

Review Article

The Artistic and Cultural Function of Iranian Carpets in the Travelogues of the Safavid Era

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Received: 7 October 2023

Revised: 6 June 2024

Accepted: 10 June 2024

Abstract

Introduction: Among the historical periods of Iran, the Safavid era is precious from the point of view of dealing with the cultural anthropology of the Iranian people. Due to familiarity with the Western world, in this era, the foundations of social criticism and a critical look at social problems and sufferings were formed, and at the same time, the unpleasant and pleasant elements that make up Iranian society were presented to Europe. The opinions of European tourists about the cultural aspects of Iranian society are integral representations, the explanation and analysis of which can lead to the recognition of the main elements of Iranian culture and civilization at that time. The amazing attention of the travelogues of the Safavid period to Iranian carpets and the explanation of their beauty and elegance are among the issues that European (Farangi) travelers have mentioned in their writings, and accordingly, they have pointed to one of the cultural foundations of Iran and one of the essentials of the ecosystem of the Iranian society. In the present study, the following questions will be answered: «Which anthropological, artistic, and commercial dimensions have been explained in the European (Farangi) travelogues of the Safavid period in connection with Iranian carpets?» and «How have these dimensions influenced the attitude of the Westerners towards Iranians?»

Research Method: This research is descriptive-analytical. After extracting the desired content from the examined texts, the data was explained and analyzed using library sources. Considering that this research is based on the historical data contained in the travelogues, the historical research method is also among the research methods.

Findings: Based on what is inferred from the analysis of Iranian carpets and their belongings in European (Farangi) travelogues of the Safavid era, Iranian carpets were one of the best and most attractive cultural leaders of Iran in the eyes of Europeans in the 17th century and after, which has been able to draw a favorable image of Safavid Iran in the minds of Europeans with its unique visual appeal. In addition to their material value, Iranian carpets have aroused the artistic admiration of Europeans and improved their attitude towards many Iranian ethnic groups. Also, part of the cultural identity of the Iranian people has been revealed to the Europeans through the patterns and designs of carpets.

Conclusion: In European (Farangi) travelogues, there are many mentions of carpet weaving centers, local knowledge of carpet weaving, and associated customs. A significant part of the cultural components of Iranian peoples, such as the connection of carpet designs with mythological stories and Iranian history, the use of carpets in religious ceremonies, and the like, have been introduced to European observers through the texture of this carpet. Most travelogues pay attention to the abundance, dispersion, and variety of designs and patterns of Iranian carpets, and their minimum is related to Iranian customs and traditions in connection with carpets.

Keywords

Iranian Carpet, Carpet Weaving Art, Safavid Era, European (Farangi) Travelogues, Tourism Attraction

How to cite this article: Tabatabaei, S.S., & Tabatabaei, S.H. (2024). The Artistic and Cultural Function of Iranian Carpets in the Travelogues of the Safavid Era. *Paykareh*, 13 (36), 77-91. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22055/PYK.2024.19170>



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Introduction and Problem Definition

The Safavid period is one of the most influential and significant cultural and social eras in the history of Iran. Thanks to the expansion of communication with Europe (Farang), Iranians gained knowledge about the civilization of the Western world. From the 17th century, the growing move of European (Farangi) travels to the East and especially to Iran began to the extent that, thanks to these commercial, political, economic, and religious relations, a kind of emerging literary genre called «travel literature» appeared. During the Safavid period, the Iranian carpet emanated as one of Iran's best representatives and cultural messengers in the Western world and could fulfill its mission well. Thanks to the relative security and prosperity of that time, the profession of carpet weaving flourished in Iran, and the designs and patterns of Iranian carpets became the arena of manifestation and the stage of showing mythological and heroic stories; therefore, from this point of view, familiarity with Iranian carpets at that time is worth attention. The current research is trying to search for traces of Iranian carpets in the European (Farangi) travelogues of the Safavid period, and while introducing new dimensions of the cultural past of Iran, express the role of carpets and rugs as a tourist attraction. Accordingly, the current research has tried to look at the lower layers of society through the contents of European (Farangi) travelogues and show the decisive role of carpets in the lives of different groups of people. The paradigm used in the present research is based on description and analysis. This research specifically seeks to find out, from the point of view of European (Farangi) tourists, to what extent the Iranian carpet has been considered a tourist object and attraction. Can we say that the Iranian carpet, as a cultural element, has been able to present its art to the Europeans and arouse enthusiasm in them as a representative of Iranian culture?

Research Method

This research has applied chiefly the descriptive-analytical approach. In this regard, the contents and notes related to the study subject have been extracted from the contents of European (Farangi) travelogues of the Safavid period, and then, the process of analysis, comparison, and explanation has been carried out using secondary library sources. Because the current research is based on the historical data of travelogues, the historical research method is also considered among its approaches. Obviously, this article is not limited to merely collecting and presenting data; it has also compared, validated, and verified the data.

Research Background

The background sources of the current research are placed in two general categories: First, the studies that look at Iranian carpets from a cultural perspective, and second, travelogues that pay attention to the representation of the social and cultural image of Iran during the Safavid period. In the book entitled «Art of Iran», «Ghirshman» (1991) studied the dimensions and artistic delicacies of Iranian carpets. The eighth chapter of the book entitled «Arts of Iran» by «Ferrier» (1995) is dedicated to carpet weaving, in which carpets from different regions of Iran are introduced. In the article entitled «A riddle called Pazyryk», «Opie» (1993) refers to the characteristics of this beautiful Iranian carpet. Considering that the author's attention was primarily focused on the works of Iranology, there is no mention of some travelogues, including the travelogue of «Kaempfer».

«Karachi» (2003) has conducted comprehensive research in the field of travelogue literature along with the bibliography of Persian travelogues in the book entitled «Faraway Visits».

Theoretical Foundations

When talking about the carpet and its enchanting beauty, the name of Baharestan carpet, more correctly titled by «Godard» (Godard, 1998, 471), «Bahar Khosrow», comes to mind. If we consider the statement of researchers who consider «Pazyryk», the oldest carpet in the world with Iranian origin (Mirzaei, 2017), the history of the Iranian carpet should be dated to about 2,500 years ago. Furnishing the tomb of Cyrus with a carpet (Quds, 2016) adds to the validity of this statement; therefore, it can be said that the land of Iran was the source of handwoven carpet production in the ancient world. According to some experts, the first dynasty whose carpet samples have survived is Safavid (Pakbaz, 2018, 1044); however, if we don't explore the history of Iran's carpets during the Timurid period and the Turkomans of Aq Qoyunlu and Qara Quyunlu, we will not understand the secret of the exquisite carpets of the Safavid era and the origin and beginning of this art (Mirzaei & Rajabi, 2019). The Safavids established carpet weaving workshops first in Tabriz and then in Herat, Isfahan, Kashan, and other places. Some of the dated carpets of the Safavid era are now the glory of European museums (Varzi, 1976, 61-67).

Carpet and its Role in Creating Visual Beauty

The main covering of reception halls has been carpet. «Chardin» mentioned the stunning and well-woven carpets on the hall floor, which were surrounded by square brocade cushions. Elsewhere, he talks about the hall's beautiful and colorful silk carpets (Chardin, 1993, 1976). «Olearius» also mentions a hall with beautiful carpets in his observations (Olearius, 2006, 112). The rooms' decoration and even the grandee tent have not been less than the hall. The rooms decorated with beautiful carpets did not escape the keen eye of the German «Olearius» (Olearius, 2006, 105 & 127).

There are also reports that there is a velvet carpet with gold texture in a corner of the Shah's tent, and the floor and body of the Khan's tent are furnished with precious carpets and a kind of beautiful embroidered silk fabric (Amiri, 1990, 95 & 271). During the Safavid era, the carpet was the most exquisite decoration of religious places. During the era of Safavid reign, the floor of Hazrat Masumeh Holy Shrine was covered with well-knit and precious woolen carpets, but on Eid (feast) days, they spread silk brocade carpets on them (Chardin, 1993, 525). «Olearius» describes Imamzadeh Seyed Ibrahim near Shamakhi and says: «From the left side, one could enter through a door into a bright corridor - which was all painted white and furnished with beautiful carpets» (Olearius, 2006, 52). «Kaempfer» also refers to furnishing Imamzadehs with exquisite carpets (Kaempfer, 1984, 134). In describing the grandeur and beauty of the mosque where Shah Safi's tomb is located, «Della Valle» mentions this aspect of aesthetic dimensions: «The floor of the chambers is also covered with carpet and large candlesticks with very tall wax candles are placed on them» (Della Valle, 1991, 299). When describing Sultan Saeed Ahmad's tomb in a village mosque, Chardin says: «It is covered with green velvet, and the floor is covered with fine carpets» (Charin, 1993, 1996).

Major Carpet Weaving Centers

Mentioning that one of the famous industries in Kashan is carpet weaving, Chardin says that the artisans of this city at this time have a remarkable reputation in pottery, tile making, velvet weaving, gold weaving, and carpet weaving. Quoting from Pottinger's travelogue, he says about Kashan: «Its artifacts are brass dishes, carpets, and simple and flowery silk fabrics» (Chardin, 1993, 1908 & 1910). Others have also mentioned a number of silk weaving factories in Kashan and Yazd, which only provide domestic consumption of the country (Amiri, 1990, 200). With the transfer of the Safavid capital from Qazvin to Isfahan, the main centers of carpet production are slowly moving towards the Center and South of Iran. The carpet weaving industry in Isfahan has significant prosperity. The king has 32 factories in this city, each employing 150 workers on average. Some of these factories are among the side industries of carpets and rugs such as dyeing and silk weaving. When mentioning the caravanserai of Bazar-eAraban, «Chardin» states that «carpets of the neighborhood are bought and sold there, and the people of Josheqan who are carpet weavers are there» (Chardin, 1993, 1421 & 1903). Carsten Niebuhr's report at the end of the Safavid era proves that «the best of these carpets is the Isfahan weave; the wool or goat hair of these carpets is from Kerman» (Niebuhr, 1975, 39).

Therefore, the words of «Kaempfer» where he says that most of the carpets belong to Kerman (Kaempfer, 1984, 251), are not devoid of truth because «the most important and best carpet weaving workshops in Iran are in Kerman and especially in Sistan» (Chardin, 1993, 896).

Identifying Local Knowledge of Carpet Weaving

Carpet weaving is the central art of Iranian women. Referring to a woman in the city of Qom, «Figueroa» says that her primary occupation was carpet weaving, and she had two carpet weaving looms in her house (Figueroa, 1984, 251). Some sources (Tajadod, 2011, 99-101) introduce the best wool from Khorasan, then Kerman, Hamadan, Arak, Tabriz, Qom, and Kashan. «Chardein» refers to using camel wool to weave cloth and carpets (Chardin, 1993, 1872). Dyeing the spun yarn is another step toward producing a high-quality and elegant carpet. Generally, with the prosperity of the carpet production market, its peripheral industries will also grow. Observing the dyers' bazaar has been one of the favorite entertainments of «Gres»; a place where «masters soaked the woolen skeins in that dye jar and then left it to dry in the sun» (Gres, 1991, 243). «Chardin» refers to the necessity of drying the floors of the rooms and spreading the felt to absorb possible moisture. He goes on to emphasize that «if we cover our rooms like this, it won't take long for them to rot and tear» (Chardin, 1993, 897 & 813), and thus, he wants to say that Iran's climate is drier than Europe's. Also, the method of measuring and determining the quality of the carpet has not escaped the eye of the punctilious observer. According to Chardin, the quality of a carpet is determined by the number of threads in a specific part they count. The higher the number of threads, the better and more expensive the carpet. The number of threads in the best carpets is not more than fourteen to fifteen in each part (Chardin, 1993, 896). Carpets can effectively reduce the heat of the environment in the hot season. Sprinkling the ground and then throwing a carpet on it is one of the traditional methods of moderating hot weather in tropical regions. This awareness seems pleasant to Chardin. This French tourist has even paid attention to the way of paying the wages of the carpet weavers. «Carpets are woven by workers who reside in settlements and villages and have the king's property at their disposal, and reduce their wages from the rent» (Chardin, 1993, 1538 & 1421).

Abundance of Carpets in Iran

Carpet is the most common Iranian floormat (Chardin, 1993, 249 & 584). This short sentence is the result of the opinions of European tourists who observed the houses of Iran during the Safavid period. The surprise of the European tourists at the large number of carpets they saw in the corner of a room in Mazandaran (Amiri, 1990, 351) shows that, unlike in Europe, carpets in Iran are not considered noble and luxury goods.

One sign that indicates the abundance and perhaps low value of carpets in Iran is the furnishing of public places. «Barbaro» was hospitalized in Mardin City, where carpets were spread for certain patients, the value of each was more than 170 ducats. The beauty of Tabriz Hospital in the early Safavid era is no less than that of a mosque. This beauty is due to the large halls, each covered with a carpet the size of the hall (Barbaro et al., 1970, 64 & 418). The tone of the Italian tourist's speech when he says that the people of the East, unlike the inhabitants of the Green Continent, furnish the earth with fine carpets (Della Valle, 1991, 70), is such that one can infer the abundance of carpets in Iran. Della Valle expressed his surprise and mentioned the caravanserai, where large and beautiful tents were established in the yard, covered with expensive carpets. There is no way to exaggerate this narrative because he mentioned in another place an old and broken boat whose bottom was covered with carpet, with which the author traveled to the sea (Della Valle, 1991, 59 & 147).

Carpet, the Main Covering of Iranian Houses

Lack of attention to other means of living, along with paying attention to expensive handwoven carpets, is the common feature of numerous reports obtained through the review of travelogues. This is not specific to the royal palace and noble houses; rather, this description also applies to the homes of ordinary people. We read that in Iran, the furniture of palaces is mostly carpeted (Chardin, 1993, 1567), and the king's palace has an independent place called Farshkhaneh, where all kinds of carpets and mats are kept in its different rooms (Kaempfer, 1984, 149), and Farashbashi is the manager of this department. On the other hand, we see silk carpets in the houses of ordinary people (Shirley, 2008, 194), and we see that their rooms are furnished with carpets (Olearius, 2006, 43). Since foreign delegations are often political envoys, merchants, or religious missionaries, they visit palaces more and less often, as well as the streets and markets. Therefore, the stunning charm and delicacy of the reception halls, rooms, and enclosures of the grandees' houses or nobles' tents have been more expressed in European newspapers. The dazzle of the viewer's gaze from the carpeting of the hall floor is noticeable in the travelogues of the Safavid period, and the following cases are examples of it: (Barbaro et al., 1970, 74, 416; Shirley, 2008, 143; Figueroa, 1984, 332; Olearius, 2006, 205, 206; Chardin, 1993, 608; Clavijo, 1965, 78; Jamli Karri, 1969, 116; Niebuhr, 1975, 66). The enthusiasm of Europeans from seeing beautiful carpets in the rooms can be found in the following sources: (Barbaro et al., 1970, 76; Della Valle, 1991, 14, 19, 213; Olearius, 2006, 58, 103, 104, 145, 194). Even the palace grounds were covered with expensive and excellent carpets (Della Valle, 1991, 175, 271).

The Khan and Shah's tent's floor should be covered with beautiful wide silk carpets. Chardin gave an extensive and expressive description of these tents (Chardin, 1993, 792), and its example can also be seen in other sources (Clavijo, 1965, 271; Della Valle, 1991, 270; Olearius, 2006, 66) that sometimes they put velvet pillows on that expensive carpet (Chardin, 1993, 792). The viewing area of the foreign guests is covered with a carpet so that the splendor of the Iranian carpet attracts their eyes.

The Role of Carpet in Foreign Trade

Reports show that the Shah of Iran gave a carpet to the envoys of the European countries to show his goodwill and respond to the valuable gifts. In a general view from the perspective of foreign tourists, Iranian carpets have been an exquisite gift; a gift that is sometimes presented to the king by the people and courtiers and sometimes as a symbol of Iranian culture and art by the king and the court to European envoys and delegations (Quds, 2016). Adam Olearius talked about the colorful carpets in Moscow (Olearius, 2006, 398). Chardin states that carpets are among the accessories to which minor sultans like King Mingreli are attracted. The Shah of Iran sent them (Chardin, 1993, 135). Anthony Shirley also mentioned the gift of a silk and brocade carpet from the Shah to the European delegation (Shirley, 2008, 66). Moreover, carpets were among the strategic export items during the Safavid period. The Shah of Iran exported silk, delicate woven fabrics and carpets abroad (Chardin, 1993, 899). Some travelers have talked about establishing a branch of the Dutch company in Iran and exchanging the company's goods with wool, carpets, and silk (Chardin, 1993, 612).

Iranian Carpet; Red Carpet of Reception Ceremony

Undoubtedly, the most impressive Iranian carpet in the eyes of foreign viewers is related to the ceremony of welcoming foreign delegations. The moment of entering Sultan Hasanbeig's palace has been depicted as follows: «... the king was sitting on a woven pillow and leaning on another pillow at the entrance. ... the carpet was spread all over the palace» (Barbaro et al., 1970, 67). While receiving the king from the European delegation, Shirley pointed out the rooms with premium brocade fabrics hanging from the walls, and the floor was made of high-quality carpets (Shirley, 2008, 54). Some Europeans have not been able to hide their surprise that, contrary to the traditions, they don't walk on brocade carpets in reception ceremonies and have to step on wet tiles next to the pond (Amiri, 1990, 279). The Shah furnishes the hall with exquisite carpets both during public meetings (Olearios, 2006, 193), when accepting the credentials of the ambassador of Venice (Kontarini, 1970, 24), and to meet political envoys (Kontarini, 1970, 54; Amiri, 1990, 163).

The rooms and the beautiful hall that Olearius passed through to meet the Shah of Iran were all furnished with beautiful carpets, and the European group did not want to soil these delicate carpets with their shoes (Olearius, 2006, 59 & 128). When the Spanish ambassador is dissatisfied with the untidiness of his room, he is satisfied by covering the floor with a carpet (Figuroa, 1984, 165).

The Role of Carpet in Iranian Customs

One of the cultural functions of the carpet is eating food on it. This can be seen in all social classes of 17th-century Iran. This may not be a big deal for those of us who have grown up in Iranian culture; however, the European tourist, who generally eats his food on the table, does not get over this phenomenon easily. On the other side that, he says: «In the East land, it is customary to sit on the carpet while eating» (Chardin, 1993, 663), and others said: «We used to sit on the carpet according to the Iranian tradition» (Barbaro et al., 1970, 152), is that the tradition and behavior of European are different from this. Other examples of the special attention that travelers have paid to the way Iranians eat are written in some travelogues (Chardin, 1993, 128, 1292; Kaempfer, 1984, 248; Olearius, 2006, 60; Kontarini, 1970, 40). The following function of the carpet is to sit on it. Figuroa mentioned this work as «the infrangible custom of all Asians» (Figuroa, 1984, 325). Due to a long time he spent among Iranians, Chardin was so used to sitting on a carpet that he liked it more than sitting on a chair; therefore, he clearly says: «When a person sits on the mattress as per the Iranian custom, he feels comfortable and relaxed» (Chardin, 1993, 812). The absence of a chair and sitting on the carpet attracted Shirley's attention (Shirley, 2008, 63), and Kontarini considers this practice a custom of Iranians (Kantarini, 1970, 39). One of the customs and rituals of the century celebration in those days was removing the dust from the carpet. Also, to smoke hookah, they carpeted the short platforms in front of the doors and sat on them (Chardin, 1993, 1524 & 1941). The last point of this article, related to the carpet, is a painful incident deeply rooted in religious beliefs. Chardin narrated the agonizing death of one of the servants of Shah Abbas II for the crime of falling asleep under the tent of the harem due to exhaustion, which is not dissimilar to the death of the last Abbasid Caliph (Chardin, 1993, 1326). They wrapped the poor servant in the carpet on which he was sleeping and rubbed him until he died. If we want to show the themes and topics related to Iranian carpets through the analysis of European (Farangi) travelogues of the Safavid period in a comparative diagram, Diagram 1 will be the proof.

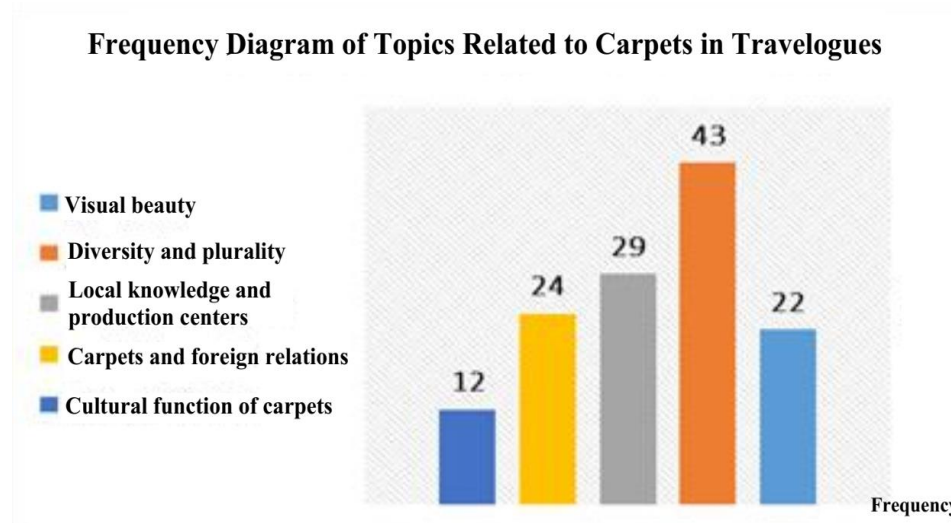


Diagram 1. Frequency diagram of topics related to carpets in travelogues. Source: Authors.

Conclusion

Iranian carpet, as one of the cultural ambassadors of Iran land in Europe (Farang), was able to attract the attention of Europeans by relying on its design, pattern, and elegance. Iranians themselves have not often looked at carpets from a research perspective because the carpet, as the most critical piece of furniture in their lives, has such a presence in their daily life and artistic and cultural life that they see themselves as unnecessary to have such a view. Perhaps due to the intensity of this presence, they have not been able to create a distance between themselves and the carpet, which is necessary for a researcher's view. In their travelogues, Europeans mentioned things such as carpet weaving centers in Iran, emphasizing the abundance of carpets, introducing the local knowledge of carpet weaving and customs associated with carpets and rugs, expressing their surprise at the enchanting beauty of Iranian carpets, and in fact, increased the eager of European adventurers for a trip to Iran. In addition, a significant part of the cultural components of Iranian peoples, such as the connection of carpet designs with mythological stories and Iranian history, the use of carpets in religious ceremonies and the variety of designs, patterns, materials and textures in this land, is introduced to the European observer from the texture of carpet. Accordingly, based on the present research, it was identified that most of the attention of the travelogues was on the subject of abundance, dispersion, and also the variety of designs and motifs in Iranian carpets. Thus, we see wonderful praises of Iranian carpets and rugs in travelogues. Also, the lowest frequency is related to Iranian customs and carpets, which shows the partial and superficial awareness of such works with Iranian people's cultural foundations and beliefs.

Author Contributions

This article was written with the participation of both authors. All authors discussed the results, reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgment

Not appreciation

Conflict of Interest

The author (s) declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest related to this research, in writing, and publication of this article

Research Funding

The author (s) did not receive any financial support for conducting the research, writing up, and publication of this article.

Appendix

1. Habibullah Sadeghi, painter, born in 1957, died in 2023.
2. Jalal Shabahangi, a graphic artist, born in 1935 and died in 2023.
3. Parviz Kalantari, painter, born in 1931, died in 2016.
4. Jamaluddin Tabasinejad, a painter born in 1954.
5. Zahra Nazari, painter and sculptor, born in 1979.
6. Jamaluddin Khoraminejad, painter, born in 1955, died in 2012.
7. Mahmoud Samandarian, painter, born in 1963.
8. Seyed Hasan Soltanizadeh, painter, born in 1964.
9. Iran Dorudi, painter, born in 1936, died in 2021.
10. Abbas Rostamian, painter, born in 1959.

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