





CARPETS RETURN TO VENICE

Two intimately related loan exhibitions of classical carpets, one in Brescia, the other in Venice, have made headlines this spring.

Ben Evans toured both shows with collector Romain Zaleski. Additional commentary by others fortunate enough to recently visit Italy



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1 (Previous page) West Anatolian 'Transylvanian'-type rugs from the Zaleski collection displayed in 'Black Church' style in Brescia

2 'Serenissime Trame' at Palazzo Ca' d'Oro showing small-pattern 'Holbein', lobed-medallion Ushak and 'Lotto' arabesque carpets with Girolamo dai Libri's *Madonna of the Umbrella* of 1530

3 Large-pattern 'Holbein' and 'Damasceno' carpets with Vincenzo Foppa's *Madonna and Child with Saints* fresco of 1485

4 Large-pattern 'Holbein' carpet, Western Anatolia, first half 15th century. 2.60 x 5.02 m (8' 6" x 16' 6"). Zaleski collection, MT 175929

Approaching Ca' d'Oro along Venice's Grand Canal, one travels along one of the smallest but greatest of the world's trade routes. Where modern Venice trades in tourism, old Venice traded in goods and power. Five hundred years ago, imposing palaces guarding the canal were meant to impress merchants rather than today's visitors. From the windows and balconies of these edifices to commerce, built to convey both the power of the city state and the success of its traders, the works of painters such as Carpaccio show oriental carpets hanging as conspicuous emblems of prestige on high days and holidays.

While the beauty and majesty of the palaces remain the same, today they convey power and influence through the cultural institutions that occupy them. For the duration of the exhibition 'Serenissime Trame' (extended to 10 September 2017), they also offer a subtle link to the past through the large carpet canvases hanging over the canal from the loggia and windows of Palazzo Ca' d'Oro. The carpets reflect two lives of this palace, the first from the 14th-16th century, when carpets and rich textiles may well have dangled above the canal, and the second in the 19th century when Baron Giorgio Franchetti housed his art collection here, restoring the traditions of rich artistic patronage as well as artistic treasures to Venice.

The theme of returning and restoring resonates with this exhibition, since it returns carpets to view in the rooms of the home/gallery Franchetti decorated in grand style in order to dedicate it and his collection to the city, an intent that his heirs ultimately fulfilled in 1923. There are three rugs on permanent display, including a small-pattern Holbein fragment, that have returned to the museum after conservation by Open Care, Milan, the Bruschettini Foundation for Islamic and Asian Art, Genoa, and Galleria Moshe Tabibnia, Milan.



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This also marks a return to public view of oriental carpets in Venice. It is a great surprise that carpets, and indeed the woven arts per se, so inextricably linked to the prestige of the city, are so poorly represented in public collections. This past seems to be outside the consciousness of the cultural life of the modern city. Aside from two Polonaise carpets in the back of the museum of St Mark's and two other carpets in the Museo Correr, visitors to Venice would remain ignorant that Venice was, for many years, the gateway to the East and entirely eastward looking—its fortunes established through its control of trade with that part of the world. When in 1520 Venice sent Cardinal Wolsey of England sixty 'Damascene' carpets, this was a clear indication that oriental carpets were items of prestige and trade in the city in the 16th century.

The catalogue accompanying the exhibition has an essay written by Giovanni Curatola, professor of archaeology and history of Islamic art at the University of Udine, entitled 'A Love Story: Venice and Oriental Carpets' explaining how and why carpets appear in paintings from the Veneto from the 13th century onwards and the centrality of their place in Venetian society.

It is shame that it is only this excellent temporary exhibition that has placed carpets back on view in Venice. While I was there it was clear that the display of carpets from

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the Zaleski collection alongside contemporaneous paintings was greatly appreciated by visitors: more than 20,000 people have gone through the galleries. My visit allowed me to witness the surprised and delighted reactions when it dawned on them that the carpets and the paintings were the same age.

Like any outstanding exhibition, 'Serenissime Trame' was such a success because beyond its marriage of wonderful carpets with paintings depicting these exact types, it engages visitors on many different levels. Not only does it return classical carpets to a place of institutional prominence in Venice, but the history of oriental carpets in the city is personified by the return of one particular carpet: the 15th-century large-pattern Holbein (4).

This previously unrecorded carpet was sold at auction in Venice in 2002 and for many years had lain a mere stone's throw from Ca' d'Oro, under the bed of the collector Carlo Monzino in his Venice home. Although a century later, the carpet and the tale of this sale offer a reminder of the unparalleled riches of Venice that were sought out and sold, most notably in the late 19th and early 20th century, to international collectors and connoisseurs including Baron Franchetti.

That such an important carpet had remained undiscovered for many years speaks either of the lowly state of oriental

Ushak & Esfahan

Enclosed on one side by a bustling pedestrian thoroughfare and the aquatic highway of the Grand Canal on the other, the privacy of the Palazzo Ca' d'Oro offers sanctuary in which to calmly consider the majesty of the carpets and paintings that serenely adorn the exhibition.

Upon entering, one passes beneath the gaze and seeming blessing of the Virgin Mary by Girolamo dai Libri (Verona, ca.1474- after 1555) in his *Madonna dell'Ombrello*, 1530. It is no accident that the remarkable 15th-century four-lobed Ushak medallion carpet from the Zaleski collection (5) is laid out in front of this altarpiece, as it bears the exact same border design of 'plumed palmettes and bi-partite leaves' as the carpet upon which the enthroned Madonna and Child in the painting rest. Carpets were rarely depicted on the floor in these masterpiece paintings as they were perceived as objects of such great desire that were instead flaunted hanging over balconies or on raised table tops. If a figure was shown to be standing upon such an object, then it was only their royal or religious stature that allowed it, elevating the importance of the carpet still further. The distinctive design of the Zaleski Ushak carpet originated in the Ottoman court *nakkashane* (atelier) and relates to a number of other motifs produced there in the 15th century, including those found on tile designs (see Jon Thompson, 'Carpets in the Fifteenth Century', *Carpets and Textiles in the Iranian World 1400-1700*, Oxford, 2010, pp.31-57).

By displaying contemporaneous paintings and carpets side by side, the exhibition consciously provides important documentary evidence. The Zaleski Ushak is a rare and near complete survivor, although it has at some stage lost its decorative woven outer guard stripe. In dai Libri's altarpiece one can see that both the inner minor stripe and the main border pattern are the same as in the Zaleski carpet, allowing us to assume that the missing outer guard stripe could have displayed the same linked, scrolling leafy meander as that depicted in the painting.

The popularity of these beautiful court carpets is attested to by the thriving export market from the early 16th century. Ushak carpets began to be depicted in western paintings in the first half of the 16th century and were a favoured design throughout many of the European courts, including that of





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5 Ushak four-lobed medallion carpet, west Anatolia, second half 15th century. 1.93 x 4.21 m (6' 4" x 13' 10"). Zaleski collection, MT 124470

6 'Polonaise' silk and metal thread rug, Esfahan, Central Persia, first half 17th century. 1.42 x 1.99 m (4' 1" x 6' 6"). Zaleski collection, MT 105975

England where, in works by the court painters Hans Holbein and Hans Eworth, King Henry VIII (r.1509-1547) is depicted standing on top of an Anatolian Ushak carpet ('Portraits of King Henry VIII', HALI 3/3, 1981, pp.176-181).

The exhibition presents three themes: carpets, paintings and collecting, yet the title is a reflection on Serenissime Venice itself, celebrating both the sovereign state and the maritime republic. Following the return of Marco Polo from his travels, the Venetians were introduced to the luxurious qualities of raw silk from whence a long love affair with sumptuous fabrics and textiles began. The silk

and metal-thread 'Polonaise' carpet from the Zaleski collection epitomises this (6). Its shimmering palette of pastel colours set upon a once gleaming silver metal-thread ground echoes the rich fabrics used in the robes of many rulers, as seen in Lazzaro Bastiani's portrait of the Venetian doge, *Francesco Foscari* (1457-1460), in the Correr Museum, Venice. It also has an evident affinity with the gleaming golden spires that hover above the Basilica of St Mark and the foliate terminals and pierced roundels centred by quatrefoil motifs that adorn the neighbouring Gothic arcaded gallery of the Doge's Palace.

European visitors to Persia such as John Fryer in 1676 commented specifically on the richness of the silk textiles and carpets in Esfahan that had special bazaars handling the sale of rugs 'both woolen and silk, intermixed with Gold and Silver, very costly, which are the peculiar manufacture of this country' (quoted by M.S. Dimand & Jean Mailey, *Oriental Rugs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, 1973, p.59). Sir John Chardin, who visited Persia between 1666 and 1672, also noted that the workshops were allowed, when they had time, to work for clients other than the shah. Many rugs were given as diplomatic gifts from the Royal Court, including an example gifted in 1603 to Marino Grimani, then doge of Venice, 'to become part of the treasury', where it remains today along with four other rugs 'of silk and gold' gifted by an embassy in 1622.

A large proportion of the 'Polonaise' carpets made at the time ended up in Europe. Some were directly commissioned, such as a group of eight carpets ordered by Sigismund Vasa III of Poland in 1601. These appear to have been delivered in 1602, some or all of which then passed by marriage into the Wittelsbach family and are now in the Residenz Museum in Munich. Further examples survived into this century in the collections of the kings of Denmark, the Habsburgs in Austria, the Czartoryskis in Poland, the grand dukes of Liechtenstein, and the royal house of Savoy in Italy.

This exhibition successfully illustrates the importance of the role of Renaissance painters in recording the styles of the carpets that arrived from the East and which became so highly regarded by the Venetians in the West.

Louise Broadhurst, Head of Department, Oriental Rugs & Carpets, Christie's



The road from Damascus

The Ellis-Wher-Zaleski 'damaschino' carpet is one of those impressive carpets that jumps out from among the others, and for multiple reasons shocks me every time I see it: an early 16th-century carpet, extraordinarily well preserved, characterised by the balanced relationship between the palette and the rich, but still sharp, kaleidoscopic decoration.

Furthermore, I have always looked at it in order to comprehend the potentially misleading 'para-Mamluk' label coined by Charles Grant Ellis, and to understand which were the real 'damascene' carpets, as mentioned in the documents of the time.

This time, in Venice's Ca' d'Oro Palace, next to Francesco Beccaruzzi's almost contemporaneous portrait of a man from the Uffizi in Florence, I admired this carpet even more intensely, being aware of standing in front of a piece that was already extremely well appreciated 500 years ago. Indeed, it was chosen as guest star in that painted scene, which probably was a self-congratulatory exercise, where each painted object served to enhance the painted character. Nobility. Excellence. History. Art. The paintings are images which are better able to express the importance of these artefacts than words.

Moreover, in Venice it was marvellous to see Girolamo dai Libri's huge canvas of the *Madonna dell'Ombrello*, lent by the Castelvecchio Museum of Verona, in which a 'Lotto' arabesque carpet adorns the elevated space, special and holy to the Virgin (2). Close by, almost as if it had materialised from the painting, is a true carpet with an ornate lattice: the rare, severe and hypnotic 'ornamented'-style Lotto formerly in the Aita collection, almost perfectly and incredibly preserved. This exciting and immediate correlation between the surviving original carpet and the original painted 'document' was for me the most fascinating aspect of this incredible exhibition.

Luca Brancati, arts consultant, Turin

carpets in the late 20th century, or simply that Venetian palaces still contain many riches: Kurt Erdmann suggested that the latter was the case in his contribution to a 1966 volume about Venice and the Orient when he wrote, '...I am convinced that in the palazzi of Venice, as in those of Florence, there are still many pieces.'

The Holbein demonstrates the importance of the Zaleski collection in its scope, range, quality and intent as well as the importance of the exhibition itself; I discovered at the exhibition that the collection consists of over 1,500 items and that 1,300 have now been donated to the Fondazione Tassara, recently formed for the express purpose of creating a carpet museum. The Fondazione holding includes three hundred carpets from the classical period, and the exhibition shows that the quality in this area is as good as many institutional collections—being able to exhibit three Holbein carpets emphasises the point.

Walking around the Venice exhibition with the collector, it is apparent that like most good collections, its assembly is a collaborative partnership, in this case with Moshe Tabibnia. The shape of the collection is directed by Tabibnia but is underpinned by a genuine passion for pile woven rugs and a strong sense of appreciation of colour. Indeed seeing the three

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Holbeins together is an exercise in understanding both the colour and texture of the carpets.

The large-pattern Holbein is a different animal to the small-pattern pieces. Just as it is clear that many of the Lottos are woven in different workshops or locations, the large-pattern Holbein has a different woven structure and colours to the others which are much more traditionally west Anatolian in style, weave and colour. What is instructive is that it has many more colours than any image suggests, with variations in the blues and greens, and reds and pinks. These highlight the secondary field motifs as well as the interspersed twinkling stars that have shifts in colour, enhancing the design and the way in which it is read. Interestingly the field has subtle design details that help to show the hand of the weavers, in particular the small horizontal line of 'S' motifs used to even up the space between motifs in the right-hand top field. This anomaly turns the carpet from an iconic image into a recognisable handwoven carpet of great virtuosity.

The way colour is used can change a rug design dramatically, but when it is used with skill, precision and knowledge of the nuances of artistic composition, rugs can be transformed from weavings into masterpieces. This is best indicated by the two small-pattern Holbein rugs, which appeared to be quite

7 East Mediterranean
'Damaschino' or 'Para-Mamluk'
rug, southeast Anatolia, western
Iran or Syria (?), early 16th century.
1.41 x 2.07 m (4' 8" x 6' 9"). Zaleski
collection, MT 111203



Caucasian dragons & Ottoman flowers

The dragon is an archaic symbol of power, present in many ancient civilisations from the Far East to western Europe, and its use in carpets can be found in many different productions and at various levels of stylisation.

The early Caucasian carpet in the Zaleski collection at Ca' d'Oro, once in the Wher Collection, has been published by, among others, Marino Dall'Oglio (*HALI* 2/1, 1979, p.17, fig.3), Şerare Yetkin (*Early Caucasian Carpets in Turkey II*, 1978, pp.16-17, pl.121) and Jon Thompson (*Milestones in the History of Carpets*, 2006, pl.27, pp.246-50), who calls it '... probably the best and earliest example of a sizeable family of weavings known as dragon carpets, which feature stylized but recognizable mythical animals.'

It is indeed striking for its monumental size, its colours and most of all for the clarity of its design and the unusual number of stylised but clearly identifiable beasts, always in pairs, first and foremost four couples of large confronting dragons. None of these beasts (we also see two pairs of antelopes along the central axis) are static, but are portrayed in energetic poses, as if running on the carpet's surface. The dragons in particular seem to shake their serpentine bodies, roaring and spewing flames from their jaws. Their power is so great that these mythical beasts give their name to the entire group, even when the dragons are absent, as in later examples.

I consider it the prototype of the peculiar dragon carpet group from which most of the Caucasian/Azerbaijani production of the 18th and 19th centuries stems. Many scholars think all these carpets are provincial works derived from Safavid court examples, but in my opinion this is simplistic. Even if inspired by court examples, their patterning is more complex and shows great creativity that can be explained only in the context of a sophisticated workshop, where real artists developed a new style in carpet weaving.

Early dragon carpets are quite rare and often in bad condition or fragmentary. In addition to red-grounds like this one, others have a very dark brown field, including a famous carpet in Berlin's Museum of Islamic Art, and another, once in the Bardini Collection and currently in a private collection in Italy. At first sight, the dark-ground rugs appear more dramatic, but none of them surpasses the elegance and perfect balance of this red-ground piece.

After the Ottoman conquest of the Mamluk Sultanate of Cairo in 1517, exactly 500 years ago, a new floral repertoire replaced the more geometric Mamluk style. Thus carpets woven in Egypt under Ottoman rule, the so-called 'Cairene Ottoman' court carpets, bear a variety of floral and naturalistic designs, developed in court studios, similar to the ornaments we find in other mediums such as luxury silk textiles, velvets and pottery. Initially these carpets were probably woven for the court's own use or commissioned as diplomatic gifts, but soon they began to be produced for the trade and on special commission by western, mainly Italian, merchants. It is well known that Italian court inventories often mention carpets called 'cairini' or 'cagiarini'.

The outstanding carpet in the Zaleski collection has shining wool and is in pristine condition. Its monumental dimensions suggest that it could be one of the earliest examples woven for the Ottoman court. Once with Milan's Davide Halevim (sold at Christie's London, 14 February 2001; HALI 115, 2001, p.41, fig.6), it shows the grandeur and sophistication of Cairene court workshop carpets at their highest level. A typical feature of the patterns of these carpets is the small round medallion, a green disc placed in the centre of the red field, quite different to the ogival medallions of the more common large-medallion Ushaks made in west Anatolia during the same period.

This round medallion is like a basket of flowers of various types, including the characteristically stylised tulips and carnations of the Ottoman floral style. In addition to these flowers we see the wavy lines of the *çintamani* motif, another typical feature of the Ottoman style of this period. Quartered, the pattern of the central medallion is repeated in the four corners of the red field. The border shows a pattern of palmettes and sickle leaves (*saz* leaves as they are often called) and has very elegant, perfectly balanced corner solutions: diagonal palmettes aligned exactly with the corresponding ones, placed in the middle of the inner central disc.

A similar medallion-and-corners design appears in other examples, which are often woven in a squarer format, making them suitable as table covers, as they were mostly used in the West, rather than as floor coverings. This happens, for instance, in another outstanding carpet once in the Rothschild



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Collection and now in an Italian private collection, which was exhibited in Genoa a few years ago (HALI 181, Autumn 2014, pp.118-19). The Rothschild example shows the *çintamani* device only in the quartered corner medallions and not in the centre, while another famous example, the cross-shaped table rug in the Victoria and Albert Museum (no. 151-1883) has a central medallion exactly like the present carpet (HALI 4/1, 1981, p.45, fig.11).

Alberto Boralevi, dealer and scholar, Florence

8 Caucasian Dragon carpet, Azerbaijan, ca. 1600. 2.47 x 5.20 m (8' 1" x 17' 11"). Zaleski collection, MT 149741

9 Cairene medallion carpet, Ottoman Egypt, second half 16th century. 3.10 x 4.86 m (10' 2" x 15' 11"). Zaleski collection, MT 107568

different to each other but share exactly the same patterns; the use of colour obscures the similarity. Only the lack of interlaces in the secondary motifs distinguishes these two designs, thereby providing a lesson in the primacy of colour in creating a good rug design.

At one time Venice was considered a potential home for the Zaleski collection—and indeed could there be a better place in Venice than Ca' d'Oro with its Franchetti and Rothschild heritage and spacious rooms? However, another serious option may well be the nearby city of Brescia, with its wonderful museum and obliging municipality. The city was a willing witness to another Zaleski collection display of rugs during May–June 2017, with an installation of 'Transylvanian' rugs in the 18th-century Rococo 'Ridotto' (foyer) of the city's Teatro Grande (1). Within the two tiers of this grand entrance, a group of Transylvanian rugs was hung, almost in 'Black Church' style, from the balconies and loggia among the ornate decoration. Interestingly, while the churches of Transylvania were mostly whitewashed after the 16th–17th centuries, many of the elements have a Rococo or Baroque style and thus the rugs seem to fit into this style of decoration perfectly. Lit beautifully, the carpets glowed like emblems or crests, making subtle reference to earlier painters' images of carpets hanging off loggias in Venice during the Renaissance.

The siting of the Venice exhibition at Ca' d'Oro matches the legacy of the Franchetti collection, a family whose name is associated with many fine classical carpets, and also the Bargello collection in Florence, with the quality of the Zaleski collection. It is clear that the collection demands a similar legacy and the rug world will be a richer place for the eventual establishment of a museum. I do, and indeed we should all, look forward to seeing how and where this develops.

Ben Evans

Anatolia to Appalachia

One knows about this carpet for many years from pictures, and about its appearance at a provincial auction house in Asheville, a small town in the Blue Ridge Mountains. One knows of the dramatic sale, available for all to see online in the early days of the internet, when the new medium still provided surprises. In other words, one is faced with a legend.

What was previously only known from pictures, suddenly lies at an impressive six metres in length at your feet. If one were inclined to pathos, one would certainly try to describe the first impression with a word like 'majestic'.

Despite the relatively dense drawing in the medallions, the carpet looks extraordinarily well balanced. This is due to the generosity of the composition and its precise execution, as well as the unusual regularity of weave, which it shares with the so-called Ottoman court kilims.

But there is something that touches even deeper, that Dennis Dodds tried to describe in HALI 129 using the word 'painterly'. Although the carpet appears to be very large and two-dimensional, a kind of plasticity arises, especially in the medallions, due to the fact that the white areas act here like the white highlights of a painting or ink drawing.

Even more important is the basic colour, abrupt in many nuances, and its play with the medallions floating above it and the caterpillar-like border frame: a light aquamarine or blue with small petrol-blue portions, similar to the deep colour encountered in the Gothic art in the permanent exhibition of the Franchetti Collection in Ca' d'Oro. In the Karapinar carpet, this colour creates a relaxed spatiality that, in perfect interaction with the vitality of the details in the foreground, results in an atmosphere of almost metaphysical transcendence.

Gebhart Blazek, gallerist, Graz

10 'Karapinar' medallion carpet (detail), Central Anatolia, 16th century. 2.21 x 6.29m (7' 3" x 20' 8"). Zaleski collection, MT 138544

11 Cairene Ottoman and 'Karapinar' medallion carpets from the Zaleski collection, with artworks from the Franchetti collection in 'Serenissime Trame' at Ca' d'Oro, Venice



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Safavid splendour

'Serenissime Trame', the Venice exhibition of the Zaleski collection of Middle Eastern carpets with paintings from the Italian Renaissance, was glorious. It created a rare opportunity to see these distinct cultural media together in the same room, briefly. The reunion also allowed a comparative experience of colour that print and digital media cannot match.

Its narrative was deceptively simple: exceptional carpets from Turkish, Syrian, Iranian and Indian contexts were displayed across four sections, and interspersed with a few European paintings: from a Titian blonde and a man in black, to several outstanding Madonnas. These 15th and 16th-century scenes all feature carpets (underfoot, on a table or over a balcony): the designs and colours are painted with a level of care that proves how much the carpets mattered to the Italian painters and to their wealthy and discerning patrons.

11 Safavid animal combat carpet, Central Persia, second half 16th century. 2.74 x 3.84 m (9' 0" x 11' 5"). Zaleski collection, MT 178482

12 Safavid palmette and cloud-band carpet in situ at Ca d'Oro, Esfahan, first quarter 17th century. 2.11 x 4.92 m (6' 11" x 16' 2"). Zaleski collection, MT 140705

These dated European paintings are time capsules for the study of carpet consumption: we see Turkish and Syrian carpets as new and glamorous imports, the proud property of traders, flagging up their business success across the Mediterranean. Holding the exhibition in Venice was a master stroke: stepping away from the objects for a moment, I was on the balcony of Palazzo Ca' d'Oro, looking onto the Grand Canal and at the historic city, built on international seafaring wealth. There is a good reason why Italy became a major source of Safavid and Ottoman-period carpets in the late 19th century, when wealthy Americans, British and Germans began to collect them. Retained in domestic households, such carpets had long been part of Italy's mercantile heritage.

It may seem self-evident to demonstrate this connection, but I often see it ignored in displays of European painting. Last year, I visited another great trading city to see 'Asia in Amsterdam' at the Rijksmuseum. This too was an absorbing narrative of merchant activity and the trade in luxury goods, this time by the Dutch East India Company in the 17th and 18th centuries. Carpet scholarship has long noted the glowing presence of Safavid carpets, ostentatiously included in so many of the paintings of the Dutch Golden Age. Several such paintings were in that Amsterdam show, but there was almost no mention of these Persian carpet 'portraits' in labels or catalogue.

Red-ground carpets attributed to Esfahan, circa 1600-50, are not rare, but I love their design

permutations: the twisting cloud-bands, blowsy lotus flowers and layered frilly leaves, as well as the flashes of lighter colours against the cherry red. There were two in the Venice exhibition (13), as well as a slightly older and more sophisticated ancestor (12). This is a composite carpet from the well-known silk-foundation animal group discussed by Christine Klose in HALI 170, related to the 'Emperor's Carpet' pair in Vienna and New York.

Klose noted two cases where fragments had been reassembled into smaller carpets, neatly conjoined to avoid interrupting the designs. The Zaleski carpet is one of these, the other was sold to the South Kensington Museum (today the V&A) by Jane Brunton in 1894. Behind glass high on the wall of the Jameel Gallery, the exquisite design of the V&A composite is hard to appreciate. The Zaleski carpet was on open display and at eye-level: one could really see the quality of its design, particularly the two-tier foliate scrolling systems and the wild animals throughout the composition.

Carpets like this confirm the correlation with the arts of the book in Safavid Iran: the animals all spring from 16th-century album-drawings in which minute, precise, virtuoso draughtsmanship was rated the height of skill. Safavid painters concealed miniature figures within the natural world by painting tiny faces in rock formations and even tinier animal combats in the clouds.

A similar delivery occurs in the Zaleski carpet, where red-eyed lions and serpentine dragons crouch in the flora. To spot any of these grants a rewarding buzz, which has been described as an intended interaction, contracted between ingenious artist and discerning patron. It is so easy to admire these motifs only as delightful drawings, but of course they are more than that: it requires a serious technical performance to translate a fluently curvilinear drawing into the pixelated medium of knotted pile, and to create a carpet like this. But such was their skill that Iranian weavers at the time of Shah Tahmasp (r.1524-1577) almost make it look easy. I suspect that both these demonstrations of technical proficiency, that is fine draughtsmanship and carpet weaving, together promoted the splendour of the Safavid court and kingship to an admiring world.

Moya Carey, Iran Heritage Foundation Curator for the Iranian Collections, V&A