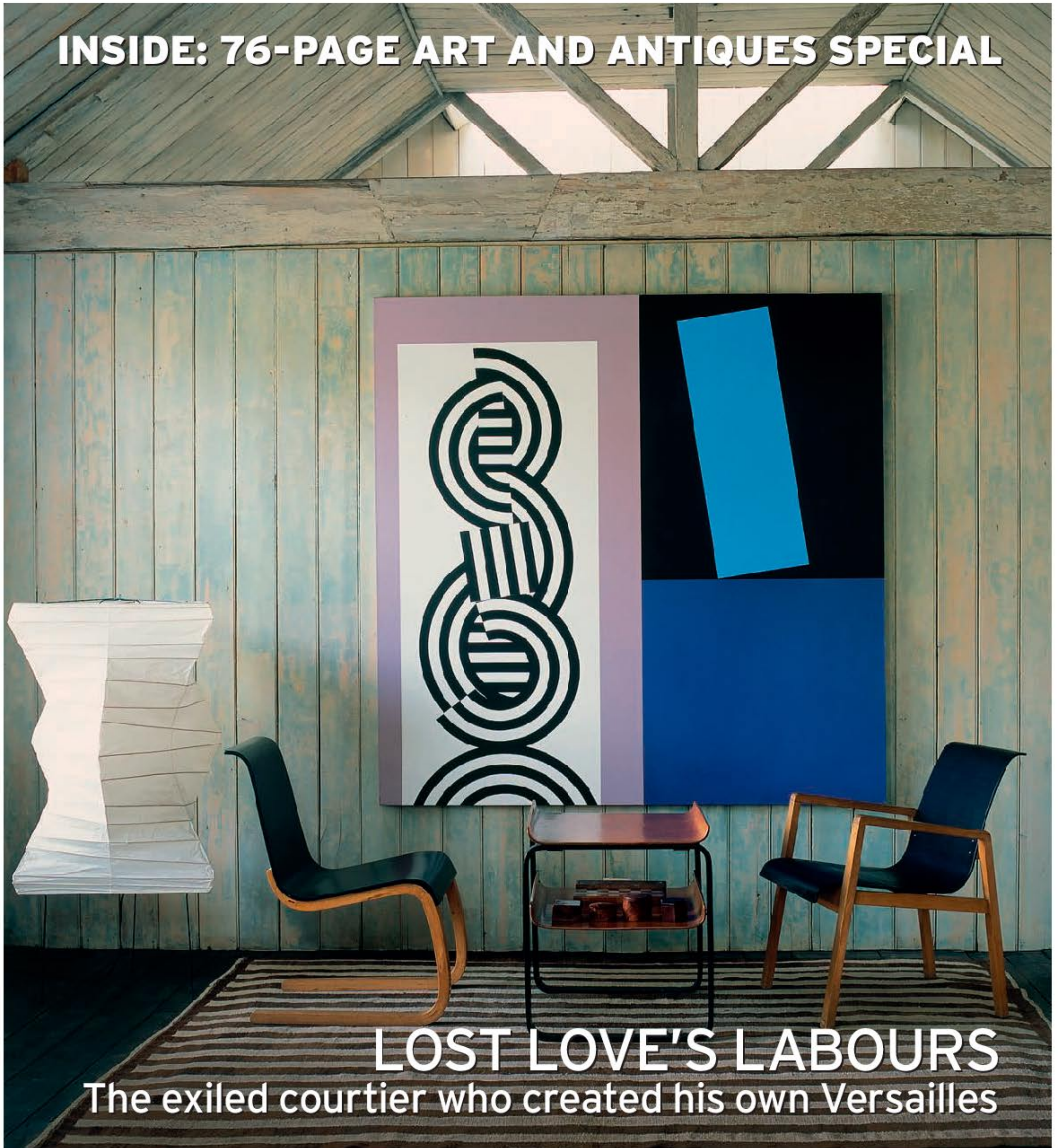


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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

INSIDE: 76-PAGE ART AND ANTIQUES SPECIAL



LOST LOVE'S LABOURS

The exiled courtier who created his own Versailles



TYING THE KNOTS

In the Eurasian gateway that was 15th-century Venice, pile-woven rugs from Persia, Egypt or Turkey were as prized as fine Italian paintings – and began to feature in them too. Hanging both in unison, a new exhibition suggests how such textiles in art signify the most sophisticated East/West marriage of the Renaissance. Text: Sophie Barling

Opposite: in the exhibition this Anatolian 'Lotto' carpet (second half of the 16th century) compares with Girolamo dai Libri's *Madonna dell'Ombrello*, 1530 (see page 117), where Mary sits enthroned on a similar example. This page: in Vittore Carpaccio's *Birth of the Virgin* (c.1502-04), a woman sits on a parapet draped in an Anatolian rug, notable for its golden arabesques – normally seen on Persian examples



Top: in Carpaccio's *Visitation*, c1504, balconies are hung with Oriental carpets. The Biblical figures are surrounded by others dressed anachronistically in Ottoman robes and turbans. Above, left and right: two 17th-century 'Transylvanian' carpets, so called because many Ottoman Turkish rugs were preserved in churches in that central Romanian region. Opposite: a 'Bird Ushak' rug, probably woven in Uşak, western Anatolia, in the second half of the 16th century. The shapes are not avian, but leaf-like figures in a repeated pattern





Above: figurative motifs such as those seen on a central Persian shrub-and-bird carpet (second half of the 16th century) may have been developed by miniaturists. They required more elaborate weaving systems than geometric designs. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Dai Libri's *Madonna dell'Ombello*; this is one of three 'Lotto' rugs that appears alongside Dai Libri's painting in the exhibition; Karapinar carpets, such as this 16th-century version, typically feature circular medallions on a central field, surrounded by narrow floral borders

IN CARPACCIO'S *Visitation*, painted around 1504, a pregnant Mary embraces her cousin Elizabeth, also miraculously expecting a child. Animals, a favourite motif of the Venetian artist, frolic in a palm-dotted landscape. In the background the balconies of a towering, marble-clad building are festooned with Oriental rugs. It's tempting to look around for a matronly woman wielding a wicker carpet-beater, but this is no housekeeping scene: it's an echo of Carpaccio's Venice. Pile-woven rugs were the most prized among the exotic riches that flowed into the Adriatic city from the East, and on high days and holidays those wealthy enough to possess them would flaunt them at their windows and balconies. Transposed to the Holy Land, their intended significance seems equally festive: hanging like flags, they surely herald the significance of this moment between two expectant mothers – who will give birth to John the Baptist and Jesus Christ.

The *Visitation* is one of a handful of Renaissance paintings now on show at the Ca' d'Oro in Venice. The curators have matched works by Carpaccio and other artists of the Veneto and its neighbouring regions with 15th- and 16th-century carpets of the kind illustrated in the paintings. They come from the collections of two Oriental-textile lovers, Romain Zaleski and Baron Giorgio Franchetti, who bequeathed the Ca' d'Oro to the Italian state. Here are richly ornamented rugs from Mamluk-controlled Cairo and Damascus, and from Ottoman Turkey as well as India and Persia. These textiles are rare: for a long time, unable to get their hands on the real thing, scholars could only study Oriental carpets of this period through paintings. It's partly for this reason that the main design types, with their medallions, arabesques, lozenges and niches, are named after artists who painted them: Lotto, Bellini, Crivelli, Memling, Holbein... The classifications are not particularly helpful – many artists painted each type, and individual artists painted more than one type – but they show just how irresistible these items were to the best European artists of the day.

Oriental rugs had been prized in Europe since at least the 13th century, when the Venetian merchant Marco Polo judged the carpets produced in Konya, Anatolia, the best in the world. And being objects of such luxury and status, they soon found their way into European paintings, their vibrant colours and patterns a gift to the artist's brush. Men, such as the subject of a portrait here from the Uffizi by Francesco Beccaruzzi, were lent learning and sophistication when painted at a table covered with, say, a 'Damascino' carpet. It's unusual to see these precious textiles placed on the floor, at least in secular paintings (Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* comes to mind as a rare example). If a foot was massaged by a plush Oriental pile, that foot would usually be royal or saintly. When the Madonna sits enthroned with a richly decorated 'Lotto' rug beneath her feet, as in Girolamo dai Libri's painting, the textile effectively marks sacred ground. Four out of the six paintings in this exhibition have the Virgin Mary as their subject – there's even a 'Holbein' carpet present at her birth, as imagined by Carpaccio. The oldest of all the works, a fresco painted in 1485 by Vincenzo Foppa, is in fact named for the carpet that hangs on a balcony in front of the Virgin and child: in *Madonna del Tappeto*, the rug's busy geometrics and bright colours all but eclipse the saintly protagonists.

The exhibition pairs this painting with a 'Holbein', slightly older than Foppa's work and, says co-curator Moshe Tabibnia,

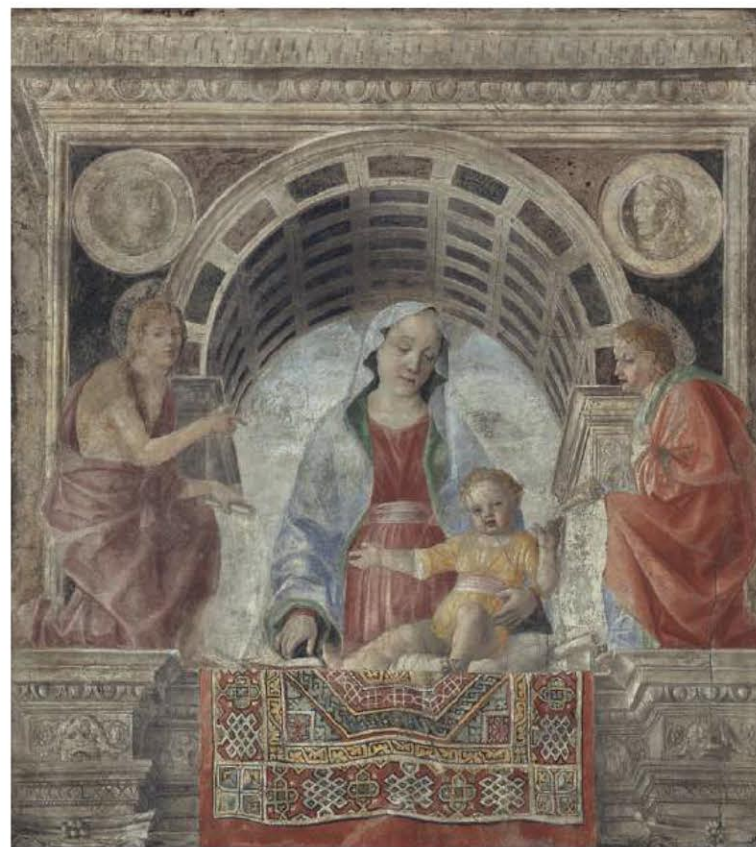
'exceptional... This is the oldest "large medallion Holbein" that we know of. It's a miracle when you get something like this in your hands.' Tabibnia, who runs an eponymous dealership in Milan, found it in a Venetian collection. Most likely, he says, it has been in the city since it was first brought here in the 15th century, its wool freshly woven from western Anatolia.

Venice, of course, was in a position to skim off the cream of what passed through the lagoon on its merchant ships. By the Renaissance, the Republic was long established as a great maritime power, ideally located to monopolise trade between East and West. Luxury objects such as these carpets could be powerful bargaining tools: 60 made in Mamluk Cairo were gifted to Cardinal Wolsey in exchange for a licence allowing Venetian merchants to import wine to England.

The Ca' d'Oro is a fitting location for a show that reflects the complex, layered relationship between La Serenissima – the Most Serene Republic – and the East. This lavish 15th-century palazzo sits on the Grand Canal, its Gothic tracery and arches mixing happily with elements borrowed from the Islamic world: Muslim-style pinnacles along the roofline; windows shaped like mihrabs (prayer niches). It's an architectural reduction of the whole Venetian entrapment: a city whose longest-reigning doge, Francesco Foscarini, was born in Mamluk-controlled Egypt; where the great *arsenale* – *arsenale* in Venetian dialect – the absolute centre of the Venetian Republic's naval power, got its name from the Arabic *dar sina'a* (literally 'house of manufacturing'); a city where Islamic prayer rugs are painted centre-stage under the feet of Christian divinities. Even Venice's patron saint, Mark, was thiefed from the Middle East: Venetian merchants stole the evangelist's relics from Alexandria in the ninth century.

Fast-forward six centuries, and the likes of Gentile Bellini were painting scenes of the great basilica and piazza named after that snatched saint. In those images can be gleaned the long history of conflict, trade and diplomacy between Venice and Constantinople (where Bellini himself had spent two years, 'loaned' as court painter to the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II), and other parts of the Muslim world. Visitors to the exhibition might fancy walking over to the Gallerie dell'Accademia, where they'll find Bellini's vast *Procession in St Mark's Square*, c1496. The great onion-domed basilica dominates the canvas, some Islamic notes mixing with the general Byzantine flavour. On the north side of the square, women watch the procession from balconies draped with Oriental carpets. In the last canvas he worked on before his death, Bellini returned to Venice's patron saint – and in a sense to that *Procession* painting. In *St Mark Preaching in Alexandria*, a large square is dominated by a great temple that strongly resembles the Basilica San Marco; as in Carpaccio's *Visitation*, figures are anachronistically dressed in Mamluk or Ottoman garb; and along the buildings on either side, richly coloured rugs appear at windows. This is Venice mapped onto Alexandria. Ambiguous symbols of appropriation and exchange, the carpets play their part in these intriguing portraits of an East at once Ottoman and Mamluk, contemporary and Biblical – all filtered through the Venetian gaze.

'Serenissime Trame: Carpets from the Zaleski Collection and Renaissance Paintings' runs at the Galleria Giorgio Franchetti alla Ca' d'Oro, 3932 Cannaregio, 30121 Venice, until 23 July. For opening times, ring 00 39 41 5200 345 or visit cadoro.org



Top: Vincenzo Foppa's fresco *Madonna del Tappeto*, 1485, is compared in the exhibition to a slightly older, large medallion 'Holbein' carpet, whose motifs match those in the painting. These rugs are named for the German artist Hans Holbein the Younger, but in fact they appear in works made decades before he was painting. Above: closely related to 'Star Ushaks', this 'Medallion Ushak' was made in the second half of the 15th century. Its warp, weft and pile are all wool, and it has been made with symmetrical, or Turkish, knots