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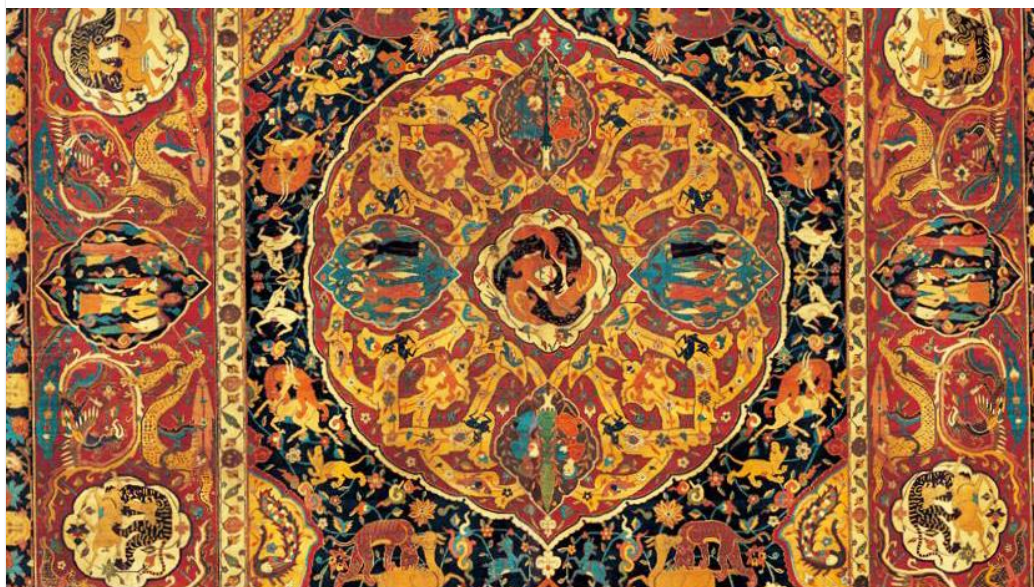
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DESIGN

Inside the crazy world of million-pound super-carpets

Dr Lindsay Allen on rare, 16th-century Persian floor coverings and their most ardent fans



Detail in the Medallion and Animal Carpet, in the Miho Museum in Japan
MIHO MUSEUM

Dr Lindsay Allen

Thursday April 13 2023, 12.03am BST, The Times

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The frescoes of the Palazzo Rosso in Genoa, Italy, reach mythological heights in grand 17th-century apartments. In the galleries that now occupy them, one may admire masterpieces by Dürer, Van Dyck and Paolo Veronese. But as the sun set on a chilly afternoon in February, a select group of visitors gazed intently only at the floors. Occupying the centres of each room were carpets. At seven metres long, some turned stately audience halls into an encounter with fantastical landscapes. In the more intimate Sala dell’Inverno, a 16th-century expanse of Bordeaux and indigo wool pile lay on a platform dominating the room like a gilded dynast breathing his last. Carpets, and carpets alone, were the stars of the show.

This exhibition, *The Magnificent Sanguszko Carpets*, provided to the world of carpet-collecting a buzz equivalent to that in trainspotting caused by, say, the 2013 “great gathering” of the garter blue Mallard with its five surviving sister A4 steam locomotives. Named after the Polish-Lithuanian aristocrat who once owned a pre-eminent example, the Sanguszko carpets are defined by the exhibition’s curator Michael Franses as a group of 14 surviving elite floor coverings made in the south-central Iranian region of Kerman in the 16th century. Of these, Franses’s exhibition presented an unprecedented eight in the cloth, alongside reproductions of a further six, amid a lavish “before and after” spread of carpet comparanda. Designed with colourful, crisp vignettes of Persian folklore, the carpets depict courtly pursuits in unparalleled fineness. It was, Franses said, akin to the convening of “a full orchestra of superlative musicians”.

Although practised in the region for millennia, carpet-weaving in 16th-century Iran reached an apogee of sumptuousness because of competitive commissioning of art by both the royal court and ambitious regional governors. Preserved in noble and religious collections across Europe and west Asia, such carpets

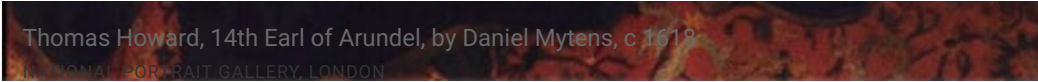
attracted a storied reputation during the growth of specialised textile collecting in the 19th and 20th centuries. Before then

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portraits of early modern Europe. Rugs of the eastern Mediterranean, manufactured in the Ottoman realm, had long injected vivid auras to sacred and royal portraits, to the point that some early modern Anatolian patterns are now permanently named after the painters who depicted them with saints and diplomats.





Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel, by Daniel Mytens, c 1618

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

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joined up on the coasts of India and the Persian Gulf with the overland trade, opening the supply lines to new prizes. When the in-vogue painter Daniel Mytens painted the Earl of Arundel in 1618, the courtier's setting included not just Mediterranean antiquities but also a top-flight carpet recently manufactured in the former Persian capital of Qazvin.

Carpets, like paintings, are mobile luxuries. But none of the famed carpets of the Sanguszko type appear in those early portraits, suggesting they were precious or exclusive commissions not usually destined for export. Sanguszko family lore held that an ancestor had seized their pre-eminent famous carpet from the tent of a defeated Ottoman soldier at the Battle of Khotyn in 1621. In 1928, the collection consultant Royall Tyler relayed this mythology to his clients, the diplomatic power couple Robert Woods Bliss and Mildred Barnes Bliss, recommending they buy the “most beautiful carpet in the world”. Its “powerful, rich, delicate, tender, violent” colour scheme, he continued, “sends one clean off one’s head”.

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That carpet now resides in the Miho Museum, an IM Pei-designed temple-like fastness built into a mountain in the Shiga prefecture in Japan (they sent a lifesize, vinyl print-out to display in Genoa in its stead). The Sanguszko family's prize loot

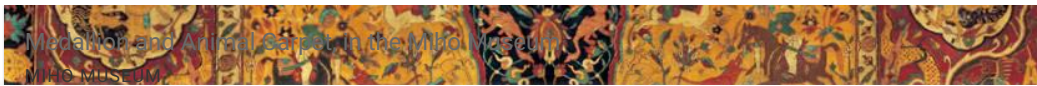
perfectly suits the purpose of its new owners, a foundation devoted to the Shinii Shumaikei spiritual sect, one of whose

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In the 1920s Tyler guessed at a six-figure price tag for the Blisses; the Miho finally purchased it in 1994 for a reported price of over \$4 million.





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collate these reflections and crumbs of greatness in warp and weft. Both buyers and sellers echo Tyler's emotional response to the aesthetic experience of a beautiful carpet. "All my rugs are my favourite . . . I buy them with my heart," the New York carpet entrepreneur Jason Nazmiyal told Hali magazine last year.

Hali takes its name from the term for "carpet" in Turkish ("its ultimate source is uncertain," says the magazine in a blurb on its masthead). Founded in 1978, Hali is dedicated to documenting antique carpets and rare textiles. Each quarterly issue offers lightly academic, richly illustrated carpet taxonomies, sandwiched between multiple leaves of dealers' full-page ads, each displaying the most notable specimen of their stock. The magazine's bumper 200th issue in 2019 covered many classic Iranian and Turkish types — in a "best of" pick, the editor Ben Evans says of a northwest Iranian beauty, "this is a ruggie's carpet" — while also exploring Berber garments, Turkmen embroidery and a collector's selection of 20th-century Fante Asofo flags from Ghana. It's a heady mix.

Back in the exhibition, a considerably provided pouf enabled visitors to perch at the very centre of the Sanguszko carpet's printed vinyl stand-in, experiencing its pattern immersively rather than at one remove on the wall. No one usually gets to step or sit on a 16th-century carpet. The multidimensionality continued in the selection of exhibits: the "Angiolini" Sanguszko (sold to Berlin from Bologna in 1888) survives in the cloth only as a ragged 1m-wide ladder measuring less than half of its original width. Its gaping losses represent the trauma inflicted by an incendiary bomb that breached its safe storage in 1945.



A portrait of Prince Roman Sanguszko (1537–1571), 1850

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floor of a New York hotel — in 1951. Lost (but once-photographed) segments appeared in muted monochrome amid the multicoloured islands of known pieces, the latter too scanty to serve as stepping stones to the next room.

Missing from this exhibition — and most carpet shows to be fair — was the fully dimensional world of objects that once rested on them. Contributors to a Hali-sponsored colloquium on the exhibition's final weekend valiantly conjured slideshows of ceramics, tiled mosques and ornamented or illustrated books from the same era. Moya Carey of Dublin's Chester Beatty library compared the carpets to contemporary album compilations of sketches, calligraphy and literary bons mots, to explain how the textiles impacted the minds and memories of a diverse population.

For over 200 years, from the Safavid dynasty's foundation by Shah Ismail in 1501 to the sacking of the kingdom's capital Isfahan by an Afghan army in 1722, the court powered luxury trends that influenced tastes across the continent, and for decades beyond its fall. Lost gardens, paradises and sacred

space are commonplace clichés of the “Oriental carpet” world. But follow the intricate paths offered by each work’s pattern

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Where to see the most beautiful carpets in the world



The Ardabil Carpet in London’s Victoria and Albert Museum is the world’s oldest dated carpet and one of the most historically important

PETER KELLEHER/VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

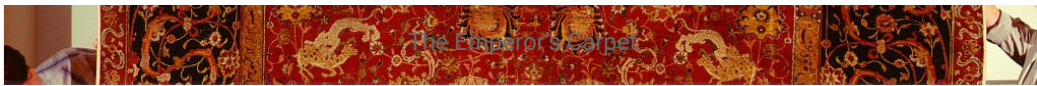
1. The V&A, London

Believed to have been commissioned in the 16th century for the tomb of the Sufi ancestor of the Safavid kings in northwest Iran, the Ardabil carpet’s crisp woollen pile is illuminated in the V&A’s Jameel Gallery for ten minutes every half-hour.

Purchased by the museum in 1893, the medallion design strongly influenced carpet production for the international market in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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Reputedly once presented to the Hapsburg emperor Leopold I by Peter the Great, the 16th-century [Emperor's Carpet](#) reached America via the agency of the promoter (and dealer) of Iranian art, Arthur Upham Pope. A menagerie of real and imaginary beasts are suspended among layers of complex scrollwork and stylised vegetation.



The Anhalt Medallion Carpet

The slightly earlier [Anhalt Medallion Carpet](#), meanwhile, is like an elaborate enamelled book cover blown up to palatial size

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The Schwarzenberg Paradise Park Carpet
LOIS LAMMERHUBER/THE MUSEUM OF ISLAMIC ART, DOHA

3. Museum of Islamic Art, Doha

One of the precursors to the Sanguszko design (and therefore a loan to the Genoa show), the so-called Schwarzenberg Carpet shows a “Paradise Park” pattern with cypresses set among the sinuous branches of blooming deciduous trees, studded with multitudes of birds; ducks sit in the central blue pool while lions and leopards patrol the dark blue ground.

islamicart.museumwnf.org



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Commissioned in the 16th century for a ruler, likely the Safavid Shah Tahmasp, addressed in a framing inscription as “Darius of the World” — evoking one of Iran’s most famous pre-Islamic kings — the Museo Poldi Pezzoli’s Tiger carpet is prowled by numerous creatures in addition to the big cats, amid dense flora sprouting on a claret field. The palazzo museum’s carpets are part of Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli’s collection of fine art, including works by Italian and Flemish old masters.

jozan.net



The Vienna hunting carpet
THE MUSEUM FÜR ANGEWANDTE KUNST, VIENNA

5. The Museum of Applied Arts (MAK), Vienna

On a golden field, the Vienna hunting carpet shows the sensational effects of a blend of silk pile with metal thread. The pattern of leaping horsemen engaged in chasing their prey can be paralleled across Safavid arts, from book art and public murals to the woven brocades that could be used in fine clothing.

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