

# Making Carpet History

For more than a decade one international dealer has made most of the running for high profile, high value acquisitions of classical carpets, whether in the public arena at auction, or on the private market. This autumn Moshe Tabibnia presents a long-anticipated major exhibition of more than thirty of the best in his newly refurbished Milan gallery, with a catalogue authored by Dr Jon Thompson.

'Milestones in the History of Carpets', comprising more than thirty classical period oriental weavings from most major weaving traditions during the years 1500 to 1700, opens in mid-October 2006 at Moshe Tabibnia's elegant via Brera gallery in the fashionable heart of Milan.

Parallels for a highly-focused exhibition within a dealer's own gallery accompanied by a scholarly catalogue of this scope and quality are hard to find in recent years. Over the past dozen or so years, major commercial gallery exhibitions of antique carpets outside the context of art fairs or rug conferences have become largely a thing of the past. Indeed, we have seen nothing comparable to Tabibnia's planned exhibition and catalogue outside of a museum for over two decades, not since John Eskenazi's 'Il tappeto orientale dal XV al XVIII secolo' in Milan at the beginning of 1982. So Tabibnia's endeavour, which has been several years in preparation, is doubly welcome, offering connoisseurs a genuinely rare opportunity to see, and buy, some of the best classical carpets currently available on the international market.

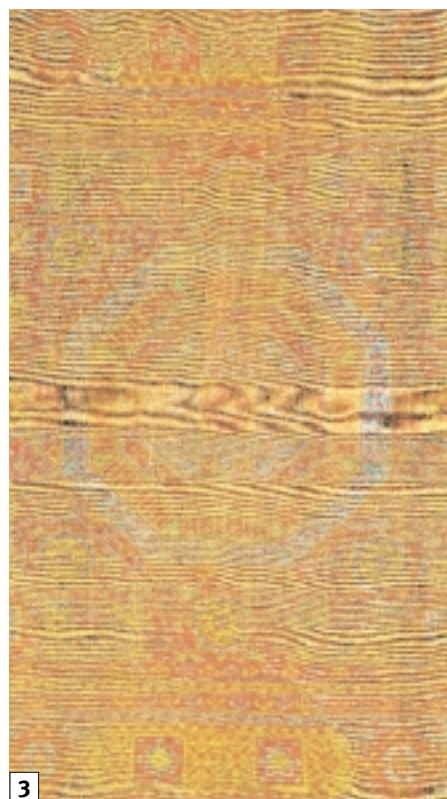
The range and quality of the carpets to be shown are breathtaking. All major classical genres are represented barring the carpets of

Spain, though it is likely that most attention will be focused on two highly important early Anatolian carpets: the extraordinarily beautiful and very rare Kufic-bordered four-octagon 'large-pattern Holbein' carpet from the Abbey of San Gregorio (5), acquired at Finarte-Semenzato in Venice in 2002 (HALI 126, p.15, HALI 127, p.143), and the astonishing Karapinar lobed-medallion carpet from the Foy Casper Collection (15), which caused such a stir at Brunk Auctions in Asheville, North Carolina, the following year (HALI 129, p.13, HALI 130, p.124).

The San Gregorio 'Holbein', which has been C-14 dated to the first half of the 15th century, is complete, without major repairs. It is so rare that there is only one other comparable four-octagon carpet known, in Berlin (Friedrich Spuhler, *Oriental Carpets in the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin*, London 1988, pl.4). The Casper Karapinar too is complete, and in remarkable condition. Although not unique, the specific design is only really known from a heavily fragmented rug formerly in the Bernheimer Collection (HALI 86, p.131). The Casper carpet too has been radiocarbon tested, with a result that, taken together with art historical evidence, places it in the second half of the 16th century.



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## Facing page, details:

1. So-called 'Para-Mamluk' rug (*Tapedi damaschini*), east Anatolia or west Persia (?), early 16th century. All wool, 1.41 x 2.07m (4'7½" x 6'9½")

2. Cairene Ottoman carpet, Egypt, second half 16th century. All wool, 3.10 x 4.86m (10'2" x 15'11")

3. Mamluk-style carpet, Egypt, 16th century. All wool, 2.28 x 4.90m (7'6" x 16'1")

## This page, details:

4. Mughal shrub carpet, north India, 17th century. Wool pile on a cotton foundation, 3 x 4.56m (9'10" x 14'11½")

5. Ottoman 'large-pattern Holbein' carpet, Anatolia, first half 15th century. All wool, 2.60 x 5.02m (8'6½" x 16'5½")

6. Ottoman 'Lotto' arabesque rug, Ushak, west Anatolia, 16th century. All wool, 1.60 x 2.90m (5'3" x 9'6")

7. Ottoman carpet, Anatolia, 16th century. All wool, 1.32 x 2.05m (4'4" x 6'8½")

8. Ottoman Star Ushak carpet, west Anatolia, 16th century. All wool, 1.88 x 3.49m (6'2" x 11'5½")

9. Ottoman 'small-pattern Holbein' carpet, Anatolia, mid-15th century. All wool, 1.55 x 2.62m (5'1" x 8'7")





In the catalogue written to accompany the exhibition, his first concerted excursion into the history of oriental carpets for some years, Dr Jon Thompson breaks new ground when he devotes substantial space to the discussion of another very rare item, the delightful so-called 'para-Mamluk' rug with a quincunxial arrangement of interlaced star motifs that once belonged to the late Charles Grant Ellis, and came to Tabibnia via the Wher Collection (1). Thompson finds the name 'para-Mamluk' coined by Ellis, with its inescapable Egyptian association, to be misleading, and for his nomenclature prefers to look back to a Venetian historical citation of 1526, where "*Tapedo a la damaschina*" are mentioned in the *Diarii* of Mario Sanuto (Michael Rogers, 'Carpets of the Mediterranean Countries 1450-1550. Some Historical Observations', in Robert Pinner & Walter B. Denny, *Oriental Carpet & Textile Studies II*, London 1986, p.17). However Thompson's new research does not bring us much closer to knowing whether these rare early carpets, which he believes were first exported to Europe before the Mamluk weavings of Egypt but after the earliest Turkish rugs, were in fact made in Syria or only traded through Damascus. Like Walter Denny, who has boldly attributed the para-Mamluks to Akkoyunlu Tabriz (*The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets*, Washington 2002, pp.19-29), Thompson tends, with due caution, towards a more easterly origin for the group, in either eastern Anatolia or western Iran.

Most of the carpets in Tabibnia's exhibition will be familiar to attentive HALI readers, either having passed through the auctions and then been reported in these pages, or come to the Milan dealer from the known holdings of leading international collectors and dealers. The selection includes a preponderance of complete carpets in good, or excellently restored, condition. In addition to those mentioned above, the exhibits include a particularly strong represent-

**This page, details:**  
10. Safavid animal carpet, central Persia, mid-16th century. Wool pile on a silk foundation, 2.74 x 3.84m (8'10" x 12'7")

11. Safavid kilim, Kashan, central Persia, ca. 1600. Silk and precious metal tapestry on a silk foundation, 1.11 x 2.13m (3'7½" x 7'0")

12. Safavid prayer rug, Persia, 17th (?) century. Wool pile with precious metal thread on a silk foundation, 1.04 x 1.62m (3'5" x 5'4")

13. Safavid red-ground palmette carpet, Esfahan, central Persia, 17th century. Wool pile on a cotton foundation, 2.53 x 5.90m (8'½" x 19'4")

**Facing page, details:**  
14. Dragon carpet, Caucasus, first half 17th century. All wool, 2.47 x 5.20m (8'1" x 17'0½")

15. Ottoman lobed-medallion carpet, Karapinar, central Anatolia, second half 16th century. All wool, 2.21 x 6.29m (7'3" x 20'7½")

16. Blossom and palmette carpet, Caucasus, 17th century. All wool, 2.20 x 4.50m (7'2½" x 14'9")

17. Ming palace carpet, China, 16th century. Wool pile on a cotton foundation, 2.02 x 4.70m

ation of Ottoman Turkish weavings: two small-pattern Holbeins (9), two Lotto arabesque rugs (6), small-and large-Medallion and Star (8) Ushaks, a Selendi 'Bird' rug, a 'Transylvanian' prayer rug, and a couple of early Anatolian 'village' weavings in good condition, one of them a lovely so-called 'Tintoretto' (small-medallion) design surrounded by a white-ground 'whirling leaf' border.

There is an equally strong selection of Safavid Persian workshop rugs, among them the Parish-Watson Tabriz medallion carpet, the much-published Bacri silk foundation central Persian animal carpet composite fragment (10), a very fine smaller 16th century silk-foundation red-ground rug with a pattern of birds, shrubs and palmettes and a large 17th century red-ground cotton foundation Esfahan in perfect condition (13). They join a small format so-called 'Polonaise' (yet another widely-used and potentially misleading term that Thompson eschews), and two 'Topkapı' group wool and precious metal on silk prayer rugs with Qur'anic inscriptions, for which Thompson, on stylistic grounds, prefers a 17th century dating (12) to the 16th century option proposed elsewhere. Rather surprisingly no 17th century Kerman 'Vase' or Khorasan carpets are included. There is also an east Mediterranean 'Chessboard' carpet and both Mamluk-style (3) and Cairene Ottoman (2) carpets, not to mention top-notch examples of early Caucasian Dragon (14) and Blossom (16) carpets as well as a Mughal shrub carpet (4).

A handful of previously unknown and/or unpublished material includes a Ming period Imperial Palace carpet from China (17), and a Safavid period silk and metal-thread tapestry panel (11). This latter item, which is without figurative content but has a central oval medallion, resembles a small group of silk 'kilims', apparently made in Kashan around 1600 for King Sigismund Vasa of Poland, that have belonged to the Wittlesbach family (the Bavarian royals) since the mid-17th century.

In the closing days of the four-week exhibition, between 7 and 10 November 2006, Dr Thompson, who is the May H. Beattie Fellow for Carpet Studies in the Department of Eastern Art in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University will present a series of four focused gallery lectures reflecting the major themes raised by the carpets on show and discussed in the catalogue: namely 'Turkish Carpets of the 15th Century', 'Mamluk Egypt & Damascus Problems', 'Safavid Persia, the Age of Luxury', and 'The Mystery of Karapinar Carpets'.

For anyone with an interest in the history of the oriental carpet, this important show and catalogue, which will be printed in separate English and Italian editions, should not be missed. Such a wide-ranging selection from the limited corpus of best-quality classical material is rather unlikely to be repeated in the foreseeable future.

**Milestones in the History of Carpets**  
Galeria Moshe Tabibnia,  
3 via Brera, Milan, Italy  
14 October – 11 November 2006

