

# SPUN FROM THE SOUL

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Five years after the so-called Hunting Carpet of Pope Pius IX was the centrepiece of the exhibition 'Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Iran 1501-1576' at the Palazzo Reale and the Poldi Pezzoli Museum in Milan, this historic carpet is again the pivot of a series of events of great interest to the international carpet community.

**THIS YEAR, PARALLEL EVENTS** In Milan pivot around this single but very important 16th century carpet. The first is 'Il Frammento Ritrovato. Il tappeto di caccia e altre storie' (The Rediscovered Fragment, The Hunting Carpet and other stories) at the Poldi Pezzoli; the second is the display of twelve classical carpets from the same museum that had not been shown since the Italian ICOC in 1999; the third is a small private show of high quality antique rugs at the Moshe Tabibnia Gallery, entitled 'Trame Rivelate' (Threads Revealed).

The Hunting Carpet was found in the late 19th century in the Quirinale Palace in Rome, in poor condition, having been cut into seven pieces. But despite its condition, it was recognised as a great work of art and the Italian Queen, Margaret of Savoy, ordered its restoration in order to decorate her private drawing room in the royal residence at the Villa di Monza, near Milan. The restoration was probably carried out in a tapestry workshop, either by Pietro Gentili in Rome, or in Florence. The treatment involved rejoining the seven pieces and reconstructing the missing parts, mainly in the borders, in tapestry weave.

At the beginning of the 20th century the Villa

di Monza was abandoned by the Royal Family and Margaret's son, King Victor Emmanuel III, gave the carpet to the state. In 1921 the Ministry of Culture placed it in the Brera Gallery in Milan, where it could never be displayed. In 1923, the Brera's director, Ettore Modigliani, arranged its permanent loan to the Poldi Pezzoli Museum, where it could be shown with the other carpets from the collection. In return, he obtained an outstanding 15th century polyptych that did not fit in the Poldi's rooms, but could be better displayed at the Brera.

Since its discovery, the Hunting Carpet has been cited and celebrated in almost all works dealing with Safavid weaving, not only for its beauty, but also because of the important inscription in the central cartouche, which bears the date 949 AH (1542-3 AD) and the name of its master weaver or designer, Ghiyath al-Din Jami. The fact that part of the original border had been replaced in the 19th century restoration was of little consequence, until Michael Franes recognised that a fragment offered at Christie's in London on 21 November 1985 (lot 25) was in fact the lower right hand corner of the border **1**. Published by Franes in his 1986 *Textile Gallery Brochure* No.2 (pl.X), the fragment

was later purchased by the Genoese collector Dr Alessandro Bruschettini, who first loaned it to the 'Hunt for Paradise' exhibition (which opened at the Asia Society in New York), to be displayed beside the entire carpet, and then donated it to the Poldi Pezzoli, to be rejoined in its original place, sewn to the existing reweave that remains beneath **2**. The restoration work is totally reversible and the fragment can be removed if necessary.

In celebration of the donation, the museum organised 'Il Frammento Ritrovato'. The border fragment has been analysed, cleaned and restored by Luisella Belleri of Open Care in Milan, who noticed, as Michael Franes had done before her, that the carpet does not have silk warps as was once thought, but cotton ones – the pink dyed silk fringe is tied onto the warp threads between 5-10 centimetres into the pile.

The most interesting feature of this fragment is the elegant corner solution, which was not known to the 19th century restorers, who simply copied the only surviving original border on the other end of the carpet. This suggests that the carpet may originally have had a proper corner solution in the lower border, but not on the upper



**1** Fragment from the right hand lower corner border of the Hunting Carpet of Pope Pius XI, Tabriz, second quarter 16th century. Wool and cotton pile on a silk and cotton foundation, 1.35 x 0.48m (4'5" x 1'7"). Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, Bruschettini Gift



**2** Matching detail of the right hand lower border of the Tabriz Hunting Carpet showing the late 19th century flatwoven restoration, on top of which **1** has now been sewn



one, reinforcing Jon Thompson's suggestion in the 2003 Asia Society catalogue that this masterpiece was probably not woven for the Shah in a royal workshop, but elsewhere for a local governor.

The other eleven carpets in the Poldi Pezzoli collection are displayed either in the same room as the Hunting Carpet, or in a ground floor gallery at the Palazzo Reale. All of them are well known and have been published several times, but for this occasion a new and updated edition of the Museum carpet guide, sponsored by the leading local dealer Moshe Tabibnia, has been printed with an English abstract.

Among these others, undoubtedly the best-known and most beautiful is the 16th century red-ground 'Animal' Kashan, also known as the 'Tigers' or the 'Darius of the Universe' carpet, one of the so-called 'Salting' group, and among the best of its type. The inscription running along the inner border is a poem, expressly composed for this rug praising its quality and beauty. *"This is not a rug, it is a white rose... a garden filled with red lilies and roses where nightingales elected their home... its warp and weft have been spun with the yarn of soul..."*

That this carpet belongs to the Salting group does not mean that it is a later copy – its well-documented history demonstrates its authenticity. It was purchased by Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli in 1855 in Milan at the Giovanni Fossati private auction for eighty Austrian Lira.

Other than the Kashan, until the opening of the museum in 1881 there were only two other rugs in the Poldi Pezzoli Collection – an outstanding Saryk Turkmen main carpet with the *temirjin-göl*, purchased in 1879, and an Ivory-ground Marasali Shirvan prayer rug, described in the museum's earliest inventory as "a very small Indian rug".

Another outstanding piece is a 16th century Turkish village rug with a large medallion design 4, that was included by May H. Beattie among the Karapinar weavings from central Anatolia in her seminal 1968 article in *Oriental Art*, 'Some Rugs of the Konya Region'. Both its beautiful central medallion and corners with pendants field design, and its ragged palmette border, recall the classical Ushak repertoire, but the weave and the colours are completely different. Very few of the known examples of this type share the black ground in the central medallion, border and spandrels.

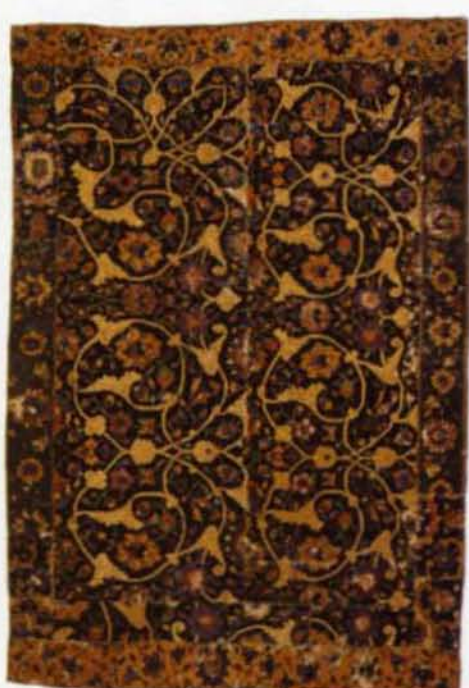
In addition to the two major Safavid carpets, my favourite in the collection is a tiny, apparently insignificant border fragment, a patchwork of smaller pieces recomposed to look like a small rug 5. It is woven with the *jufi-knot* and can thus be assigned to Khorasan in eastern Persia, and perhaps also to the 16th century. With its deep blue ground, the colours are gorgeous and the



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spiral vine pattern is most intriguing.

The other pieces are less exciting, but still well worth seeing. They include: a Star Ushak carpet with a palmette border, worn out but beautiful; a small Cairene Ottoman rug of the earliest type; an early 18th century Gordes prayer rug with columns; and three red ground palmette and cloudband design 16th and 17th century Esfahans.

**Moshe Tabibnia's** small but very interesting exhibition, with some exceptionally good pieces, was inspired by the Poldi Pezzoli collection. He wanted to show comparable carpets acquired in recent years on the international market. Indeed, some of his pieces are even better than those exhibited at the museum, in particular an exceptional Star Ushak in perfect condition with a similar border to the Poldi Pezzoli carpet, and a

**3** The Hunting Carpet of Pope Pius XI (detail), Tabriz, northwest Persia, dated 929 or 949 AH (1522 or 1542 AD). Wool and cotton pile on a silk and cotton foundation, 3.35 x 6.82m (11'0" x 22'4"). Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, DT1

**4** Turkish medallion rug, west or central Anatolia, mid-16th century. All wool, 1.58 x 2.23m (5'2" x 7'4"). Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, 2770

**5** Khorasan carpet border fragments, northeast Persia, late 16th century. Wool pile on a cotton foundation, 0.84 x 1.24m (2'9" x 4'1"). Poldi Pezzoli Museum, Milan, 2772

**6 overleaf** The Wher-Dur-laeher animal and tree carpet, northwest Persia, 17th/18th century. Wool pile on a cotton foundation. Moshe Tabibnia, Milan



very good and well-preserved 16th century red ground Esfahan. Another interesting piece is a 16th century 'Lotto' rug with the half-cartouche border, very similar to an example of the Bardini Museum in Florence – a Turkish rug type that is not represented in the Poldi Pezzoli. His small Cairene Ottoman rug may be a little later than the example in the museum, but is nicer and in better condition, and an outstanding early central Anatolian village rug (ex-Alexander Collection) may be compared to the Poldi Pezzoli Karapinar, even if the colours and weave are quite different.

Of course, there is little that can compare with the Hunting Carpet, other than the inscribed and dated Ardabil carpets in London and Los Angeles, or the silk carpets in Boston and Vienna, but Tabibnia does present an important and intriguing rug that may be seen as a descendant of the Hunting Carpet group 6. This is a 17th century northwest Persian animal and tree design carpet with naively drawn scenes akin to those of the Poldi's masterpiece, showing mounted huntsmen as well as hunters on foot armed with guns.

This beautiful rug belongs to a strange group, probably woven in Azerbaijan over a period of more than 150 years between the mid-17th century and the first quarter of the 19th (see HALL 73, 1994, pp. 90-99). The Tabibnia piece, known as the Durlaehar carpet after its first recorded owner, was more recently in the Wher Collection, Lugano. A very similar carpet with an identical border and analogous dimensions, formerly in the Joseph V. McMullan Collection, is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Curiously, another rug of this "amorphous" group, not included in Tabibnia's exhibition, may be compared to the Poldi Pezzoli Salting carpet. This is the so-called Halm Animal Carpet, also provenanced to the Wher Collection, which I had the good fortune to exhibit in my gallery in Florence in 1999 during the 9th ICOC (HALL 108, 2000, p. 149).

Tabibnia has written of his desire to co-operate with other Milanese institutions to promote the discovery, study and appreciation of textile art. 'Trame Rivelate' is intended not only to 'reveal' the links between different carpet productions, but also to unveil the first stage of the MATAM project.

MATAM is an acronym for Milan Antique Textile Art Museum, and is also a palindrome that works in Italian (Museo Arte Tessile Antica Milano). Tabibnia's most ambitious project to date, it involves not just the gathering together of an important collection and the building of a new museum – the model of which is proudly displayed in the exhibition – but also a close relationship with the city of Milan and its local authorities, no easy thing to achieve. The site in front of the Brera is perfect, and everything is ready for work to begin so that MATAM can open in 2011. An official announcement confirming the project will be made this autumn.

#### IL FRAMMENTO RITROVATO, IL TAPPETO DI CACCIA E ALTRE STORIE

Poldi Pezzoli Museum & Palazzo Royale, Milan  
22 May – 12 October 2008

#### TRAME RIVELATE

Moshe Tabibnia Gallery, via Brera, Milan  
22 May – 22 October 2008

