Oriental Rug Primer

Introduction

Formally, to qualify as a true "Oriental rug," the item must meet three criteria:

1. Manufactured in one of a specific set of countries (see below)
2. All of the weaving and knotting done by hand
3. Non-synthetic materials used, typically wool

Regardless of their design, machine-made rugs, rugs manufactured in the occident, and rugs made with synthetic fibers do not qualify as true "Oriental rugs."

True Oriental rugs all come from one of the following places in the so-called "rug belt":

- Iran (formerly "Persia," the very source of the term "Persian rug")
- Turkey (Anatolia)
- The Caucasus region (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia)
- Central Asia (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan)
- China
- India

Today, many Oriental rugs are sourced from Pakistan; but good quality rugs sold there are typically woven in Afghanistan, where the workmanship is far superior, or are woven by Afghan expatriates who fled the violence of their native land.

Though India is considered a producer of Oriental rugs, their tradition is not native but rather was introduced from other countries. Today their rugs are known for unimaginative if competent Persian copies of commercial value only.

It is also worth noting that as economic conditions in China improve, the labor-intensive art of rug making is becoming unprofitable, and China has virtually ceased manufacture.

Rugs are broken down into the following types:

- Carpets (6’ x 9’ or larger)
- Rugs, identical to carpets but smaller; three independent subtypes exist:
  - Runners, long and narrow, typically used for hallways
  - Mats (generally 5 square feet or less)
  - Moslem prayer rugs
- Bagfaces, donkeybags, juvals, tent doors (ensis), pillow coverings (yastiks), coverings for pack animals, and other utilitarian nomadic items

The third bullet above is a catch-all category encompassing various knotted “rugs” produced by nomadic peoples serving such purposes as saddlebags for donkeys and horses, adornments for camels (especially the traditional bridal camel), or receptacles for laundry, household items, or salt. The image on the top left is a Qashqai bag front.

(Qashqai photo by Vincent Keers [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html) or CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], from Wikimedia Commons.

On the top right is a Tekke ensi; on the bottom, a Turkish yastik. Interestingly, for some time such nomadic pieces have been all the rage of serious collectors, who admire them for their authenticity.

The three most important factors to consider about an Oriental rug are:

- What is the town, region, or tribe that created the rug?
- Is the rug of flatweave or pile construction?
- Does the rug follow a medallion design, all-over design, or neither?

These topics are described immediately below.

Oriental rugs come in a dizzying variety of patterns, leaving we of the occident bemused about how to describe them. Fear not: a typology exists. Categorizing Oriental rugs according to what Westerners would describe as their "style" or "design" is based on two criteria:

- The village, city, or region in which it was manufactured. For example, on the top is a "Kerman-Lavar" rug, named after the renowned towns of its origin.
- The tribe, traditionally nomadic, that created it, generally having its own stylistic traditions. On the right is a Qashqai rug, named for the southern Iranian tribe that created it.

Antique rug photos courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

The most famous towns/villages/regions are:

- Iran: Abadeh, Arak, Bakhshaish, Bidjar, Farahan, Isfahan, Kashan, Kerman, Khamseh, Lilihan, Nain, Qum, Sarouk, Senneh, Serab, Shiraz, Tabriz
- Turkey: Bergama, Ghiordes, Kulah, Malataya, Mudjur, Oushak
- Caucasus: Karabagh, Kazak, Kuba, Shirvan

The most famous tribes are:

- Iran: Bakhtiari, Khorasan, Kurds, Luri, Qashqai
- Turkey: Yoruk
- Central Asia: Baluchi, Bokhara, Chaudor, Ersari, Salor, Saryk, Tekke, Turkmen, Yomud

Antique Turkish Oushak rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

The second important factor deals with the technique used to weave the rug. There are two:

- "Pile weaving," in which the rug has knots attached to a foundation (warp and weft). The knots protrude upward, which results in a thick, plush carpet. This is the type most people associate with Oriental rugs. All of the rugs pictured heretofore are pile-woven.
- "Flat weaving," which lacks knots and hence a thick pile. Flat weaving was certainly developed earlier in history than pile weaving. The example to the right shows an Azeri shadda flat-woven rug.

High-Level Design: Central Medallions

The third and final factor is high-level design. This is a subject of seemingly endless complexity.

In truth, "pattern" is a less important concept with Oriental rugs than the locale in which it was manufactured or the tribe that manufactured it, as described above.

However, knowledge of the rudiments of high-level design is rewarding. Undoubtedly, the most important design characteristic is: Is the high-level design "central medallion" (shown on the right), "all-over," or neither?

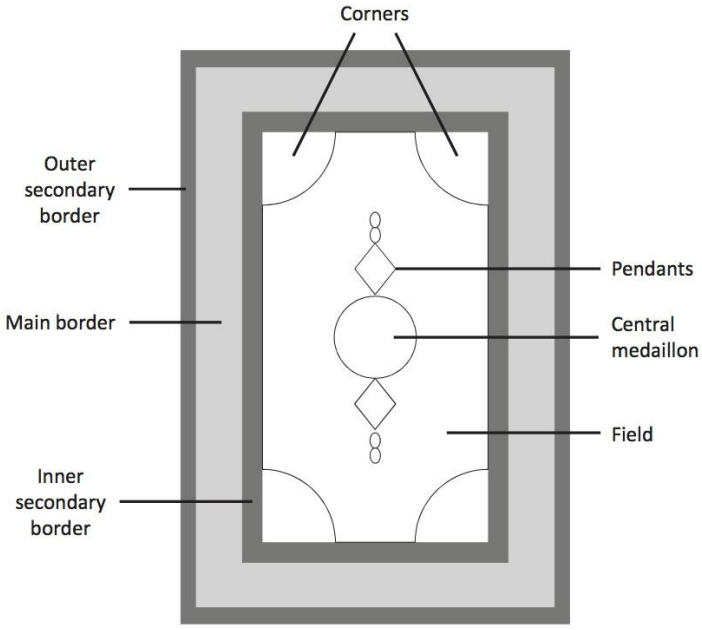
Antique Persian Isphahan rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Almost certainly the central medallion design is the most popular. The diagram to the right shows the typical elements of an Oriental rug with a central medallion:

- The "field," which surrounds the central medallion.
- One or more "borders" setting off the field, where one border always predominates and is referred to as the "main border." Others are referred to as "secondary borders," "minor borders," or "guard stripes."
- Corners or "spandrels" placed in the 4 corners of the field, often reiterating the design of the medallion.
- Pendants or "anchors", appendages protruding from both ends of the medallion.

It should be stressed, however, that all of these design elements except the medallion apply equally to non-medallion rugs.

Diagram by HajjiBaba [CC BY-SA 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0)], from Wikimedia Commons.



Though prized for their extraordinary detail, some Oriental rugs have large "open" fields devoid of ornamentation.

Technically, open fields are possible on non-medallion based rugs too, but this is comparatively unusual.

Antique Persian Isphahan rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Multiple medallions are not only common but in some locales are the norm.

High-level designs are further categorized as "rectilinear" or "curvilinear." An example of rectilinear, in which design elements are based primarily on straight lines and right angles, is shown in the rug on the right.

(As with open fields, the concept of rectilinear vs. curvilinear also applies to non-medallion based rugs.)

Rectilinear designs offer fewer challenges in terms of the skill of the weaver and the time required to execute the design, and certainly arose earlier in history than curvilinear designs.

Village and tribal/nomad weaving have tended to be rectilinear, given the fewer resources required, but this is only a general tendency. Turkish weaving, especially when compared to Persian, is predominantly rectilinear.

In curvilinear design, design elements are based primarily on curves, as in the example on the right.

City and royal court weaving is much more likely to be curvilinear. Historically, it was the Persians who introduced curvilinear weaving, and even today it tends to be more favored there than elsewhere.

High-Level Design: All-Over and Other

Most rugs lacking a central medallion are said to have an “all-over” design (right).

Antique Persian Fereghan rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

An all-over design in which a small number of filler elements are repeated over and over is called an “infinite repeat” (or “endless repeat”) pattern.

Antique Persian Afshar rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

In addition to endless repeat patterns, all-over designs include another subtype, as Murray Eiland describes:

> "Intermediate between the medallion and repeating designs are various compartment or panel arrangements in which the field is broken up into rectangular, square, or lozenge-shaped areas containing similar or diverse design motifs."

Antique Persian Bakhtiari rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Finally, there are designs which are neither medallion nor all-over. On the left is a so-called "ethnographic" design, in which the pattern consists of symbols meaningful—perhaps sacred—to the given ethnic group that wove the rug. This example is a Yomud ensi.

On the right is an example of a "pictorial" carpet, in which the carpet displays images from the natural world.

Carpets from the Rug Belt

Persia/Iran

Antique Persian Isphahan rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Bidjar.

Antique Kashan rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Tabriz rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Sarouk, Kashan style.

Jozan.

Antique Sarouk rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Isphahan rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Turkey

Antique East Anatolian rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Milas rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Bergama rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Bergama rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Caucasus

Antique Seichur rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Kazak rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Kazak rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Karabagh rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Karabagh rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Kazak rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Kurdish (Turkey, Caucasus, Iraq, and Persia)

The Kurds have enclaves throughout the rug belt.

Antique Kurdish rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Kurdish rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique Kurdish rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Central Asia

Tekke

Antique rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Salor

Antique rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Saryk

Antique rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Baluch

Antique rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

China

Antique rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Antique rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Low-Level Design Elements

Here are some common low-level design elements of Oriental carpets:

Herati pattern

Per Wikipedia: "The Herati pattern consists of a lozenge with floral figure at the corners surrounded by lancet-shaped leaves sometimes called "fish". Herati patterns are used throughout the 'carpet belt'."

Vine/tendril/arabesque

Trefoil

Mihrab, always found in Moslem prayer rugs

(The mihrab is the niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction that Muslims should face when praying.)

Photo by Dad.erot [CC0], from Wikimedia Commons

Tree of life

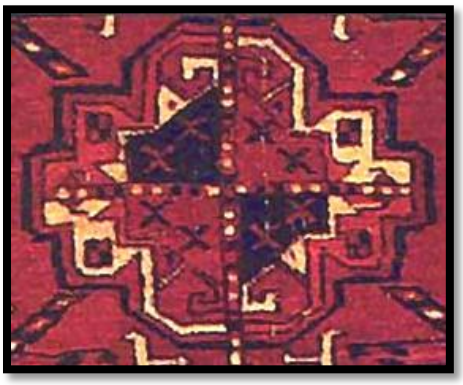
Rosette (flower viewed face-on)

Boteh

Photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Palmette (flower viewed in cross-section)

Gul (a specialized form of Central Asian medallion)



Leaf

Lattice

Photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Latchhook / ram's head

Photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

Mina Khani (typically, small rosettes or palmettes alternating with some other shape, often within a lattice)

Photo by Pouyakhani [CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], from Wikimedia Commons.

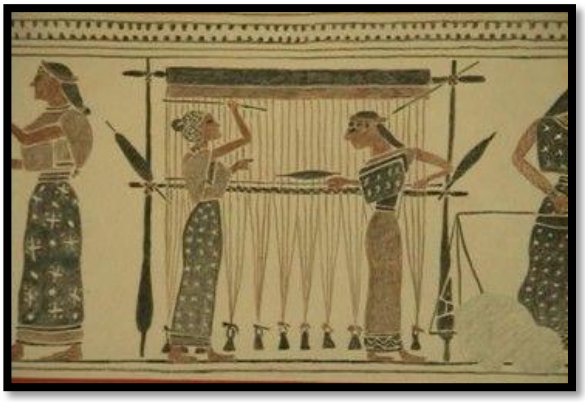
Another reason that "pattern" is relatively unimportant is that Oriental rugs are so detailed—that is, have so many design elements—that it is hard to classify the overall pattern. For example, this rug fragment includes many of the major design elements. How would you decide which one predominates?

Oriental Carpets Down Through History

~7000 B.C. Flat-woven rugs are created in modern-day Turkey.

~1700 B.C. Pile weaving arises, probably in Turkmenistan.

~1500 B.C. Syrian cuneiform tablet reads: "It would be good if five women who weave carpets were staying with her."



~800 B.C. Victory obelisk of Assyrian King Shalmaneser II showing two Judean prisoners bearing carpets.

~750 B.C. Homer's *The Iliad*:

"Then Achilles went inside his tent and opened the lid of the strong chest which silver-footed Thetis had given him to take on board ship, and which she had filled with tunics, cloaks to keep out the cold, and good thick rugs."

The Odyssey:

"One of them spread a fair purple cloth over a seat, and laid a carpet underneath it. Another brought tables of silver up to the seats, and set them with baskets of gold."

~450 B.C. The Pazyryk Carpet

The earliest intact Oriental rug in existence today is the Pazyryk Carpet produced by the Pazyryk Culture of present day Armenia or Persia. It measures 6 feet by 6.5 feet and has a knot density of approximately 360,000 knots per square meter, which is a higher knot density than most modern carpets. It had been frozen in Siberian ice, which is why it is so well-preserved. It displays all of the technical features of a present-day Oriental rug: "A field with repeating patterns, framed by a main border in elaborate design, and several secondary borders" (*Wikipedia*).

(Right) Detail of the Pazyryk Carpet, now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

The technical sophistication of the carpet indicates that at the time of its creation, pile weaving must have been going on for hundreds of years.

5th - 6th cen. A.D. Fragments indicate pile weaving was occurring in Turkmenistan.

After this point, there is a 600-year gap in the historical record before the next extant rug specimen.

9th cen. A.D Documents indicate carpet manufacture is occurring in Persia, but no specimens currently exist.

~1310 A.D. Marco Polo says: "And here [Konya, Turkey] they make the most beautiful silks and carpets in the world, and with the most beauiful colors."

13th-14th cen. Crusaders returning from the mideast introduce Oriental rugs to the west. They quickly become a symbol of wealth and power.

(Throughout this period, the vast majority of rugs are Turkish. Little is known about Persian rugs during this time.)

~1345 Lippo Memmi's *Virgin Mother and Child* (right), is the earliest known depiction of an Oriental rug in the West.

Photo by Sailko [CC BY 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0)], from Wikimedia Commons.

14th century

Persia is ruled by the Mongol Timurid dynasty founded by Timur the Lame. The earliest Persian rugs now extant can be traced to this period. (Timur the Lame is called *Tamburlaine* in Christopher Marlowe's eponymous tragedy. Marlow was a contemporary of Shakespeare. His purported portrait is shown on the right.)

15th century

According to Erich Aschenbrenner, based on paintings from that period:

"…in the 15th century Persian court carpets underwent a significant change of fashion and style…. Floral designs replaced geometric ones, and endless repeat patterns were abandoned in favor of centralized [medallion] designs."

16th – 18th centuries

Carpet weaving reaches its zenith during the Persian Safavid Dynasty (1501 - 1736), due to patronage by the Shahs. Perhaps the epitome of Persian weaving occurs during the reign of Shah Abbas I (1571 – 1629), pictured on the right. He establishes a court factory in Isfahan and moves the capital there. Carpets of unsurpassed beauty with thread counts up to 770 knots per square inch and as large as 23 ft. x 23 ft. are produced. Rectilinear designs give way to the more challenging curvilinear. This is considered the classical age of Persian carpet weaving.

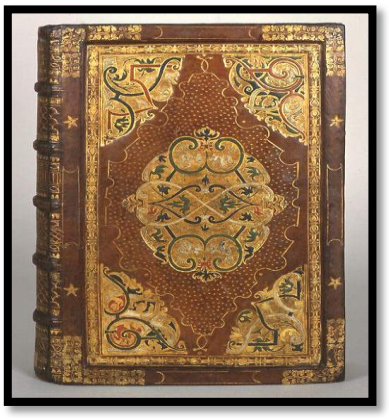
Shah 'Abbas I. Embassy to Venice (1595)
Carlo Caliari

16th century, continued

According to one expert:

"The common 'Lechek Torūnj' (medallion and corner) design was developed in Persia for book covers and ornamental book illuminations in the fifteenth century. In the sixteenth century, it was integrated into carpet designs."

The leather-bound tome on the right clearly shows such an influence.



This raises an interesting question: Why are Oriental rugs so overwhelmingly confined to abstract geometrical and curvilinear shapes and comparatively devoid of human subjects. K. Zipper and C. Fritzsche have the following explanation:

> "According to the Sunni *Hadith*, or 'commentaries on the Koran', the representation of men, animals, or other living creatures is forbidden."

However, as with so much of life, things are not so simple. For one thing, kings generally were able to do as they wished, and some wished figurative rugs. Furthermore, Persians are primarily Shiites and have a different *Hadith* than Sunnis.

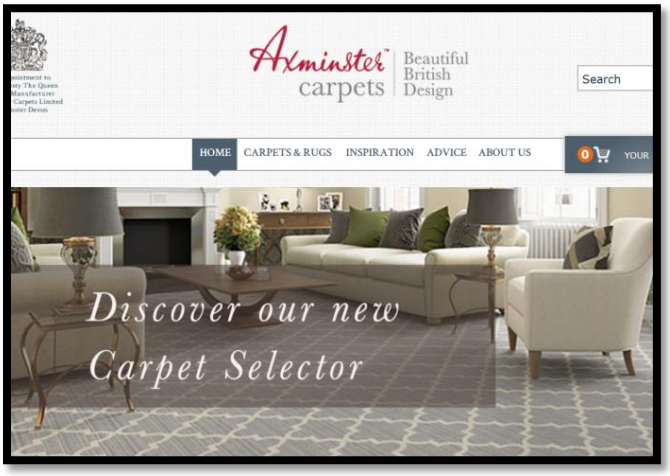
Therefore both ancient and modern hunting scenes, "nobles tableaus" (in which various historical, religious, and mythological characters are depicted side-by-side), and even scenes of lovers can be found, though not at all favored in the West.

Rug title: *The Great Cyrus & Kasandan in the Castle of Apadana*

(Treasure Gallery Inc) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0) or GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html)], via Wikimedia Commons

16th century, continued

- Rug making begins in China and India.
- Earliest extant Caucasian carpets—the so-called Dragon carpets—date to this period.
- Knowing a good thing when they see it, European entrepreneurs begin manufacturing "Oriental carpets" in Europe. By the mid-18th century, Axminster Carpets, an English firm, is founded and exists to this day.



1683 Poem appears in the Parisian journal *Mecure de France* in praise of Oriental carpets:

It is said I come from a barbarian nation,
Yet althouth I am without ambition,
There is nothing barbarian in my appearance.
The rainbow in all its beauty lacks the colours
Which shine from my garb.
Cruel time fades them a little each day
And chases the bloom of youth from my cheek.
Both high and low, as is my fate,
I am seen at court and in the sacred places,
I grace even the high table,
I remain there and do not hunger.

1723: Afghans conquer Persia; city weaving collapses. This marks the end of the "classical period" of Persian carpet weaving, which goes into a 150-year dark age.

19th century—rug making becomes a modern industry:

- Belgium develops machine-woven rugs.
- Europe creates the first synthetic dyes.
- European nations set up factories in the rug belt for the weaving of Oriental rugs.
- To meet Western tastes, traditional artisans surrender their design traditions and weave carpets to suit commercial demands. (As Murray Eiland rather acerbically puts it: "Oriental products of a less oriental nature were demanded.")

  Maximizing profit, traditional artisans switch to synthetic dyes. Some rugs are treated with chemicals to remove bright natural colors and are "repainted" with ink to enhance their marketability.
- Forgeries of antique carpets, some of them quite sophisticated, begin appearing on the market.

19th century, continued

As a result of these developments, carpet weaving flourishes in a commerical sense as rugs become common household items, purveyed in the new-fangled "department stores." But paradoxically these developments destroy the very craftsmanship that wove the goose that laid the golden rug. Artisans are left without a livelihood. Carpet weaving expertise goes the way of all flesh.

19th century, continued

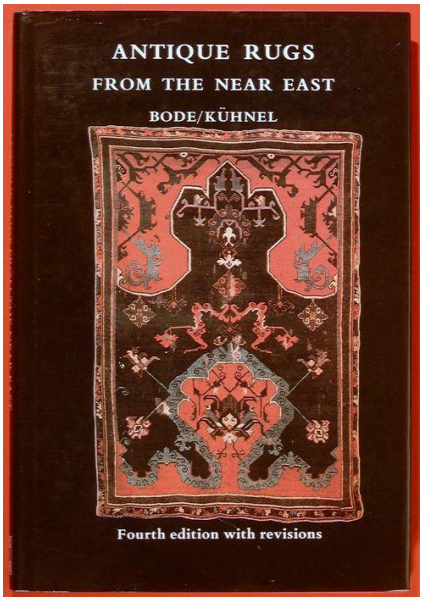
Even as weaving expertise passes away, Westerners begin to see Oriental rugs as a true art form. Scholars and scientists both devote serious study to the field.

1871 Julius Lessing publishes the first book on Oriental rug design.

1891 First formal public exhibition of Oriental rugs, in Vienna.

1892 The German Wilhelm von Bode publishes *Antique Rugs from the Near East*, which remains to this day the Oriental rug Bible.

1893 The Victoria and Albert Museum puchases the Ardabil Carpet at an enormous price.



19th century, continued

Such publicity leads to an Oriental carpet craze, and the market for Oriental rugs splits into the haves and have-nots. Wealthy individuals begin collecting fine antiques, because well-made rugs are no longer being woven. The middle class furnishes its homes with cheap knock-offs. Serious carpet weaving in Turkey and elsewhere goes into a disastrous decline, as did Persian weaving before them.

Antique Persian Bidjar rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

1915 – 1923

Turkish Armenians (who are Christians) side with Russia during World War II. Russia loses, and Turkey conducts an 8-year genocide against Armenians that kills up to a million and a half people. Armenians had been the leading carpet weavers in Turkey, and their loss further cripples the carpet industry there.

1920s As the middle class grows in Europe and America, demand for Oriental rugs grows. But contemporary quality is so low, suppliers find they get better prices for old (used) rugs than for new.

Antique Persian Qum rug photo courtesy of Fred Moheban Gallery.

1925 In Persia, Reza Shah Pahlavi overthrows the Qajar Dynasty, instituting the Pahlavi Dynasty. To beautify his palace, he reestablishes village weaving centers and enforces strict rules for techniques and materials—and woe to he who violates them. Persian craftsmanship enjoys a Renaissance.

(The Shah's descendent, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, is overthrown in turn by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979.)

Late 20th century

Starting in the mid-1960s, a rebirth of interest in Oriental rugs begins, sparked by collectors more interested in authentic day-to-day utilitarian rugs such as bagfaces, donkeybags, juvals, and ensis, rather than elaborate court weavings.

Pictured is an asmalyk (camel covering for a bridal procession) from Turkmenistan.

1980s - 1990s

Spurred on by the efforts described above, “return-to-tradition” organizations such as the following are formed to promote time-honored weaving techniques and materials:

- The DOBAG, Azeri, and Ayvacik initiatives in Turkey
- The Ersari Weaving Project in Pakistan
- The Iranian Zollanvari and Miri companies

The success of these efforts is currently much in doubt.

21st century

Tastes mutate. Growing up in the Post-Education Era and forged in the Age of Irony, Generation Xers and Milennials tend to reject the formality and tradition of Oriental rugs, choosing instead to invest in BMWs, hover boards, and iPads. The struggling market for fine carpets goes into a death spiral. Civilization passes away.

A Selection of Famous Oriental Carpets

Ardabil Carpet (Kashan, 1540), second-oldest in existence, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Woven and signed by A. H. Maksud.

Ghyas el Din Jami Carpet (Tabriz, 1542-1543), woven by Ghyas el Din Jami himself.

Salting Carpet (1600)

Detail of Sanguszko Carpet (~1600), now in the Miho Museum of Art, Tokyo.

Coronation Carpet (Isfahan, 1640 - 1650), now in Rosenborg Castle, Copenhagen.

Photo by Tgeik [CC BY-SA 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0)], from Wikimedia Commons,

Clark Sickle-leaf Carpet (Kerman, ~1725).

Sold at Sotheby's in 2013 for a record $33,765,000.

The largest hand-woven carpet in the world, at the Turkmen Carpet Museum in Ashgabat

Photo by Ibrahim Rustamov (tg:User:Ibrahim) [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html), CC-BY-SA-3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/) or CC BY 2.5 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5)], from Wikimedia Commons.

Islamic Manunal (Holy Carpet).

Image forbidden.

The Manunal is a covering mat or carpet for the Kaa'ba outside the Great Mosque at Mecca. Very highly decorated, a new one is made in Saudi Arabia each year and transported to Mecca. The carpet itself, which must not be seen or touched, is enclosed in a large ornate box.

Manufacturing Venues

Oriental rugs are categorized by the life-style of their weavers:

- Tribal and nomad
- Village
- Town/city workshop
- Royal court

While this classification remains important for antiques, nomadic lifestyles have all but disappeared, as has manufacture by royal court weavers.

Tribal and Nomad:

Very few peoples are truly nomadic in this day and age, although the life style is not completely extinct. Tribal weaving, contrarily, remains robust.

The unsettled life of the nomad or semi-nomadic tribal weaver restricts the size of the loom, and thus of the rug. They invariably employ a "horizontal loom," easily disassembled and requiring little space. It is little more than a wooden frame staked to the ground. An example is to the right.

Village:

Village-based weaving remains common today, typically performed on a "vertical loom." In both tribal/nomadic weaving and traditional village-based weaving, the weaver typically both designs the appearance of the rug, *and* performs the weaving.

Village-based weaving is almost always rectilinear in design, due to the increased demands of skill and time needed in curvilinear designs.

Town and City Workshop:

Most manufacturing has passed to commercial enterprises located in towns and cities. These are little more than factory sweatshops. However, the unlimited space and modern equipment available in urban areas enables carpets of virtually unlimited size.

Factory loom - By Colegota [CC BY-SA 2.5 es (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/es/deed.en)], from Wikimedia Commons.

In such venues, the design is done by a professional artist, in a paper-based model known as a "cartoon," and then turned over to the weavers, who are little more than unskilled workers.

In the figure on the right, the weaver examines the cartoon at the top and reproduces it as knots.

Photo by Julia Maudlin from Lake Oswego, Oregon, USA (Following the Pattern, Weaver, Esfahan, Iran) [CC BY 2.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

How Oriental Carpets Are Made

The first step is to spin yarn/thread from the wool of sheep or goats, from the hair of a camel, or from silk threads from silkworms. Since ancient times, cotton has been preferred for the warps and wefts, because it helps the rug lie flatter on the floor. However, wool was used by nomadic peoples, because it was readily available, and because it takes the sedentary life of the farmer to raise cotton.

Yak hair and horsehair are not unknown as thread sources.

Traditionally spinning was done by hand or on spinning wheels, but for most of the 20th century this has been replaced by machine spinning.

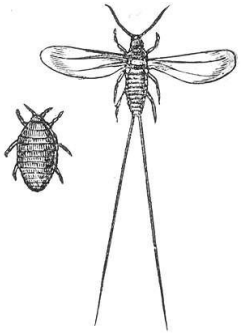
Wool, in addition to being plentiful in traditional nomadic societies, has several other advantages for carpet weaving. Per K. Zipper and C. Fritzsche:

> "It is far less susceptible to dirt than cotton, and does not react electro-statically. It is elastic and springy and is a good insulator against both cold and heat. It takes dyes well and is not easily flammable."

The spring shearing yields the best wool.

Next, the yarn/thread is dyed. Historically, only natural dyes from plants and insects were used. Two of the most famous red dyes are made from the root of the madder plant (left) and the Armenian cochineal insect (right). Other sources include:

- Onion, chamomile, or saffron for yellow
- True indigo (a member of the bean family) for blue
- Oak acorns or iron oxide for black
- Copper sulfate for green
- In ancient times, the murex sea snail for purple



Madder photo by H. Zell [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html) or CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], from Wikimedia Commons.

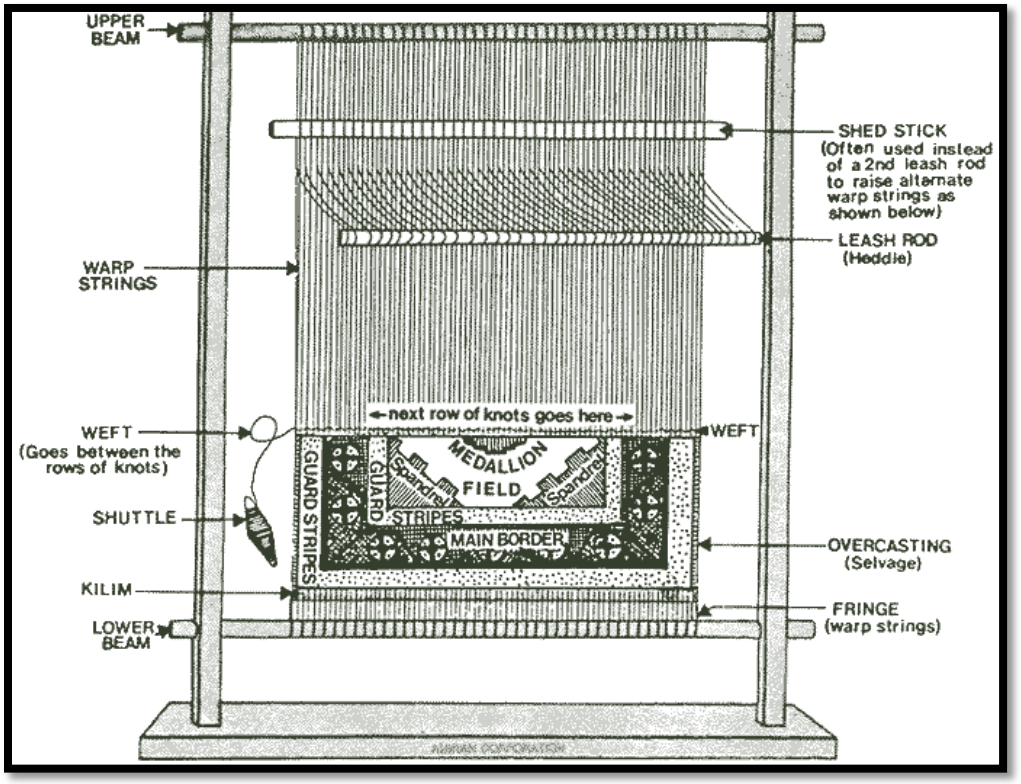
No change has had a more cataclysmic effect on traditional carpet weaving than the introduction of Western synthetic aniline dyes in the 1atter 19th century, which completely supplanted natural dyes. Problems include the following:

> "The careful selection of shades dis-appeared, to the obvious detriment of the carpet weaving tradition itself, many of the anilines were not color-fast and ran badly, whilst several shades, notably purple and various reds, were very sensitive to light and, in the case of purple, faded to beige within a few years." (Zipper & Fritzsche)

Collectors, seeking authenticity above all else, rejected these new carpets, and the industry went into a death spiral. Today, serious collectors are only interested in rugs with yarns dyed from natural substances.

Next, the rug is woven on a loom, including the tying of the knots. The diagram below shows a typical village loom, in this case a vertical loom. A carpet can only be as long and as wide as the loom on which it is created, which means that village-based carpets rarely exceed 6'x 9'. Tribal/nomadic rugs are typically even smaller.

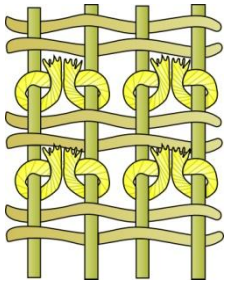
Diagram below by Nejad Rugs.

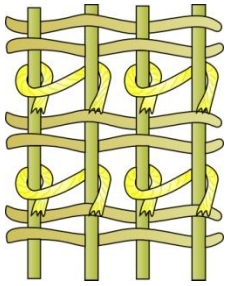


The following types of yarn/thread make up the structure of an Oriental rug:

- **Warps:** The threads that run (typically) the length of the rug, ending as fringes. The warps serve as the skeleton of the rug. In the diagrams on the right, the warps run vertically.
- **Wefts:** The threads that run (typically) the width of the rug and are interlaced alternately above and below the warps. The weft holds each row of knots in place. Like the warps, the wefts are typically not dyed. In rugs of good quality, there are at least two wefts after each row of knots. In the diagrams,the wefts run horizontally.
- **Knots** (also referred to as the pile): Threads that are tied around the warps and give the rug its surface pattern. Knots are shown on the right in yellow. In general, knots are either:
  - "Symmetric" (aka "Turkish"), shown on the top, or
  - "Asymmetric" (aka "Persian" or "Senneh"), shown on the bottom.

Diagrams by Arie M. den Toom, reproduced under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License.





Fringe: The ends of the warps are call the fringe. The fringe might hang loose or be braided or tasseled or woven into a flatweave called a "kilim."

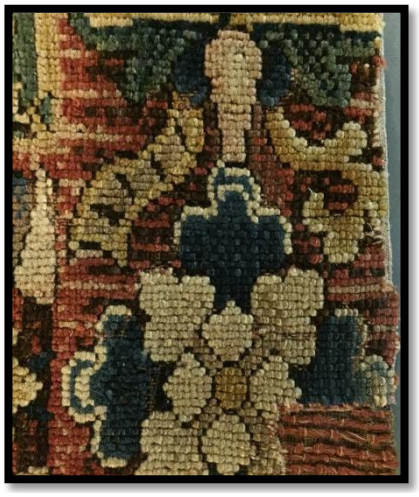
Edges:

The warps typically are reinforced at the outside edges of the rug to protect them from the extra wear and tear they undergo. The two main types of reinforcement are known as "selvage" and "overcast."

Fringe photo by Stilfehler [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html) or CC BY-SA 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], from Wikimedia Commons.

From Wikipedia:

> "Each knot tied into a rug can be regarded as one 'pixel' of a picture, which is composed by the arrangement of knot after knot. Hand-woven pile rugs are produced by knotting strings of thread individually into the warps, cuting the thread after each single knot. The fabric is then further stabilized by weaving in one or more strings of weft, and compacted by beating with a comb."



The density of knots is measured in terms of *knots/unit-of-area*^{2}, for example, knots per square inch. Below 30 knots per square inch is considered coarse, and above 290 extremely fine. The greatest known density is in a silk rug, at 3200 knots per square inch.

The example on the right shows the back of a rug with a very fine weave.

To quote Erich Aschenbrenner:

> "In general, finely knotted carpets command a highter price than coarsely knotted ones, if only because the material cost is higher and they take longer to produce. Nevertheless, the knot density is by no means the sole criterion of quality."

However, higher densities ***do*** contribute to the durability of a rug.

Photo by Arie M. den Toom [GFDL (http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html) or CC BY 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

A little-appreciated aspect of the value of an Oriental rug, both in terms of monetary value and perceived quality, is the artistic quality of the design. These are, after all, works of art, and as such creativitiy is prized, and slavish imitation scorned.

The figure on the right is an actual silk Persian carpet, and the realism of the execution is impressive. Though prized in Iran, in the West this sort of presentation is generally considered kitsch.

The final steps in rug weaving are to cut the rug off the loom, fasten the borders, clip the pile to obtain an even surface, and wash the finished rug. Then it's off to the retailer.

Carpet exhibition - Tasnim News Agency [CC BY-SA 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0) or CC BY 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0)], via Wikimedia Commons.

My Favorite Rugs from Each Region

(Okay, we'll give Persia two.)

Persia

- Kazvin
- 19th/20th cen.

Turkey

- Gördes
- Latter-19th cen.

Central Asia

- Tekke
- Late 19th cen.

China

- 19th century

Caucusus

- Kuba / Konagkend
- Circa 1900

Persia

- Nain
- 20th cen.

Oriental Rugs In Art

The Carpet Merchant by Jean Leon Gerome (1824 – 1904)

Oriental rugs have an intimate connection with the occidental art world. Since they became known to the West, they have been an element in the set design of countless paintings.

As shown in the text that follows, the costliness and beauty of Oriental rugs led them to be used in paintings to serve three main functions:

- To symbolize the power and authority of the contemporary Catholic Church
- To portray the wealth and prestige of secular rulers and aristocrats, as well as prosperous burghers
- As a source of beauty in their own right

The following three paintings are examples of the first.

Madonna with Saints John the Baptist and Donatus (1475-83)
Andrea del Verrocchio

The Alms of St. Anthony (1542)
Lorenzo Lotto
Photo © José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro

Madonna and Child Enthroned (late 15th century)
Gentile Bellini

By the end of the Renaissance, secular authority had grown to rival and even eclipse that of the Church. In the course of time, it occurred to royalty and the aristocracy that what was sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander: If the Church could exemplify their wealth and power by depicting Oriental carpets in their paintings, so could they.

Curiously, in Northern Europe such individuals seem to have been confused about the purpose of Oriental rugs, using them as table coverings rather than floor coverings, as all of the following examples show, except the one with Henry VIII. Renaissance Europe only rose above this confusion when in a flash of insight, Voltaire slapped himself on the forehead, declaring, "*Merde! Ils appartiennent à la baise sol,"* thus ushering in the Enlightenment.

Portrait of Henry VIII (1537)
The Workshop of Hans Holbein the Younger

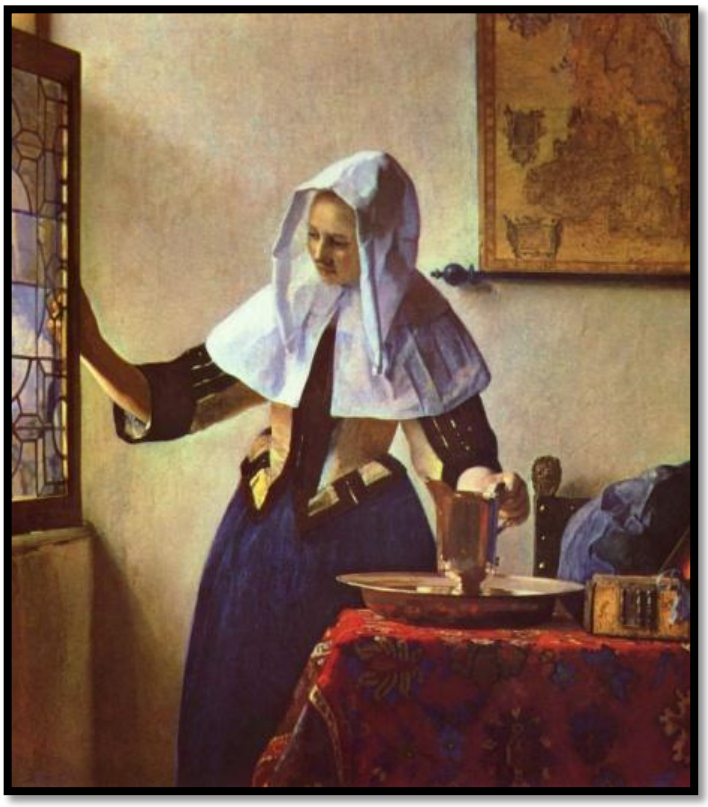
The French Ambassadors (1533)
Hans Holbein the Younger

The Somerset House Conference (1604)
Juan Patoja de la Cruz

Rich northern burghers, flush with wealth from manufacturing or trading, seized upon Oriental carpets as symbols of their affluence.

Oriental rugs were a favorite design motif of the immortal Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer (1632 – 1675).

Perhaps this would be a fortuitous time to relate an even more telling remark relative to the relationship between Oriental rugs and painting. Lacking a "carpet typology" at that point in history, rug styles became known by the names of the painters that depicted them, such that certain kinds of rugs became known as "Bellinis," "Lottos," and "Memlings."



Woman with a Water Pitcher (1665) Johannes Vermeer

Portrait of Danzig Merchant Georg Gisze (1532)
Hans Holbein the Younger

Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window (1657)
Johannes Vermeer

Somewhat later in history, the carpet or rug was employed not just as a secondary element with mere metaphorical value as a signifier of wealth and power, but rather became the very source of beauty that the artist sought to capture, as in these examples.

(The example on the right shows a carpet with a "Memling gull," named after the artist.)

Still Life with a Jug of Flowers (late 15th cen.)
Hans Memling

Still Life with Globe and Parrot (1658)
Pieter Boel

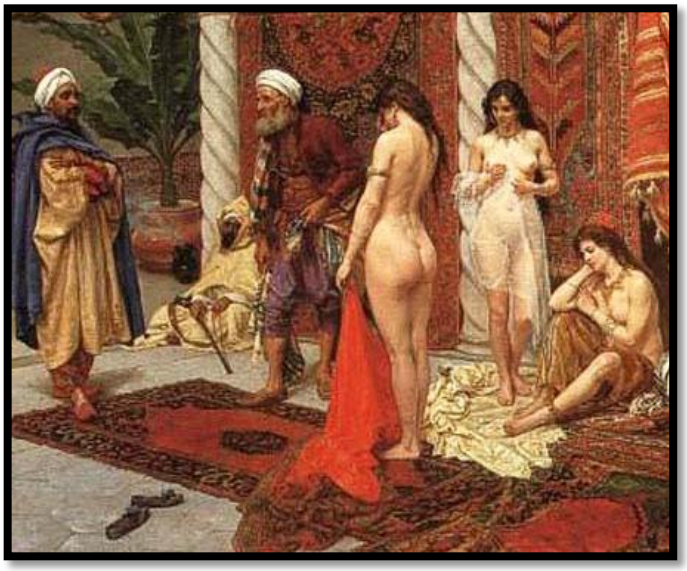
Still Life with Oriental Carpet (circa 1665)
Franceso Maltese

The last great flourishing in art of depiction of Oriental carpets was in the so-called "Romantic Orientalist Period" of the second half of the 19th century. At this time artists became enamored with the "exotic East," a curious description since the entire Mideast from Morocco in the west to Iraq in the east lies due south of Europe.

The beauty and aura of Oriental rugs made them a natural design element in such paintings, and one could ask: What would an Orientalist painting be without an Oriental carpet? It became a set feature of this genre—as did the harem and odalisque.

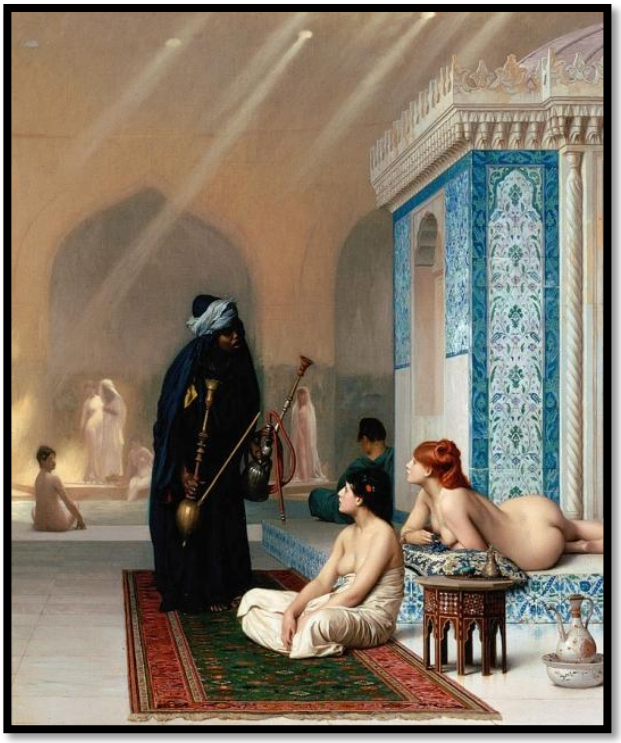
It is interesting to note that, as shown in the example on the right, even as late in history as this, artists continued to depict nudes without pubic hair, a practice which: (a) Dates back to the ancient Greeks, and (b) So shaped the marital expectations of 19th century art historian John Ruskin that, appalled by his bride's hirsute nether region, he was unable to consummate the marriage, which ended in annulment.

But I digress.



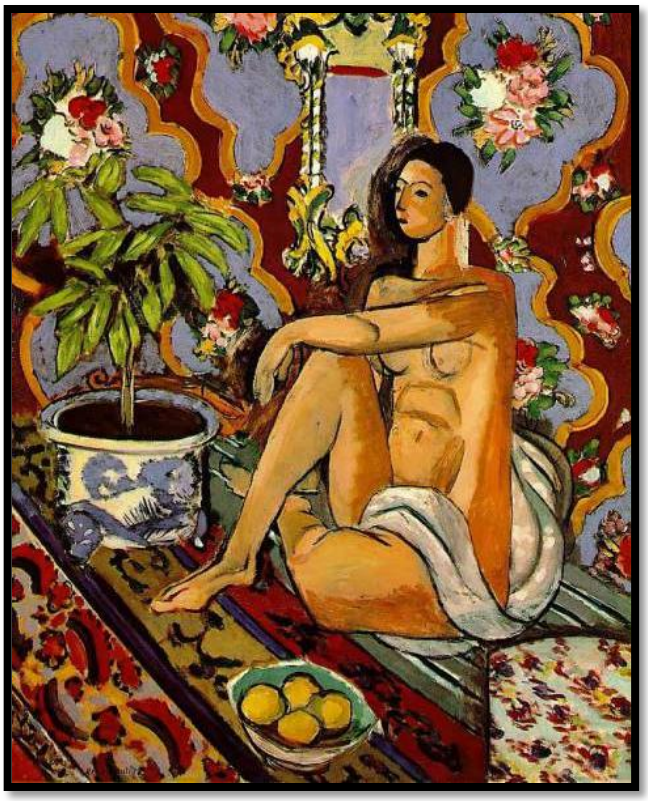
Inspecting New Arrivals
Giulio Rosati (1858 – 1917)

The Harem Bath
Rudolph Ernst (1854 – 1932)



Harem Pool (1876)
Jean-Leon Gerome

In the 20th and 21st centuries, as art vogues passed from Impressionism to Expressionism to Abstract to Pop to Op, Oriental carpets have all but disappeared from serious works of art. An exception is Henri Matisse's *Decorative Figure on an Ornamental Ground* (1926).



The Myth of the Magic Carpet

The myth of the magic carpet is a peculiar adjunct to the otherwise prosaic history of Oriental rugs. The first known reference is in the *One Thousand and One Nights* (8th century anno domini). According to a well-known source, this Arabian tale:

"…relates how Prince Husain travels to Bisnagar and buys a magic carpet. This carpet is described as follows:

'Whoever sitteth on this carpet and willeth in thought to be taken up and set down upon another site will, in the twinkling of an eye, be borne thither, be that place nearhand or distant many a day's journey and difficult to reach.'

"The literary traditions of several other cultures also feature magical carpets, in most cases literally flying rather than instantly transporting their passengers from place to place.

"Biblical King Solomon's carpet was reportedly made of green silk with a golden weft, sixty miles long and sixty miles wide."

Riding a Flying Carpet (1880) by Viktor Vasnetsov

The fantasy appeal of such a legend quickly made its way into cinema and TV. For example, 1924's *The Thief of Baghdad* starring Douglas Fairbanks, shown below.

The immortal work on the right of course requires no introduction.

More recently, Disney's *Aladdin*, an inaccurate and culturally insensitive retelling of the ancient Arabian legend—falsely included by Westerners as one of Scheherazade's thousand-and-one tales—features a rug with a far greater range of Thespian expressiveness than Keanu Reeves will ever attain.

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