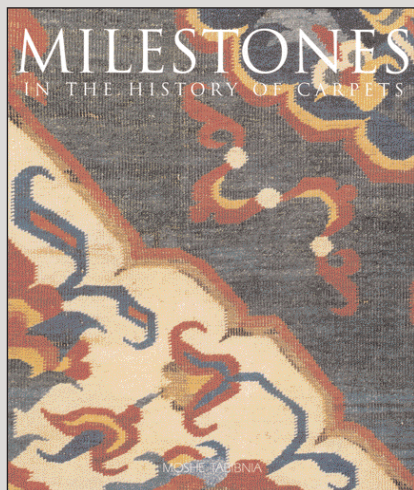


## BOOKS JON THOMPSON'S MILESTONES IN THE HISTORY OF CARPETS REVIEWED IN DEPTH BY JULIA BAILEY



**MILESTONES IN THE HISTORY OF CARPETS**  
**JON THOMPSON**  
 Moshe Tabibnia, Milan 2006  
 English and Italian editions,  
 288pp., 30 colour plates,  
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**REVIEW: JULIA BAILEY**

During the Milan ICOC in 1999, Moshe Tabibnia presented a thrilling array of classical carpets in his Via Brera gallery. Encouraged by the enthusiasm that exhibition generated, Tabibnia managed a mere seven years later to assemble – clearly by dedicated and fiscally bold pursuit – a collection of thirty carpet aristocrats that outdid even those he had shown during ICOC IX. An early and unknown ‘large-pattern Holbein’, the ex-Charles Grant Ellis ‘para-Mamluk’, and a sensational Karapinar were but a few stars among these new acquisitions, the ballyhooed display of which (HALI 149, pp.95–97) was to be catalogued by Jon Thompson. Splendid but ephemeral, the exhibition took place in October and November 2006, with no book to be had; only since has it become available.

Fortunately, *Milestones in the History of Carpets* is far more than an outdated souvenir – more, even, than the word ‘catalogue’ might suggest. Tabibnia’s carpets are the foci – the ‘milestones’ of the title – for Thompson’s reconstruction of carpet development from the 15th century onward, and for his attempts to place the carpet types exemplified by these outstanding specimens into broader artistic and cultural contexts (or to wrest them from contexts into which previous authors have put them).

The lavish production and fastidious printing of *Milestones* not only showcase Tabibnia’s collecting feat but also bolster Thompson’s scholarly undertaking. A crystalline detail of the Karapinar, reproduced on both slipcase and paper jacket, forecasts splendid photographic feats within the book, and indeed all thirty carpets are reproduced in near flawless colour, the largest ten as double-page foldout plates with accompanying full-page details. Almost two hundred carefully placed additional figures – colour photographs and a few beautifully rendered schematic drawings – help the reader navigate Thompson’s many references to related carpets, paintings, ceramics, and other comparanda. Page layout is spacious and orderly: text and figures fill two columns on the wide folios, with a narrower inner column reserved for captions. The use of footnotes rather than endnotes is a decided help, even if, for the truly dedicated reader, their abbreviated, author-date style demands frequent trips to the long bibliography at the end of the volume.

In the extended unillustrated introductory chapter, Thompson introduces the Timurid, Turkmen, Ottoman, and Mamluk dynastic players of the carpet-making lands during the 15th century, but also warns that in this era provision of carpet design by the court-sponsored scriptorium or design studio is the exception rather than the rule. He then lists the available tools for constructing a history of carpets: carbon-14 dating, depictions of carpets in European paintings and Persian manuscripts, archival documentation (which he downplays as insufficiently descriptive), archaeological fragments, and carpets themselves. As in his 2003 *Hunt for Paradise* catalogue, he argues that weavers of carpets with curvilinear designs worked from drawings rather than squared-paper knot plans, but here he acknowledges that early carpets with complex geometric interlaces would have required, if not such plans, at least very precise pattern guides. Finally he takes up the idea, proposed by Ellis in 1963, of a 15th century ‘international’ style of carpet design. Ellis believed Anatolia to be the source of this widely shared style; Thompson, in succeeding chapters, attempts to situate its origin further east.

The next two chapters, on 15th century carpets and their legacy, are by far the longest, most original, and most densely illustrated of the volume. Chapter 2, on Anatolian carpets, is constructed around an impressive roster of eleven carpets, including the aforementioned ‘large-pattern Holbein’, two ‘small-pattern Holbeins’, a more rustic and later ‘Holbein variant’, two ‘Lottos’, a substantial fragment of a large-medallion Ushak, and a complete star Ushak, plus two double-niche rugs and one with a reciprocal trilobe field design.

The exceptional large-pattern Holbein (Thompson labels it a ‘four-octagon carpet’ as part of his general attempt to avoid calling carpets after European painters who may have depicted them) serves as a springboard for a study of ‘stars-and-bars’ interlaces and volutes, the evolution of which he convincingly illustrates. Carbon-dated to the first half of the 15th century, the Tabibnia carpet is demonstrably akin to, but later than, a two-octagon carpet in the Vakıflar Museum in Istanbul. Nevertheless, Thompson rejects Walter Denny’s 13th century dating of the Vakıflar carpet and, more important, takes issue with the assumption that Anatolian Seljuk geometric interlace stonework provided the direct model for that carpet or any of its later relatives.

The interlace octagon carpet motif, he argues, arose and only occurs in the knotted-pile medium. Reprising Ellis’s hypothesis, he proposes that the Mamluk and Spanish carpets that seem to copy Turkish octagon designs (hence the ‘international’ designation) may, along with the Turkish carpets, all be descended from a common ancestor. On the basis of two rather insecurely moored late 14th century Persian paintings showing rugs with large octagons, he suggests that this common ancestor was native to western Iran. This is a shaky scaffold with which to support an origin theory, given the wealth of surviving or depicted Turkish octagon carpets as well as the abundance of interlace and polygon-star patterns in the arts of Seljuk and Ottoman Anatolia – even if the carpets, due to weaving constraints, adapted a singular version of these patterns. By way of analogy, one might note the appearance of an animal carpet in an indisputably early-14th century Persian painting from the Great Mongol *Shahnama*,





**Above:** 'Holbein' variant design rug, Anatolia, 16th century, 1.32 x 2.05m (4'4" x 6'9")

**Top right:** Ushak medallion carpet fragment, west Anatolia, late 15th century, 2.33 x 2.23m (7'8" x 7'4")

copied in Tabriz; no rug scholar to my knowledge has been led by this well-known representation to posit an Ur-production of animal carpets in northwestern Iran.

Thompson continues his line of thinking with regard to the field and Kufesque border patterns of two small-pattern Holbeins (or, in his words, 'carpet[s] with interlaced roundels'), placing them into chronological sequence by apt reference to Italian painting. A singular, more rustic 'Holbein variant' of uncertain date (above) has roundels that boast topsy-turvy interlaces – not a degenerated version of Holbein roundels but rather a separate 'international' motif, with parallels on Mamluk, Spanish, and older Anatolian carpets. The field motifs of Lotto carpets, he says, derive from a more curvilinear dec-

orative style – he illustrates a presumably early Persian carpet as a possible example – but the stages of geometricisation remain unknown.

Tabibnia's noble fragment of an Ushak medallion carpet (above) prompts Thompson to take particular issue with Julian Raby, who has argued that these unprecedentedly large and curvilinear carpets were first produced in the Ottoman court workshop of Mehmed II (r.1451–80). Noting their modest width, comparing in great detail a series of splayed or inward-curling 'oak' – actually lotus – leaves represented on the carpets and in other media, and summarily pronouncing the Ushak floral tracery "inept and unconvincing" (an observation belied by this splendid fragment), he concludes that Ushaks were never Ottoman court rugs but rather were part of a "blossoming experimental activity in the commercial looms of Ushak in the late fifteenth century," informed by "influences from Central Asia via Iran..." Not considered here is the identity of the clientele for these revolutionary carpets – who, if not the Ottoman court itself, might have fostered their new style and commissioned so many of them, since Europeans apparently didn't import them until the mid-16th century.

Chapter 3, 'Iran, the Turkmen Territories, and Mamluk Egypt: The Legacy of the Fifteenth Century', is built around just three of Tabibnia's carpets: the rare and marvellously preserved 'para-Mamluk', a handsome chequerboard rug (overleaf, left), and a large, three-medallion, Mamluk-style carpet made after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt. None of these is ostensibly Iranian or Turkmen, but by now the reader can probably anticipate the eastward drift of the arguments to come. Thompson begins by noting that Egyptian pile carpets made before the second half of the 15th century, mentioned derogatively by the Italian traveller Barbaro and existing as archaeological fragments, looked quite different from the surviving carpets we call 'Mamluk', which appear as if out of nowhere and have little relation to other Mamluk arts.

What Kurt Erdmann interpreted as Mamluk carpets in Italian paintings before about 1540 are, on closer examination, members of the group that Ellis dubbed 'para-Mamluk'. Their depiction coincides with the mention in Venetian inventories



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of *tapedi damaschini*, which wanes at about the time actual Mamluk carpets supplant the so-called para-Mamluks in paintings. Although inconsistent in structure, many of the intact examples of the misnamed para-Mamluks, which Thompson now relabels *tapedi damaschini*, have the mitred corner solutions standard in rugs depicted in 15th century Persian painting, and also feature interlace octagons and other motifs of the 'international style'. Barbaro, who disparaged the carpets of Cairo, greatly praised the ones he saw at the White Sheep Turkmen court in Tabriz in 1474; *tapedi damaschini*, speculates Thompson, may be the very sorts of rugs he was admiring. Here, obviously, one must ask why, if these rugs came from Turkmen Tabriz, the Venetians identified them as '*damaschini*'? Not that geographic misnomers, for instance 'Polonaise', are unknown.

Chequerboard carpets, Thompson argues, represent a continuation or last phase of the *tapedi damaschini*. The sudden appearance of Mamluk carpets probably dates to the reign of Qaitbay (1468-96), who sponsored an artistic revival emanating from Cairo; Thompson theorises that just as an influx of painters from the disbanded Shiraz court of the Black Sheep Turkmen prince Pir Budaq aided the revival of painting under Qaitbay, émigré craftsmen from the same Turkmen milieu may have given Mamluk carpets their new look, which shares 'international style' features with *tapedi damaschini*.

Chapter 4 centres on an Egyptian carpet boasting an exuberant amalgam of Ottoman styles, including pairs of wavy lines, sawtooth leaves and palmettes, and the most recent repertoire of tulips, carnations, and other naturalistic flora. Thompson contends that high-quality Egyptian imports like this rug served the needs of the Ottoman court during the second half of the 16th century, while serviceable carpets from Ushak furnished the huge construction projects undertaken at that time. This dichotomy of use seems too strict; according to Ottoman accounts for the Süleymaniye, for instance, ten "very large, superior" carpets were commissioned from Egypt in 1551; two years later the Kadi of Güre, near Ushak, was ordered to oversee production of more carpets, to be woven speedily and without deviation from the provided 'model' (*nümune*), which were destined for use in the same imperial complex.

The three early Safavid carpets of Chapter 5 include a medallion carpet of the type often reflexively assigned to Tabriz, the first Safavid capital; since so many of these carpets are not 'court quality', Thompson considers this geographic attribution unjustified. Comparing the Tabibnia medallion carpet to the dated Poldi-Pezzoli hunting carpet in Milan, he concludes that both originate from a "regional workshop in the second quarter of the sixteenth century." A fragmentary luxury carpet with a lac-dyed crimson ground embellished by palmettes, clouds, and a host of real and mythical animals does merit courtly status: it and an intact twin in Vienna are close relatives of the definitively royal Emperor carpets, one in Vienna and the other in New York. Thompson convincingly relates the borders of a third rug – a remarkably preserved shrub carpet (facing page, right) discovered in an English country house – to the 'compass and rule' style of carpets depicted by the renowned painter Bihzad, who was brought from Herat to Tabriz to head the Safavid scriptorium.

By the 17th century, Thompson notes, "the history of carpets becomes a little clearer," and his entries on the five Persian carpets featured in Chapter 6 – a silk and metal-thread

carpet (whose misnomer 'Polonaise' is shunned), a silk and metal tapestry, a near-pristine example of the crimson-ground carpets now often assigned to Esfahan (without, Thompson maintains, "credible evidence"), and two inscribed wool and metal-thread prayer rugs of a type in the Topkapı Collection – grow shorter and less comprehensive.

The several hundred extant silk and metal-thread carpets, Thompson insists, cannot all have been made in the reign of Shah Abbas I (d.1629); most exhibit a more exuberant style shared by arts such as tile and plasterwork that date nearer the reign of his great-grandson Abbas II (r.1642–66). To support this argument visually he uses but a single illustrative figure. His discussion of silk and metal shared-warp ('toothed') tapestries, although more plentifully illustrated, is primarily devoted to associating Tabibnia's example with a small group of such pieces purchased in Kashan in 1601 for the Polish king Sigismund III Vasa.

Thompson next provides a lively historiographic summary of the odd and flashily deluxe prayer rugs, from their attribution to 19th century Turkish workshops by Kurt Erdmann to their recent rehabilitation as Persian antiques. But his scepticism toward the current view that these carpets were a Safavid gift to the Ottoman court in the 1560s or 1570s, and his argument that they more likely date from the mid-17th century, are unsupported by images of carpets or other arts from either era.

A pleasing prayer rug and a small white-ground 'bird' carpet of the type now assigned to Selendi are respectable representatives of Turkish carpet production after 1550, the subject of Chapter 7; Thompson succinctly discusses their dating, village provenance, design relation to Ottoman court carpets or tile decoration, and concentration in Transylvanian churches. But the stunning and hitherto unknown Karapinar steals his attention in this chapter, just as it stole Tabibnia's show.

An enduring characteristic of rugs from Karapinar is the use of juxtaposed colours without separating outlines, suggesting derivation from another textile medium. Rejecting appliqué, Thompson lights convincingly on shared-warp tapestry: as May Beattie pointed out, Karapinar replicates the 'toothed' effect to be seen in a small group of coarsely woven tapestries of uncertain provenance used to furnish Ottoman campaign tents (an effect also visible, with magnification, in the much finer Kashan silk and metal tapestry in Tabibnia's show). In another speculative design-source foray, Thompson takes up the provenance of the wool tapestries, using their S-spun structure and what he sees as their combined Ottoman and Persian design repertoire to suggest their manufacture in Syria. The Karapinar itself is decidedly Turkish. On the basis of its presumed wool-tapestry ancestry and the depiction of a similar carpet in a Scottish painting of circa 1620, and taking into account the limits of its curiously early Carbon-14 ranges, Thompson dates Tabibnia's premier specimen to the late 16th century.

Chapter 8, on carpets "from the Caucasian Khanates" – Thompson doesn't localise them further – features a dragon carpet with a large and well-rendered cast of mythological beasts and a splashy floral 'sunburst' carpet. He traces dragon carpet fauna to Safavid animal-style carpets and accepts Ellis's idea that a group of 17th century Kerman rugs, now represented only by a single fragment in Munich, provided the basis of their design. He respectfully rejects John Wer-time and Richard Wright's 'Tabriz hypothesis', arguing that dragon and floral carpets, despite their size, could have been





**Above:** 'Tapedi damaschini' with a chequerboard or compartment design, mid-16th-early 17th century. 1.94 x 2.75m (6'4" x 9'0")

**Top right:** Shrub design carpet, Persia, 16th century. 1.53 x 2.19m (5'0" x 7'2")

produced in the sort of "self-financed, home-based enterprise" typical of the Caucasus, and pointing out that their design legacy is visible in later Caucasian rugs, not those from the environs of Tabriz.

Chapters 9 and 10 are each devoted to a single carpet. Representing China is an intact honey-coloured Ming carpet with a forceful ascending composition of vines, lotus blossoms, and leaves. Thompson, after briefly recapitulating the evidence for Chinese rug weaving, takes carpets descriptively back in time from the 19th century to the Ming period (1368-1643), from which an elite group of palace carpets, including this one, survive.

From Mughal India comes red-ground carpet with individual flowering plants in field and border – transcriptions into pile of a naturalistic style of botanical depiction introduced into the Mughal court via European herbals and codified in the arts under Shah Jahan. This carpet, Thompson



maintains, probably once belonged to the collection of the Maharajas of Jaipur. Perhaps it is the concluding 'milestone' in the volume because its near-pictorial style contrasts so markedly with the abstract geometry of the octagon carpet at the beginning.

The scepticism I have expressed regarding some of Jon Thompson's theories – particularly his Iranophilia in certain matters of design origin and carpet production – is not meant to deny that the movements of artists and works of art from one place to another, whether westward or eastward, led to the enrichment of existing styles and the introduction of new ones. Attested by historical record and visual evidence, this phenomenon conditions the study of other Islamic arts, and Thompson's effort to apply it to carpets is salutary. One may hope that his more controversial theories will spur lengthier discussion in, say, future papers for ICOC and articles in HALI.

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Left unresolved by either the exhibition or the book, however, is the fate of the distinguished collection that gave rise to them both. Are the thirty carpets destined to be scattered among private clients and those few museums with the will and funding to acquire them? In the front matter of the volume, Moshe Tabibnia cryptically hints at an alternative: "...the establishment in Milan of the Museo dell'Arte Tessile" with "some of the masterpieces published in this volume" becoming "the core of this dream." Should his dream be realised, *Milestones in the History of Carpets* will be not laggard, but laudably ahead of deadline.