls. "I couldn't believe its condition, the colours, the drawing, the wool that felt like cashmere." But like a seasoned poker player, he hid his interest. "He would walk around the room," Dobbin says with a laugh. But "each time his path would take him closer to that carpet."

Karapinar, meaning "black spring", is a small village north of the Taurus mountains in Turkey. It is hard to find on a map, although that wasn't always the case. For a thousand years it was an important stopping point on the Silk Road and produced some of the finest carpets in the Ottoman Empire.

There might be many reasons for this but it's hard to separate fact from local legend. Visitors are told that the area's sheep produced unusually fine wool and that the local spring water is slightly acidic, which helped the dyes fix firmly and retain a vibrancy beyond their years. Finally, the local women, reportedly great beauties, were highly skilled weavers, following in the tradition of comely fairy tale craftswomen from Ulysses' wife Penelope to the poor miller's daughter who spun straw into gold with the help of Rumpelstiltskin.

Carpets were a way of life for the people of Karapinar, as they were and still are for many people in Turkey and the Middle East.

They are objects of utility and devotion: people are born on them, eat on them, and pray on them. As a



result, very few survive.

The carpet in Brunk was the most perfect Karapinar Tabibnia had ever seen, with stunning aquamarine lobed medallions. But there was something else special about

Carpet magic:
Holbein, top,
Karapinar, right,
Tappeto a uccelli,
above



it. It was 7ft by 20 ft, far beyond the dimensions of an ordinary village house, suggesting that it was meant for another type of space. And the only building in Karapinar in the late 1500s that would have required, and demanded, such finery was the new mosque.

If the carpet had been commissioned for such a purpose, Tabibnia was looking not only at a fine piece but the very pinnacle of achievement among Karapinar carpets. Commissioning a carpet for a mosque is an act of public benediction popular in the Islamic world to this day.

As these thoughts took shape in his head, Tabibnia vowed he would buy the carpet, no matter what. Unfortunately, his presence in Asheville attracted attention. "On the day of the auction I was getting phone calls from [dealers and collectors] all over the world asking where I was and what I was doing," he says. "My strategy [was] to be the very last buyer and to enter at the very last second."

Tabibnia kept his cool as the price ricocheted up into the hundreds of thousands before a stunned audience. He finally secured the carpet for \$297,000, which he still considers a bargain. "This will sound arrogant, perhaps, but if I want it, I will get it. And, considering the importance of the carpet, it was well worth fighting for."

The Karapinar, which has since been carbon-dated to the 16th or 17th century, is

undoubtedly one of the highlights of the Milan exhibition but many of the other carpets on show have equally impressive pedigrees and legends. There is an extremely rare 15th century four-octagon large-pattern Holbein, one of only two known examples still in existence; a Caucasian dragon carpet from the early 17th century; and an early 16th century rug with an interlaced star motif that experts categorise as "para-Mulak" or "from the tapedi damaschini group".

Hali, the magazine of carpet, textile and Islamic art, describes the range and quality shown in the exhibition as "breathtaking". And the accompanying catalogue, written by Jon Thompson of Oxford University, is itself an eagerly awaited academic study, which he'll outline in four talks on major themes, or milestones, in November.

Tabibnia's Milan space has had a major refurbishment over the past year and now boasts a library, research centre and conservation laboratory. It looks and feels more like a museum than a gallery, and this reflects its owner's move from commercial to academic interests.

Since Asheville, Tabibnia and Dobbin have married and are expecting their first child. They hope the current show will form part of a permanent museum.

Milestones in the History of Carpets runs until November 10 at the Moshe Tabibnia Gallery, Milan, tel: +39 028-051 545, www.moshetabibnia.com