

Lesson: Two Carpets

Essential Questions: Why are carpets important in Islamic cultures? What are the basic characteristics of West Asian carpet design? What are the similarities and differences between the Ottoman Turkish and Iranian carpets discussed in this lesson?

Learning experience: Students will become familiar with two roughly contemporaneous carpets, one from Ottoman Anatolia and one from Iran. They will analyze their design and learn about some of the aesthetic priorities of the people who created them.

Anticipatory set: In your house, your apartment, or your room: what kind of objects do you surround yourself with? Which are useful? Which are decorative? Which are both?

Context: Carpets have been made for thousands of years throughout Central and West Asia. Flat-woven textiles (kilims—carpets without pile) were made in Turkey at least as early as 7000 BCE. The oldest surviving woolen pile carpet dates from the fifth century BCE, found in a burial site in the Altai mountains of southern Siberia.

For pastoral nomadic inhabitants of the Eurasian steppe, carpets served as “floor coverings, prayer mats, tent decorations, canopies, as symbols of power, privilege and riches” (Abas 2004: 11).

In the sedentary world of cities, towns, and farming villages, carpets were also more than floor covering. They were “an integral part of one’s living arrangements, one which took the place of chairs, beds, and sometimes tables” (www: Erdmann).

Carpets, in short were necessities, not merely decorations, and so were worth the great care that was lavished on them. Those belonging to the wealthy never remained in one place all the time. At the Seraglio in Constantinople, for instance, they were changed every three months. The ones removed were first expertly cleaned and then sent to a treasure chamber for safekeeping. In Persia there were special “carpet houses” where the valuable carpets that needed a rest were stored. They were looked after by the house’s own permanent staff and the director (custodian) also decided which carpets should be used, where and on which occasion (www: Erdmann).

An account of the visit of Byzantine ambassadors to the Abbasid dynasty’s (750-1258) capital at Baghdad shows how carpets contributed to the display of royal wealth and power:

The number of the carpets and mats. . . was twenty-two thousand pieces; these were laid in the corridors and courts, being spread under the feet of the nobles, and the Greek Envoys walked over such carpets all the way from the limit of the new Official Gate, right to the presence of the Caliph—but this number did not include the fine rugs in the chambers and halls of assembly. . . spread over the other carpets, and these were not to be trodden with the feet (Grabar 1978: 168).

All three of the early modern Islamic empires—the Ottomans (1281-1924), the Safavids (1501-1739), and the Mughals (1526-1858)—developed thriving carpet industries.

Carpet weaving was transformed from a minor craft based on patterns passed down from generation to generation into a statewide industry with patterns created in court workshops. In this period [1600-1800], carpets were fabricated in greater quantity than ever before. They were traded to Europe and the Far East where, too precious to be placed on the ground, they were used to cover furniture or hung on walls. Within the Islamic world, especially fine specimens were collected in royal households (www: Sardar 2003).

Trade with Europe is reflected in the hundreds of [paintings](#), both sacred and secular, where carpets appear. Such paintings are important to scholars, so much so that some carpet styles are labeled with the names of Western painters. Carpets such as the Ushak design (1) in this lesson “were being imported into Europe as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century” (Rogers 1995: 198).

Although individual domestic weavers and nomad households simplified the process, workshop production required considerable division of labor. One source lists the products of seven crafts—spinning thread and dyeing fabric, for instance—that were necessary before weaving could begin (Wulff 1966: 195).

Weaving itself was a complex process involving either a preparatory drawing or an actual knotted sampler. These indicated the sequence and density of knots. Sometimes a professional design caller was used to call out the knotting sequence (www: Ittig 1990).

Women played a central role in carpet-making:

In Anatolia and Iran, many women were employed as spinners, dyers, and knotters in a craft that tended to adhere to a strict gendered division of labor. While the precise assignment of tasks might differ from one locale to another. . . carpet making in general was a heavily feminized craft (Tucker 2006: 398).

Carpet-making shared the same visual vocabulary as the rest of Islamic art: [vegetal design](#) (“arabesque”) and [geometric patterning](#). Moreover, one writer suggests that carpets were central to the development of this aesthetic:

Carpets represented the most ancient and the most meaningful art form in the population that first embraced Islam. . . Long experience of carpet weaving gave tent dwellers skill and passion fortessellations [patterns made of interlocking parts fitting together with no gaps between them], interlaced patterns and the all-over covering of surfaces (Adapted from Abas 2004: 11).

Carpet patterns, with their wealth of vegetal decoration, have been compared to [gardens](#). Some carpets were even made to look like [stylized gardens](#).

The ruler of the last pre-Islamic dynasty to control Iran, the Sassanians (224-651), had a carpet called “The Spring Garden.” It measured almost ninety feet to a side and was

embroidered with precious stones and gold. Victorious Arab soldiers found it too heavy to carry away, so it was cut up and the pieces awarded as booty (www: Morony).

The two carpets discussed here are different in style and visual impact. The Ottoman “Star Ushak” carpet is based on repetitions of an eight-pointed star design. The Safavid carpet has a central medallion surrounded by four lions and a calligraphic inscription. Both, however, encourage students to think critically about the importance of color and pattern in the arts of Islam.

Rationale: Carpets embody important aspects of Islamic visual culture. Also, since they are an art form admired for centuries in both East and West, they introduce students to a world of beauty that, on one hand, is specific to Islam and, on the other, transcends cultural boundaries.

Instructional resources: Two carpets, one from Turkey and one from Iran; four other carpets for comparison (1A, 1B; 2A, 2B); “Parts of a Carpet” (diagram); “Teacher’s Background Sheet: Basic Carpet Terms.”

1. Ottoman “Star Ushak” Carpet
 Western Anatolia, Ushak, Ottoman
 Late 15th-early 16th century
 (KHAL.2006.0047)



<p>(A) “Star Ushak” Carpet Ushak, Anatolia 1450-1500</p>	<p>(B) “Star Ushak” Carpet Ushak, Anatolia 16th-17th century</p>
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- Ushak was a carpet-producing center in northwestern Anatolia.
- These designs are believed to have been royal commissions.
- The multiple medallion design of (1) consists of an eight-pointed star repeating across the carpet’s field. (1A) and (1B) are variations of this style.
- The eight-pointed star of (1) is simple: two superimposed squares.
- All three carpets are dominated by the deep blue of the star motifs and the red of the main field. The stars on all three are outlined in white.
- The stars of (1) and (1A) are filled with palmettes.
- “Surprisingly, few Ushak carpets survive in Turkey compared with the numbers found in Western Europe, particularly in Italy” (Rogers 1995: 198).

- Encourage students to look closely. Notice the subtle touches of color—tiny areas of white, pale blue, and yellow on the flowers in (1), for instance. These are probably translations in knotted wool yarn of a painted master design.

2. Safavid Medallion Carpet
Iran, Kashan, Safavid
16th century
(KHAL.2006.0048)



<p>(A) Medallion Rug with a Field of Flowers Iran, Safavid Probably Kirman 17th century</p>	<p>(B) The Sely Carpet Iran, Safavid Late 16th century (Details)</p>
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- The Safavid dynasty was an important era in the arts of Islam:

The high point in Persian carpet design and manufacture was attained under the Safavid dynasty (1501-1739). It was the result of a unique conjunction of historical factors—royal patronage, the influence of court designers at all levels of artistic production, the wide availability of locally produced and imported materials and dyes. . . and commercial acceptance, particularly in foreign markets. . . Although there is no direct evidence that royal weaving workshops had yet been established [during the first century of Safavid rule], the influence of court designers on carpet weaving is clear. The two key design features of rugs in this period, the [medallion design](#) and [figural elements](#), were borrowed directly from the arts of the book as practiced in the royal atelier (www: Walker).

- The carpet has a central medallion surrounded by four lions. The lions symbolize Ali (c. 600-661), the first Shi'ite caliph. Called the "Lion of God," he was a son-in-law of Muhammad and the person Shi'ites believe is the Prophet's true successor. [Shi'ism](#) was established as Iran's state religion under the Safavids.
- A calligraphic inscription surrounds the carpet's medallion and central field.
- Notice the pale blue stems of the vegetal scrolls in the main field and the use of gray in the border.
- Carpet (2A) is a directional design. The medallion is couched in a garden-like spray of flowers.
- Carpet (2B) is dominated by the medallion and the four spandrels. Notice the prominent use of white in the border and inner stripe.

Procedure: Students will analyze and compare three Ottoman “Star Ushak” carpets (1), (1A), and (1B); and three Safavid medallion carpets (2), (2A), and (2B).

- Internet homework assignment: The class will (1) read about the two basic features of Islamic design that inform carpet-making: “[Plant Motifs](#) in Islamic Art” (Victoria and Albert Museum) and “[Geometric Decoration](#)”(Museum With No Frontiers); and (2) read the brief thematic essay on "[Carpets from the Islamic World, 1600-1800](#)" from the *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. Students will be assigned to give brief reports on each of these readings.
- In class, students give their reports on the homework readings. The teacher goes over some of the basics of carpet history and design.
- The class is divided into four groups. Groups can be assigned in advance of the homework assignment.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
(1) Ottoman “Star Ushak” Carpet	(1) Ottoman “Star Ushak” Carpet	(2) Safavid Medallion Carpet	(2) Safavid Medallion Carpet
Carpet (1A)	Carpet (1B)	Carpet (2A)	Carpet (2B)

- The teacher leads a whole class discussion about design formats and important motifs.
- Each group reports. They compare and contrast carpets (1) and (2) with their respective related carpets.
- The whole class then compares and contrasts (1) The “Star Ushak” carpet with (2) the Safavid medallion carpet.

Whole group reflection: Islamic carpets share decorative styles with architecture, the arts of the book, painting, ceramics, and metalwork. What special characteristics do carpets have that distinguish them from these other arts?

Instructional modification: These activities may take more than one class session.

Application: Using the internet, students assemble “collections” of carpets. They create PowerPoints discussing the background of their chosen carpets and the reasons for their choices. This can also be done in groups.

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Acknowledgements

This lesson was created by Eve Eisenstadt, its academic content approved by Kristina Richardson, and the final lesson edited by Martin Amster.