

Original Research Article

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Received: 14 April 2022

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Revised: 15 May 2022

Accepted: 28 May 2022

DOI: 10.22055/PYK.2022.175500

URL: paykareh.scu.ac.ir/article_17550.html

How to cite this article: Erfanmanesh, S, & Kazem Nejadi, H. (2022). Analysis of Meaning in Safavid Altar Rugs Based on Mieke Bal's Views. *Paykareh*, 11 (27), pp. 13-23.

The Persian translation of this article is published in the same issue with the following title

تحلیل معنا در قالچه‌های محرابی صفوی با تأکید بر آرای میکه بال

Analysis of Meaning in Safavid Altar Rugs Based on Mieke Bal's Views

Abstract

Problem Definition: Since many scholars in the traditional arts believe in a single meaning, it seems less possible to realize the duplication of meaning in these arts. Because it is thought that these arts are designed based on specific principles, among these arts are altar rugs woven in the Safavid period. The previous research conducted by referring to the verbal signs in the rugs implied the devotional operation of these rugs. In these research works, using different components in rugs to achieve a fixed meaning has been emphasized. However, after examining the rugs, it was found that parts of the text were ignored to get the general meaning in reading some of the rugs. Now the question is, "How will the emphasis on these details affect reading the text?"

Objective: The aim is to read the altar rugs and emphasize the marginalized details.

Research Method: The rugs in this study are examined using a descriptive-analytical method, and the emphasis is on Mieke Bal's Views based on the navel of images.

Results: Following the required examination and considering the views of Mieke Bal, one of the theorists who believe in the polysemous nature of art, it can be concluded that not all traditional arts can be taken for granted in general and fixed sense. In some traditional arts, such as the altar rugs of the Safavid period, researchers have neglected part of the text to achieve a fixed meaning. Therefore, since the emphasis on detail or even the presence of an unseen spot in the image by the audience can change the meaning, it is postponed in reading industrial, traditional, and even religious arts. The multiplicity of meaning can also be considered in the altar rugs.

Keywords

Mieke Bal, Navel of Image, Altar Rugs, Traditional Art

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Introduction

Prayer rugs became very popular among the works of art in the Safavid period. According to the verses written on them and the research done in this area, prayer rugs had a devotional function that implies a general and fixed meaning. Therefore, sometimes some details are neglected to achieve a single and fixed meaning. There is a red spot or red object in the middle of the rug between the trees in the altar rug in the Dubroff collection, which has not been mentioned in the research. There are at least three samples of this rug, all of which show this spot or object; however, in rugs where the background color is red, this object is seen in black. Also, in the Chaharbagh (Four Gardens) altar rug in the Astan Quds Razavi Museum, unlike other fish, the direction of one fish is not towards the center. If attention is paid to the movement of the fish and its meaning, the meaning of the rug or the number of fish in the other rugs in this sample will change. In addition to these two samples, a rug in the Tehran Carpet Museum can be mentioned that the view of the inside of the altar's chandeliers evokes a human-like shape, and there are crosses around it that have been less studied. Since the text is made up of all the components and each component of the image has a particular value and status, it is necessary to pay attention to all the components of the image. Given that the purpose of this study is to read the text of the rugs based on the details, it seeks to answer the question of "what effect do these details have on the reading of the text? Can the emphasis on detail in traditional and religious arts also postpone the meaning of the text?" Mieke Bal is one of the critics who believe in the multiplicity of meanings in works of art. He believes that to get the general meaning, some details might be ignored, and by emphasizing that components, even the navel of the image, might change; therefore, to achieve the appropriate answer, the target rugs are examined and analyzed by emphasizing Mieke Bal's view on the core of the image.

Research Method

The research is fundamental in purpose, and the method is descriptive-analytical. The data required for this research has been collected through a library-based method. In this research, seven altar rugs are analyzed according to Mieke Bal's view of the navel of image. Therefore, the emphasis is on details that have not been seen before or are less considered to achieve a fixed and general meaning in the rug.

Research Background

Much research has been done on the altar rugs of the Safavid period. For example, "Erfanmanesh" (2020), in her doctoral dissertation entitled "Iconological analysis of the altar rugs of the Safavid period" and in the articles extracted from the dissertation, Ajand, Namvar Motlagh, and Erfanmanesh entitled "Analysis of meaning in the altar rug in Metropolitan Museum using an Iconology Approach "(2020), and Erfanmanesh, Azhand, and Namvar Motlagh, entitled " meaning analysis of the altar rug of Suleiman, the Prophet (PBUH) using an iconology method" (2021), analyzed the meaning in the above-mentioned rugs, and in most of the rugs, she examines a kind of Iranian-Islamic conduct and ascension. "Qani and Mehrabi" (2019), in the article entitled "Investigation and analysis of visual elements of Safavid payer rugs based on Gérard Genette's views using an intertextual approach", have considered the altar rug propagating the Shiite religion. "Shayestehfar" (2005), in the article entitled "Application of religious concepts in the calligraphy of Safavid rugs", considers the altar rugs of the Safavid period as prayer rugs that are in line with Shiite ideas and the spread of Shiism. Other research on altar rugs has not yielded further results. Most of the conducted research takes a fixed meaning for rugs into consideration, and

because it is considered an art for the propagation of religion, therefore, according to its application, they give a general meaning to rugs. Less research has paid attention to the details in the rugs. Moreover, studies such as the doctoral dissertation of Sahel Erfanmanesh", who paid attention to some details, did not consider some details to achieve a single and fixed meaning. Therefore, the present study intends to conduct a rug reading by emphasizing details. So this research seems novel, and since it is an image consisting of numerous components, such research is necessary to understand Iranian art, especially the rugs of the Safavid period.

Traditional art and altar rugs

Rugs and rug weaving are among the traditional arts. In describing traditional art, Burckhardt does not consider it a unique art but observes a kind of perfection that seems separate from its human creator. He believes that in traditional art, their inherent traits and qualities emerge (Burckhardt, 1991, p. 30). Therefore, in this research, two questions are followed: "Are details important in traditional art, and what effect will the ignoring details have on meaning?" Since rugs are among the traditional arts and artistic altar rugs are in the service of religious and devotional affairs; therefore, altar rugs are considered one of the traditional arts. "Chitsazian" considered the altar rug as the prayer rug in which human and animal motifs were not common because it was used for prayer, and most of the motifs used in this type of rugs are abstract motifs (Arabesque and Khatai) (Chitsazian, 2003, p. 48). However, since the Qajar period, rugs with the altar's design, comprising human and animal motifs, became popular, and researchers divided the rugs into prayer and decorative rugs. A prayer altar is a 90 × 150 and 120 × 180 rug used for prayer. Decorative altars also include rugs that sometimes indicate the direction of the Qibla and are hung on the wall or rugs that have only the design of the altar and have no devotional function. In this group of rugs, due to the lack of religious function, images such as humans, animals, and birds were not prohibited (Hajizadeh, Attari, & Azimi Nejad, 2016, pp 53-54). The altar rugs discussed in this research are rugs that, according to previous research, have been used more in devotions and are full of Quranic verses.

Meaning and concept in a work of art

The basis of research in works of art is from what point of view and how those works are examined. "Cassirer" believes that the most remarkable talent of an artist is to be able to observe correctly (Cassirer, 1994, p. 4). Cassirer and Panofsky try to create a vision to see through "symbolic forms" and show the form and content of things to the audience in this way (Panofsky, 2018, p. 33). According to these researchers, a work of art is nothing more than a set of harmonious and proportionate relationships between a group of elements. From their point of view, these generally visual elements pursue a goal to convey meaning and concepts to the audience that understanding and achieving these meanings and concepts require a good look (Rose, 2015, pp. 25-32). But in the meantime, some have confronted such construction and believe that there is no fixed and single meaning in the work of art. According to Heidegger, in any philosophical science, what is expressed in the work is not inevitable: Rather, it is the definite thing that lies before our eyes and still remains unsaid (Panofsky, 2012, pp. 476-477). His point of view also seems to contradict the general understanding and to receive a fixed meaning of the work; Therefore, it can be said that understanding the works of art in the history of art has always been the concern of theorists, researchers, and art critics. Some have dealt with the history of art in structure and form, and some have sought meaning in works of art. In the meantime, some researchers believe

in construction and a framework of works, and some others have opposed this construction; What matters, then, is how work is viewed. If this principle is accepted, it is impossible to give a definite meaning conclusively even to religious, traditional, and industrial arts. In this study, the authors intend to look at such works from a different perspective and explain their point of view. They have used the theories of Mieke Bal, who is one of the poststructuralist theorists.

Mieke Bal; her theory and views on the history of art

In addition to the general description of the altar rugs, it is necessary to realize Mieke Bal's views to be able to analyze the intended rugs. Mieke Bal is a Dutch theorist born on March 14, 1946. Her first study was on narratology, and her first book is in Dutch on this subject. Thus, her early knowledge and books were in literary criticism, narratology, and cultural studies. She moves from words to images; therefore, she uses many literary terms to critique works of art. Bal is one of the poststructuralist theorists, and her views contrast with the history of art in its classical sense. In the theory of narration, she believes that knowledge of past works is through the narration of new works in them. Also, from her point of view, "it is possible to analyze the previous work by using the later works, and there is no need for historical primacy and recency" (Nasri, 2018, p. 120). Thus, in this view, she is faced with a kind of unnatural history that conflicts with the linear process of history and the influence of works of art on each other (Bal, 1999, p. 7). Mieke Bal pays special attention to the audience and the reader in her theories. According to her, the reader interprets the text according to his cultural requirements. According to classical art history, achieving the original meaning of everything is the primary intention in creating a work of art. In contrast, based on Bal's view, in the polysemy of works of art, she seeks the denial of a fixed meaning. Since the audience has a different cultural background, they cannot receive a fixed meaning when facing a work of art. According to her, it can be said that if images have meaning outside themselves, therefore, no restrictions can be placed on them (Bal, 2001, p. 71); So, she believes in polysemy in works of art.

Meaning in works of art, according to Mieke Bal's views

As mentioned, Mieke Bal is one of the theorists who seek the process of obtaining meaning. She discusses whether a literary work has only one meaning or whether multiple meanings can be extracted from a single work to find meaning. Because Derrida's views influence her, she seeks to explain to her audience the possibility of polysemy in a work of art (Rampley, 2008, p. 18). Derrida considered meaning indeterminate and believed that meaning permanently resides within a few steps from us and does not reveal itself entirely to the audience. So he used the term "pollination." In the process of meaning, he is faced with a scattered effect that, in the interpretation of "pollen," can be said that not all pollen can always be in one set. Influenced by his views, therefore, Mieke Bal believes that an artistic text has different layers, and in the book entitled "Rembrandt's reading beyond words and images", he sees Rembrandt as a cultural text that is interpreted differently at different times and in different periods. In this book, she points out that an ink stain becomes the central point of the painting, and a minimal component can change the meaning of the text. The minor element can be considered in this approach, and the meaning is changed accordingly. Because an image is composed of a network of details, in some periods, some of its details are important compared to other components, and other details have been ineffective in the process of meaning. But the exact details may become necessary in different eras and create new meaning (Bryson, 2001, p. 3). Therefore, in the process of

reading, according to time and place, what can be found in the text can be sought, and in this process, the importance of the author is reduced (Nasri, 2018, p. 76). She believes that, unlike the iconology approach, images have a polysemous position, and the audience receives different meanings from work according to different perspectives. However, if less-significant and non-significant details are considered and the images are read based on details, these components can critique the image's meaning. In this regard, she considers the "Vermeer" painting. She considers the neglected component, namely the hole in the wall, as the "navel of image". "Navel" is a meaningless center, and it is a term that Bal borrowed from psychoanalysis. Therefore, the center changes according to the audience's view, and with this view, the multiplicity and fluidity of meaning can be sought in the images. The navel is a metaphor for the details of a painting. It is a wound that indicates separation from the mother and is considered the first loss, and in addition, it refers to an index that points to the outside. In this approach, focusing on the center without meaning suspends the way of interpretation and meaning in work (Nasri, 2018, p. 116).

Analysis of altar rugs according to details (Mieke Bal's "Navel of image")

As mentioned above, seven altar rugs from the Safavid period are studied in three groups. In reading altar rugs, the emphasis is on details and items that have not been considered before. The first group consists of three rugs with the same appearance but different colors (See Table 1). These rugs are placed in a group of rugs containing a cresset or Ghandil. The space inside the altar consists of two symmetrical trees that cover most of the altar space. Also, the mentioned rugs have three margins, in the upper part of which the verbal text can be seen, and the lower part is covered with Khatai and Eslimi (Arabesque) motifs. In two samples of these rugs, the background of the altar is red, and the other one is black. In all three samples, the cresset (Ghandil) is placed like an inverted vase under the frontal of the altar. Two samples of these rugs, according to research, are textured in Kashan, the central part of Iran, in the sixteenth century. Some researchers consider these rugs "Hereke," which were woven in the 19th century and inspired by the rugs of the Safavid period. However, what is essential in this research is not the place and history of the texture of the rugs but the understanding of the meaning hidden in them. Researchers who have examined these rugs so far, due to the verbal signs on the rug, consider them a kind of propaganda for Shiism (Qani & Mehrabi, 2019, pp. 80-81). On the other hand, in addition to Shiism, they might also point to the role of religious creed and monarchy in the carpet (Erfanmanesh, 2020, p. 161). In some research projects, in addition to the fact that the altar is taken from the Mithraeum or Mehrābe, the black color inside the altar of the rug in the Dubrov collection (See Table 1, samples 1) is also considered a reference to the darkness of the Mithraeum (Mehrābe) and this space has been used to achieve the intended meaning (Qani & Mehrabi, 2019, p. 79). Whereas in most of the altar rugs that "Frances" introduces as Safavid rugs (Frances, 1999, pp. 40-75), the background of the rugs is woven in two light and dark colors. Among the rugs in the Dubrov collection with a black background, there are also rugs with red text in the Topkapi Museum (See Table 1, samples 2 & 3), which does not imply the darkness of the Mithraeum (Mehrābe). Therefore, although this study has focused on visual cues, some minor visual cues have not been considered. Among the items that have not been addressed so far is a red object or piece of stone that is placed between the trees under the cresset (Ghandil) (See Table 1, sample 1). This colored object is present in all the rugs with the same texture pattern, the nature of which has not been considered by any researcher so far. "Is this colored object a piece of stone? If so, why is it suspended in space and painted in a color that completely contrasts with the background?" Also, suppose this motif and

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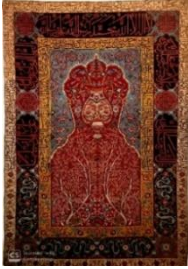

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space are supernatural. In that case, another question arises "why should only one stone be suspended at the focal point of the image and under the cresset? Why are the other stones depicted in the picture all at the lowest point of the altar, where plants and trees grow and are not suspended in space at all, but on the ground?" However, this colored object among the trees seems to be placed in this part for a particular reason, even if it is a stone. The unique and contrasting color of this stain with the background is significant, and since in most rugs, the color of the light inside the cresset (Ghandil) is the same, it can be a light, crown, particular stone, etc. Therefore, paying attention to the details mentioned above postpones the reading of the text, and the colored object or piece of stone acts like the navel of the image and can change the center of the image. Another sample of rugs whose lack of attention to detail can be more effective in reading the text than mentioned rugs includes Chaharbagh (Four Gardens) or Golestan rugs. The design of the altar in these rugs is scallop-shaped. In these rugs in the background of the altar, there is a pond in the middle of the rug from which four intersecting rivers branch. Rivers have created four gardens within the rug; Therefore, this design is also called Four Gardens (Chaharbagh).

Table 1. First group: Altar rugs containing a cresset and a stone or object in the middle of the rug.




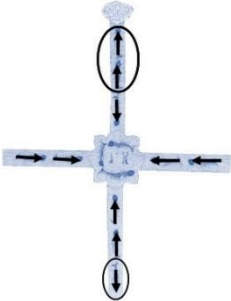
Source: Authors.

Altar Rug	Colored object or stone	Descriptions
		Altar rug, 117 × 173 cm, probably Kashan texture, storage place: Joseph Dubrov collection, New York. Source: Frances, 1999, p. 99.
		Prayer rug, 11th century AH, Topkapi Museum, Istanbul, 119 × 175 cm. Source: Reed, 1972, p. 71.
		Altar rug, 19th century, Hereke, the site of the Topqapi Museum. Source: Rogers & Tezcan, 1987, p. 20.

The enclosed space in the gardens is covered with trees and birds. In this group, three samples of rugs are examined, two of which have an altar design, and one sample has a distorted altar structure due to the repetition of the altar design at the bottom. A sample of

these rugs has received more attention, according to research. Since this research emphasizes details that have not been considered so far in reading garden rugs, the emphasis is on sample rug 1 in Table 2. This rug is stored in Astan Quds Museum. Its dimensions are 140 x 111 cm, and it is woven with asymmetrical knots. Some scholars consider the year of the carpet weaving according to the statements of "Pope" 1061 AH (Frances, 1999, p. 105). Yavari, in the book "Investigating Safavid and Qajar rugs," has considered the year of weaving as the middle of the tenth century AH (Yavari, Shirazi & Akbari, 2015, p. 159). Another sample of this rug has been woven, now stored in a personal collection in Beirut. The floating fish on the rug is noticeable in reading these rugs. The research projects considered the thirteen fish in the four-garden (Chaharbagh) design to symbolize a perfect and heavenly man or the saints of God and the prophets (Sabbaghpour & Shayestehfar, 2009, p. 48). Others consider the middle pond of the rug a symbol of the Kowsar pond towards which the fish are moving (Hesami & Babarekat, 2017, p. 56). However, according to the arrows, it is clear that the movement direction of all the fish in the mentioned rugs is not towards the center. In the rug in Table 2, Sample 1, the movement direction of one fish is opposite to that of the other fish towards the outside, and the direction is towards the pond. In Table 2, the intended fish is marked with an ellipse around it. Also, in sample 2, the direction of the three fish is not towards the center. As can be observed in the details of the image in Table 2, two fish at the top and one fish at the bottom are woven against the movement towards the pond or center.

Table 2. Second group: Chaharbagh (Four Gardens) or Golestan rugs. Source: Authors.

Altar Rug	The cross in the middle of the rug with the fish	Descriptions
		Silk garden altar rug, Kerman, early 11th century AH, 140 × 111 cm, weaver: Mohammad Amin Kermani, Astan Quds Razavi Museum. Source: <i>Burkel, & Burkel, 2010, p. 255.</i>
		Silk rug, Beirut altar rug, Kerman, 1715-16, 163 × 213 cm. Source: <i>Sabahi, 2019, p. 297.</i>



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Altar Rug	The cross in the middle of the rug with the fish	Descriptions
		Chaharbaghi (Four Gardens) Altar Rug, Kerman, 122 × 179, Storage: Private Collection, New York. Source: Sabahi, 2019, p. 298.

Erfanmamesh mentions this briefly in her dissertation; However, according to the approach of her dissertation, which is iconology, she also considers the general meaning of the rug and considers the pond and the cross in the middle of the rug to be close to one of the ponds in the Shah Nematullah Vali's tomb. According to adaptations, she found a kind of Iranian-Islamic aspiration in the rugs (Erfanmanesh, 2020, p. 180). In addition to the direction of movement of the fish in the rug, the number of fish did not seem to matter much; Because the rug is woven with the same design at the same time, the number of fish changes, and some fish are incomplete. As shown in Table 2, Sample 3, the size of the arrows indicates that the fish at the top and bottom of the pond have only a tail, and no head is drawn. Also, in addition to including two headless fish, the direction of movement of one fish is opposite to that of the other fish. Therefore, in addition to the fact that the number of fish changes compared to previous rugs, it seems that fish is not a symbol of a perfect or heavenly human. Because in addition to not representing a specific number, they are also not complete, and in all three studied rugs, at least one of them is not facing the center or the pond. Therefore, paying attention to one of the components of the rug can challenge the meaning of unity in the intended rug. Therefore, by referring to fish and their movement, the central pond of the rug cannot be considered an indicator of aspiration or unity, etc. Also, a definite and fixed meaning cannot be considered, and accordingly, the meaning is suspended here. In the research mentioned above, to reach the general meaning, some details have been ignored that could have played a vital role in the image's meaning. The latest sample is the medallion-shaped altar rug, in which the verbal text refers to Shiism. The rug in Table 3 is woven in 99 × 159 cm. "Frances Michel" considers this rug to be textured in the northwestern region of Iran in the 16th century. This rug, previously kept in the Chehelston Museum in Isfahan, is now in the Tehran Carpet Museum. "Gans-Ruedin" believes the mentioned carpet belongs to the 17th century AD, and the place of weaving is the central regions of Iran (Frances, 1999, p. 80), and "Nasiri" and "Bassam" also believe that it belongs to the 11th century AH textured in Isfahan or Kashan (Bassam, 2007, p. 146; Nasiri, 2010, p. 83). In the background of the rug, under the frontal section of the altar, there is a medallion in which, in addition to visual signs, there is a verbal text including يا الله (Ya-Allah), محمد (Mohammad), and علي (Ali), around which Nad-Ali is woven, which can be a reference to Shiism. Finally, Ayat Al-Kursi can be seen, which is widely spread above the background of the altar. At the end of Ayat Al-Kursi, a verbal text is woven that seems to be الله (Allah) and الكريم (Al-Karim). However, deficiency in reading has not been considered in the previous studies. Also, at the bottom of this rug, between the cursive Khatai motifs, there are motifs such as Medallions or "Sarband", which can be reminiscent

of a cresset. The bud inside the sarband (Medallions) looks like a candle or light in some of them. But what attracts the audience's attention among these motifs is the yellow cresset that can be seen in the motifs at the bottom of the rug. The design is drawn so that one can notice the image of a human, which can be seen in the details of the carpet shown in **Table 3**. The presence of crosses around the cressets also reinforces the hypothesis that these cressets are very different and have a superior power to other designs. The crosses around the cressets are marked in black. But in the upper cresset, yellow light is placed inside the crosses. This shows that this cresset is different from others. Erfanmanesh refers very briefly to the crosses at the bottom of the rug. However, as mentioned above, according to the iconological approach, she has also pursued a fixed meaning in the rug, and the meaning that she considers for the rugs is the emergence of Iranian-Islamic ideas and the unity of creed and Sharia (religion). Therefore, to achieve this meaning, she could not emphasize the role of the human within the cressets. So, in her dissertation, this role has been observed because it has not served the general meaning. Accordingly, she has left a part of the text that could not be read to achieve the general meaning. Also, although she points out that human-like faces can be seen inside the cresset, she ignores both to achieve the general meaning and does not pay attention to them in receiving the meaning.

Table 3. Third group: Medallion altar rug. Source: Authors.

Altar Rug	Cresset in the rug	Description
		Prayer rug with altar design, woven in Isfahan or Kashan, size 159×99 cm, woven in the century (11 AH / 17 AD), Iranian Carpet Museum. Source: Bassam, 2007, p. 147

According to the analysis of three samples of altar rugs, it can be said that details in traditional arts also have a particular importance and status, while not paying attention to them can change the meaning of the text. In many studies, to achieve the general meaning, the author ignores the details that do not serve to reach that meaning and do not pay attention to them. Therefore, in traditional arts and the reading of altar rugs, the navel of the image can also be considered, according to which the center of the image can be changed, and by changing this center, the meaning can also be suspended.

Conclusion

According to Mieke Bal's theories, the text presents the meaning to the reader, and the reader can pay attention to the meaning of the image according to the characteristics of the image that has not been considered so far. By referring to the reading of the rugs, it was determined that it is the reader who, according to his choice, shows where the center of the image is. The center of the image can be a colored object, the opposite moving direction of a fish, or anything unusual that has been overlooked and marginalized. Therefore, regarding the navel of an image, where the Mieke Bal refers to the center's change according to the details, the aim is to show no primary meaning. In existing rugs, despite the usage of rugs, which is worship and invocation, the rug designer, consciously or unconsciously, has used

details that attention to them can change or postpone the original meaning. Taking into consideration one of the fish in the rug that is moving towards the center (Table 3), the meaning of unity and moving towards the center is not seen, and in the meantime, the number 13, which is the number of companions and perfect humans and even Kowsar pond cannot be included in the fixed meanings in the rug. Also, in Table 2, the image of human beings inside the crescent and the crosses around them refer to the meaning beyond the Shari and the Twelver Shiism in the Safavid period. In Table 1, a stone or object in the middle of the rug can also postpone the meaning of the text, so it is due to these details that the center of the image changes. These details expressed in the overlooked rugs can each be the navel of the image that separates the audience from the original meaning. It seems that by changing each viewer and paying attention to further details, other meanings of the rugs can be obtained; therefore, it is not possible to give a fixed and predetermined meaning to all traditional and industrial arts. In the altar rugs of this study, which have so far expressed a fixed meaning using approaches such as iconology, it was shown that it is possible to obtain another meaning from the text or postpone the meaning by relying on unseen details.

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