

# SAFAVID CARPETS OF THE TAHMASP SCHOOL AND THE TAHMASP *SHĀHNĀMA*

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One can argue that the root of Persian fine art is undoubtedly the carpet. The intricate and colorful designs of carpets give them an allure that transcends generations. It was captured by miniaturists during the Golden Age of Persian painting in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The detailed representations of early carpet designs in those miniatures helped shape the material contexts in which the artists were conveying their understanding of the immaterial world and expressing spiritual values. The often precise replication by the painters of motifs on actual carpets provides important documentation for writing the history of Persian carpet making, and it is generally accepted that the painters were involved in carpet design.

To illustrate the close connection between carpet design and contemporary painters' record of it, this article will focus on Safavid carpets woven in the workshops associated with Shah Tahmasp and miniatures in the Tahmasp *Shāhnāma*. This period is considered by many to represent the epitome of achievement in these branches of the arts in Safavid Persia. The selection here includes works where one can see similar designs and colors. The growing recognition of the importance of Safavid carpets and miniatures has inspired a substantial scholarly literature and been the subject of several important conferences. A number of articles complement the present study but do not deal directly with same issues. Daryayi (2006) has written about design features in the carpets; Emami (1995) has studied the possible sources for those designs in Safavid carpets. A number of articles have discussed motifs used in both carpets and miniatures.<sup>1</sup>

## Some Background on the Carpet in Iran

Iranian carpets are like a mirror reflecting Iranian art and civilization. While the origin of this craft is un-

certain, many would agree that the best carpets have been woven in Iran. Since carpets wear out, their fabric may disintegrate, and thus the preservation of ancient examples is problematic, documenting the history of carpet weaving in Iran prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century is difficult. Nevertheless, the famous Pazyryk carpet, some 2500 years old and long considered the oldest surviving example of a pile carpet, attests to carpet manufacture in Achaemenid Iran. In the pre-Islamic Sasanian period, there is evidence regarding Khusro's Biharestan and Zimestan carpets which were adorned with gold, silver, and gems. In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, carpets woven in Khorasan, Isfahan, and Azerbaijan were sent as a tax to the Abbasid Caliphs. Other evidence, including some paintings, attests to weaving carpets with specific designs and colors in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Behnam 1965, pp. 4-42).

Carpets were exported to Europe as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, ones perhaps similar to the oldest Seljuk carpet (now in Istanbul), which has geometrical patterns (Razavi 2008, p. 160). It is necessary to rely on miniatures for evidence about carpet design prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but several 15<sup>th</sup>-century miniatures convey the quality of carpet design at that time. In the Timurid period of the late 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a close relationship between carpet weaving and painting: miniatures depicted carpets and carpet-like patterns, and the painted images in turn might influence carpet design (Emami 1995, p. 156).

Some of the finest carpets kept in world museums date to the Safavid Period. Given the importance Safavid rulers attached to this art, carpet weaving flourished at this time: it was a Golden Age of carpet weaving in Iran. The unique coincidence of factors such as royal patronage, the influence of court designers at all levels of artistic production, the wide availability

of locally produced raw materials and dyes, and commercial acceptance, particularly in foreign markets, all contributed to this peak of excellence (*Ibid.*, p. 75).

Among the Safavid rulers, as artists themselves, Shah Ismail (r. 1501–1524) and Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–1576) were important patrons in all the areas of the arts, but especially in the carpet industry. Under Shah Tahmasp, who had spent time in Herat before succeeding his father, there was a revival of interest in and further development of the contributions made in the Mongol and Timurid periods to Persian culture. The results in miniature painting and carpet design were outstanding (Pope and Ackerman 1987, p. 206). Shah Tahmasp was personally involved in carpet design and commissioned important projects (Behnam 1965, pp. 4–7). In his international diplomacy, he often donated valuable carpets to neighboring rulers, thus introducing Persian carpets to the other countries (Ferrier 1995, p. 123).

Carpets woven at the time of Shah Tahmasp were technically superb. Their depiction of plants, both realistically (for example, palm leaf motifs) and with stylized imagined flora, combined with a range of new motifs (Ettinghausen and Yarshater 2000, p. 300). Among the outstanding examples of the carpets from this period are the “Chelsea” and “Ardabil” carpets (in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London), the “Hunting” carpet (Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan), and the “Anhalt” carpet (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) [Fig. 1a-d].<sup>2</sup>

### Safavid Miniatures

Miniatures provide among the best evidence about the history of carpets, given the way they record patterns and motifs (Sür-e Esrafil 2001, p. 12). To appreci-

ate that evidence first requires we consider the history of miniatures as they developed in the Safavid period. Such small scale and richly detailed paintings have a long history in Iran, but really bloomed under the Safavids.

After establishing Safavid rule, Shah Ismail (1501–1524) made Tabriz his capital and summoned many artists there. They worked in his library, where there were ateliers for book production. After his conquest of Shiraz in 1504, he transferred some of its artists to Tabriz; he also invited Abd al-Aziz from Isfahan to join them. It was probably toward the end of his reign that Kamal al-Din Bihzad, the greatest miniaturist of the time who had previously been employed by the Timurids in Herat, came to Tabriz to head the royal library (Almasi 2001, pp. 48–49; Ashrafi 2005, p. 35; Sims 2001, pp. 60–63; Blair and Bloom 1995, pp. 165, 167). Qasim ‘Ali, Shafi zade, and Aqa Mirak were miniaturists who accompanied Bihzad to Tabriz. In this way was created the remarkable Tabriz miniature school.

Two important Iranian traditions came together in Tabriz, one associated with the patronage and artists of the earlier Turkoman rulers there (a “ruder and more original style”), the other with the Timurid painters from Herat (a “refined style”) (Azhand 2005a, p. 118; Grabar 2000, p. 61).<sup>3</sup> The Herat school of miniature painting embodied in the work of Bihzad and his followers had a significant influence on the work that emerged in Tabriz in the early decades of the 16<sup>th</sup>

*Fig. 1. a) The “Chelsea” carpet. b) The “Ardabil” carpet; both Victoria and Albert Museum, London. c) The “Hunting” carpet; Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan. d) The “Anhalt” carpet; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The individual images are not in the same scale (that is, the lengths of the carpets are not identical). For photo sources, see n. 2.*



century. Most scholars emphasize that their style involved a kind of “realism” in the depiction of architecture and the drawing of human figures, placing them in real-life contexts. The people inhabiting the images have varied poses and gestures; in Grabar’s words (p. 62), “what is new is the life brought to every detail, especially to the human figures, who have for the most part lost their puppet- or marionette-like characteristic.” At the same time, there are distinct influences of Sufism in the late 15<sup>th</sup>-century paintings done in Herat (Sims 2001, p. 60; but cf. Grabar 2000, pp. 64–65). By the 1530s and 1540s, the painting done in Tabriz adds an increasing attention to landscape with mountainous rocks and bright colors: nature really comes alive (Ashrafi 2005, pp. 48–51).

However, if the emphasis of the Herat school was on materiality and realism, the Tabriz school developed a spiritual and mystical emphasis. Most of those involved were followers of Sheikh Safi’s mystical school (*Ketāb-e Māh* 2011, p. 6). According to Alam Arayie Shah Abbasi, Shah Ismail and Shah Tahmasp promoted three principles in establishing national unity. They were: Shiia, the interdependence Shiia and Sufism, and the close relationship of Shiia with ancient Iranian culture. At the time of Shah Tahmasp, these principles not only affected political and social issues but also made an impact on art (Emami 1995, p.75). Since Iranian art is deeply rooted in religious beliefs and insights, the effect of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) on the development of the Iranian miniature cannot be ignored. It is possible that precisely this impact of Sufism differentiates the Iranian art of this period from that of other countries.

Sufism has long history in Iran and more generally reached its fullest development in the middle Islamic centuries. Sheikh Farīd al-Din Aṭṭār Nishaburi (a poet and Sufi in the 13<sup>th</sup> century) described seven valleys of spirituality, which came to be invoked symbolically in miniatures: 1. Quest, 2. Love, 3. Understanding or knowledge, 4. Contentment, 5. Unity, 6. Astonishment and bewilderment, 7. Deprivation and Death (*Fana*) (Sur-e Esrafil 2001, pp. 9–12). As Malherbe has stated (1990, pp. 192–94), according to the Sufis, all existence comes from God and God alone is real. The created world is but a reflection of the Divine; “the universe is the Shadow of the Absolute.” The ability to discern God behind the screen of things implies purity of the soul. It is only through an effort to withdraw from the world that one can approach God: “Man is a mirror which, when polished, reflects God.”

One of the characteristics of Sufism is timelessness and lack of specificity with regard to place. Its followers should be independent of the material world. By using certain motifs and colors, miniaturists tried to

*Fig. 2. Detail showing the border of the Chelsea carpet.*



create a mystical world in which time and location are meaningless, even if a picture might include clouds, the sun or the moon. Locations are strange and unknown, whether landscapes with gardens or plains or houses that are more “virtual” than earthly. Sometimes, the artists drew plain garments to suggest the puritan nature of dervishes’ clothes. Wool hats without any ornament represent hats woven by dervishes and Sufis (Hosseini 2008, pp. 42–83). The border of the Chelsea carpet has a design reminiscent of the hat worn by Sufis [Fig. 2]. Insofar as the founder of Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismail, was one of the Sufis, it is possible to infer that his thoughts impressed designers and weavers. Medallions in the Safavid carpets represent domes of Emam Reza’s shrine (Miri 2002, pp. 21–22).

Among the most gorgeous illuminated manuscripts of the Safavid period is the Tahmasp *Shāhnāma*, produced in the royal atelier [see pp. 111–15 below and Color Plates VII, VIII]. The project was begun in the royal workshop in the last years of Shah Ismail, intended as a gift to his son (Welch, p 17; Sims 2001, pp. 63–64). It was not completed until around 1537 in Shah Tahmasp’s workshop (Hosseini 2008, p: 231; Bahari 1997, p. 191).<sup>4</sup> The manuscript is of interest in part for the way it documents an important period in the evolution of Persian miniature style. Given that more than a dozen artists worked on it, the miniatures vary considerably in both quality and style, some much more reflecting the Turkoman traditions of Tabriz; others the style of the painters from Herat. In its size, fantastic compositions, striking use of color and richness of the gilding on the pages, it is the most sumptuous book of its time (Āzhand 2005a, pp. 115, 24; Blair and Bloom 1995, p. 168). A number of these features are truly innovative and can be credited to the artist Sultan Muhammad, who inspired subsequent generations of painters, many of whom were his pupils, and some, members of his family. Welch has identified many of those who worked on the project under his supervision: Mir Musavvir, Aqa Mirak, Dost Muhammad, Mirza Ali, Muzaffar Ali, Shaykh Muhammad, Mir Sayyid Ali, and Abd al-Samad (Grabar 2000, p. 67).

#### **Similar features – the carpets depicted in Tahmasp’s *Shāhnāma* and those produced in his carpet atelier**

There are various ways one might explore the connections between court painting and carpet manufacture. One might argue that the products in the two media had similar purposes. By their very nature, miniatures



Fig. 3 (above). The Ardabil carpet, as now displayed in the Islamic gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

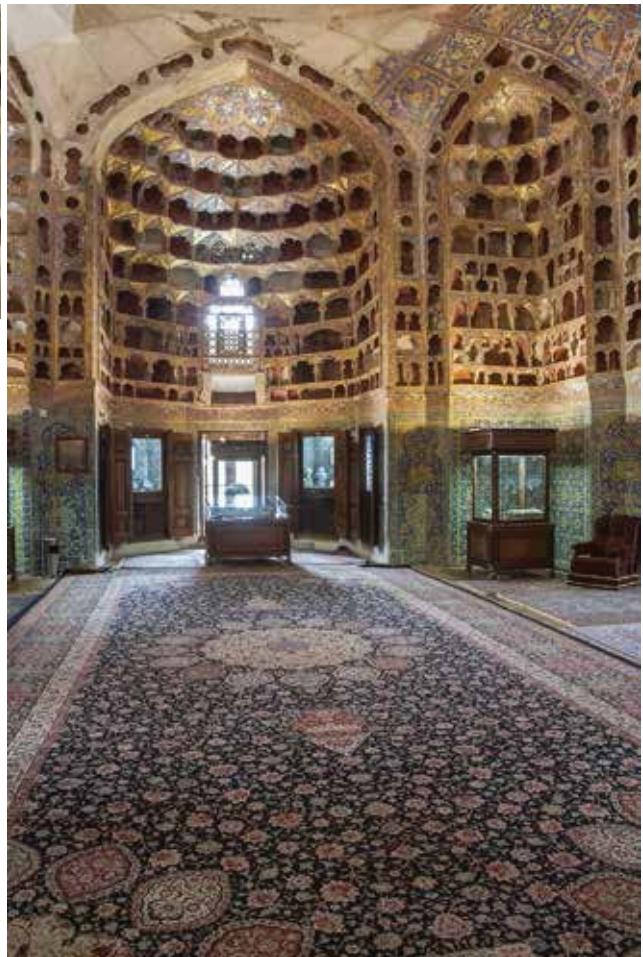
Fig. 4. A modern replica of the Ardabil carpet in the Chini Khaneh at the Ardabil shrine.

Photographs by Daniel C. Waugh.

can be viewed at one time only by very small numbers of privileged individuals, even if the lavishness of their treatment was intended to convey an impression about the wealth of their patron and their content convey a political or ideological message. Such manuscripts might be intended as gifts to foreign rulers — whatever its original purpose, Tahmasp's *Shāhnāma* ended up in the treasury of the Ottoman sultans, a gift to Sultan Selim II. Carpets could have similar purposes, the most expensive ones not necessarily intended as floor coverings (Ettinghausen 1971). They could have been used to drape thrones, for example. Tradition has it that the Ardabil carpet (in fact there was a pair of them) was made specifically to be given to the shrine/mausoleum in Ardabil honoring Shaykh Safi, the eponymous founder of the Safavid line [Figs. 3, 4].<sup>5</sup> While it is difficult to document Iranian carpet trade prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, clearly Safavid carpets found their way into foreign collections and were treasured.

It is generally accepted that there was a close interconnection between painters and carpet makers in the Persianate world of the late 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Blair and Bloom 1995, p. 171; Masterpieces 2011, p. 258). Many of the decorative motifs found in miniature paintings probably were copied as stencils for use by carpet designers. Stuart Cary Welch (1971, p. 7) describes a scenario for what may have been involved in the creation of the famous Boston Museum hunting carpet:

The patron, in all likelihood Shah Tahmasp, the second Safavid shah, would have discussed the matter with the director of the royal carpet atelier. Together they would have decided upon a subject. With the help of court painters, designs would have been produced, or, conceivably, the carpet designer would have gone through miniature paintings and drawings in the royal library and in the workshops and selected motifs to be enlarged and adapted to his own purposes. Full



scale patterns would then have been made by tracing and enlarging as guides to the weavers, who would have spent months or even years carrying them out.

Designing and dyeing a carpet are like painting a miniature. The miniaturist has much greater freedom to use colors and incorporate finely drawn motifs on paper, but the dimension and size of knots in a carpet restricts its designer even if his aim is to produce carpets similar to paintings. In both cases the color palettes are striking, with natural dyes accounting for the characteristic Safavid carpet colors of green, yellow and brown set off against background colors of navy blue, yellow, and reddish (Malül 2005, p: 56).

While our concern here is mainly with decorative details, a few comments are in order about overall design features. The carpets which we have chosen for our main examples either have a central medallion (e.g., the Milan hunt carpet, the Ardabil and Anhalt carpets), may have two such medallions (the Chelsea carpet) or a main field without the medallion that is filled entirely with repetitive design elements (e.g., several of the other hunting carpets). Cartouches may be added to the main field along with decorative el-

ements such as hanging lamps. In most instances of these designs, they are symmetrical, though in details showing animals and hunters, the hunting carpets may not have exact symmetry. Interestingly, the designer of the Ardabil carpet seems to have taken into account the perspective of those who presumably would have sat around it; so he adjusted the size of the lamp images and pendant decorations accordingly.

Decorative details included elements that derive from earlier traditions in the arts of Iran: arabesques, arabesque scrolls (*khatayi*), vegetal elements including lotus and other flowers, palmate leaves and trees. Bird motifs (for example, peacocks) are common, as are many of the wild animals that either symbolized royal power or may have been the objects of the royal hunt, although none of the examples of carpets we have chosen here from the *Shāhnāma* include depictions of fauna. What we encompass with the general term “arabesque” might include stylized motifs of vegetation that can be found in arts of Iran as far back as the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods when they had associations with Mithraism and Zoroastrianism (Malūl 2005, p. 110). In their transformations over time, they served as sources for other motifs such as *boteh jeghe* or what came to be known as paisley designs. It is possible to trace how arabesque scrolls in spiral or snakelike forms, which initially were repeated but not linked, then come to be joined and, adorned with flowers and leaves create arabesque scrolls (*khatayi*) (Malūl 2005, p. 22; Vazīrī 1961, pp. 7–83, 206). Careful attention was given to coordinating the designs of the borders and the main field of the carpet (Daryayi 2006, p. 31). Some of the design elements were imports, such as Chinese cloud bands, which can be found in Iranian painting as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century and then became common throughout the Safavid period.

Where carpets are no longer extant, their depictions in miniatures may give us an idea of what those carpets may have been like, even if in many cases the painted images may be compositions drawing on the painter’s design repertoire rather than from seeing the carpets themselves. In the analytical tables which follow here, we have taken examples from the Tahmasp *Shāhnāma* where carpets are illustrated, provided line drawings of the carpet designs in them, and separated out the decorative motifs. Then we proceed to comparisons between such design elements in actual carpets and those found in the miniatures. These tables thus demonstrate what a systematic comparison of the designs in the two media can suggest about the relationship between them.

## Acknowledgement

The editor of *The Silk Road*, Daniel Waugh, made a number of significant additions to the final version of this paper.

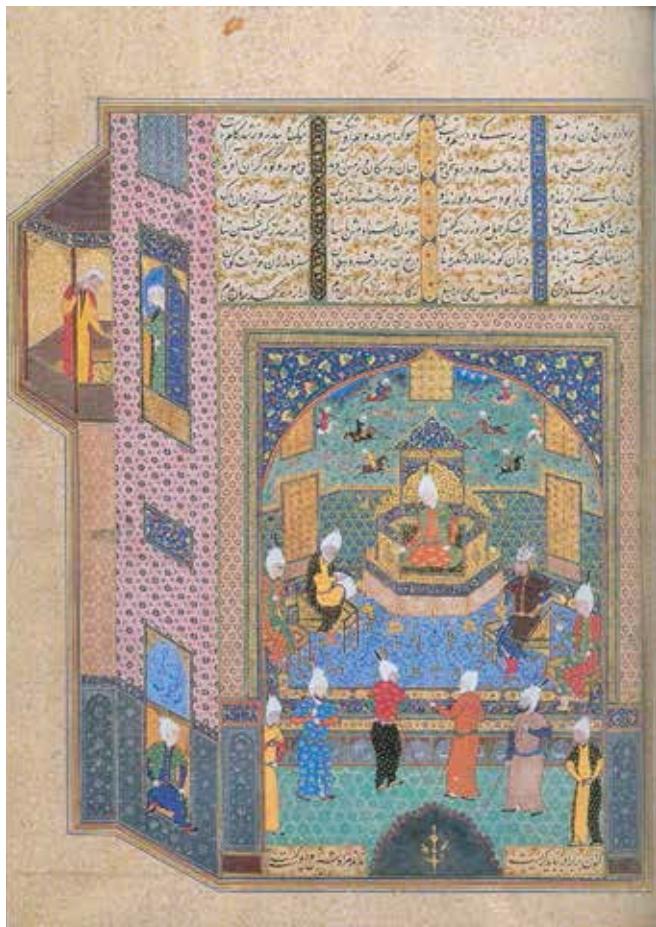
## About the authors

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**Masume Azarmdel**, has a B.A. in Handicrafts; she has done research Persian miniature painting. She produced most of the drawings of the carpet details.

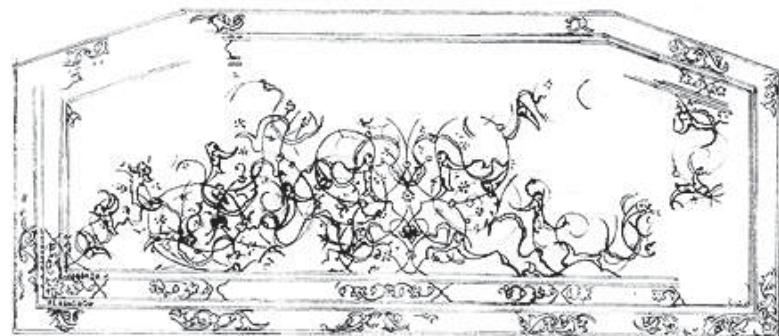
**Maryam Rezai Banafshe Deraq** also has a B.A. in Handicrafts and collaborated in drawing the images.

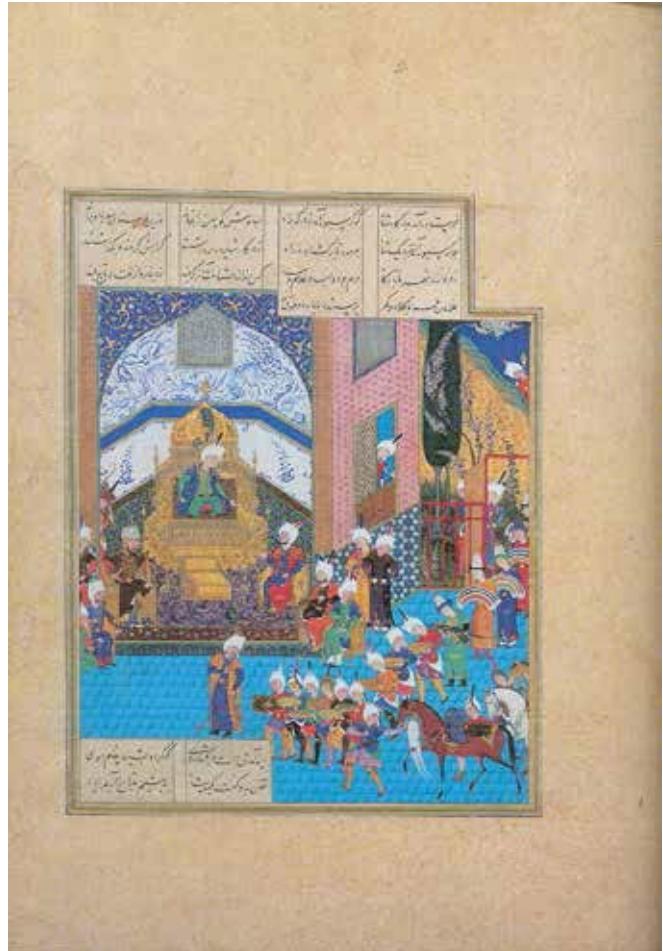


	general shape
	interior border
	exterior border
	arabesque scroll ( <i>khatayi</i> )
	arabesque

*Kay Khusrau invites Tus.*

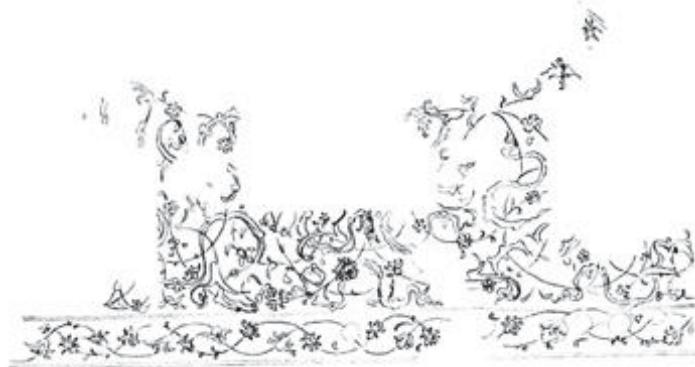
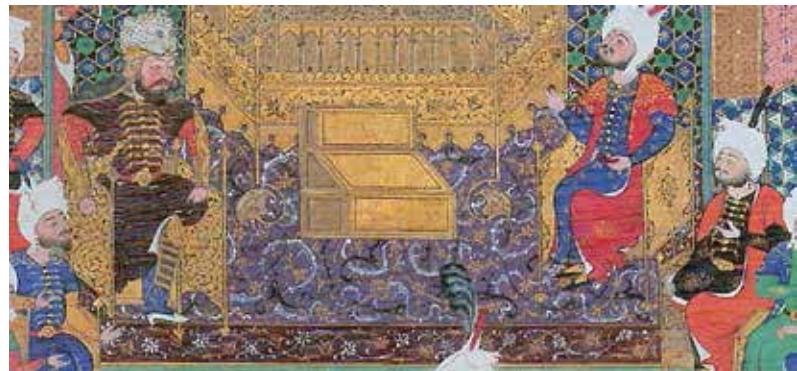
After: Miniature Masterpieces 2005, p. 276.



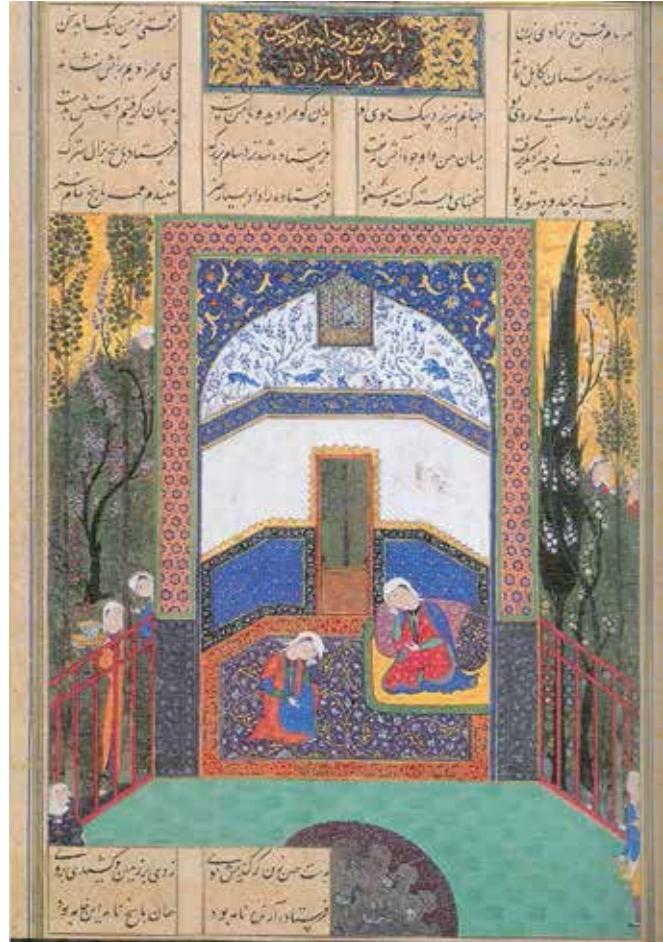


	general shape
	margin/ border
	arabesque scroll ( <i>khatayi</i> )
	background arabesque

*Siavash receives gifts from Afrasyab.*  
After: Miniature Masterpieces 2005, p. 264.

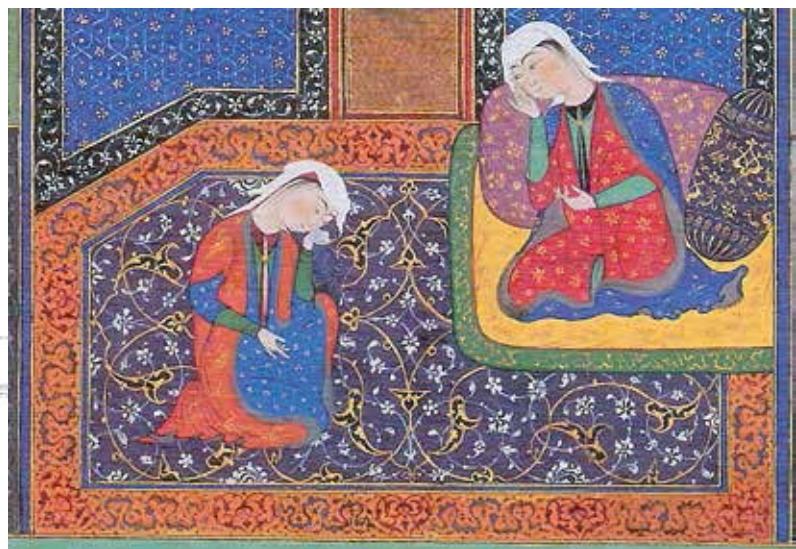


	general shape
	margin/border
	arabesque scroll background
	background arabesque



Sindukht and Rudabeh.

After: Miniature Masterpieces 2005, p. 254.

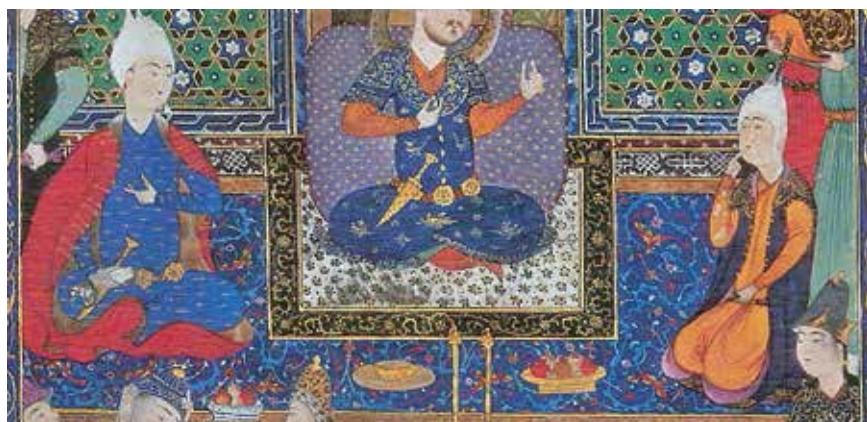




	general shape
	interior margin/ border
	exterior margin/ border
	arabesque scroll
	arabesque

*Snakes growing from Zahhak's shoulders.*

After: Miniature Masterpieces 2005, p. 232.

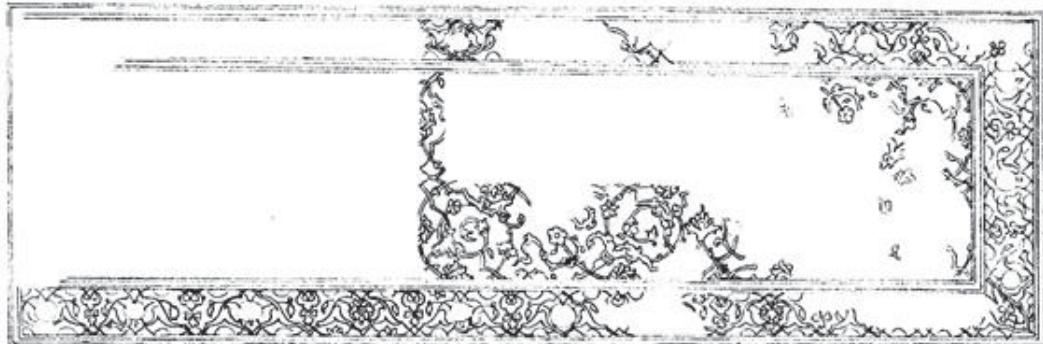


	general shape
	border
	arabesque scroll ( <i>khatayi</i> )
	arabesque



*Kava tears Zahhak's scroll.*

After: Miniature Masterpieces 2005, p. 234



shape	location of the carpet
	inside the enclosure, outdoors
	inside the enclosure, on the bench
	on hexagonal bench
	on octagonal bench

Table 1. Shapes of carpets in miniatures.

	filled arabesque
	hollow arabesque
	cloud arabesque
	chain arabesque
	arabesque sign

Table 2. Arabesque designs in miniatures.

  	rosette (four petals)
 	rosette (five petals)
	narcissus (daffodil)
	flower in shape of butterfly
 	lotus palmette
 	lotus palmette
	leaves
	Lancelot palmette
	blossom

Table 3. Floral elements in Arabesque scrolls  
(khatayi) in miniatures

**Comparing Carpets of the Shah Tahmasp School with Those Depicted  
in Miniatures of the Tahmasp *Shāhnāma***

Details of borders on carpets of the Shah Tahmasp school	Details of borders on carpets in miniatures of the Tahmasp <i>Shāhnāma</i>
	 
	 
	
	
	

Table 4. Comparison of borders.

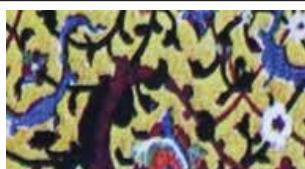
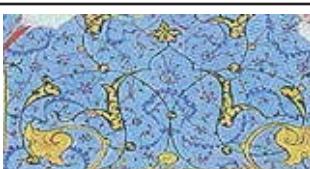
Background details – Tahmasp school carpets	Background details – miniatures
	 
 	 
	 
	 
	
	
	

Table 5. Comparison of background details.

Details – Tahmasp school carpets	Details – miniatures	

Table 6. Additional comparisons of details in carpets  
and in the miniatures of the Shāhnāma.

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Welch 1971

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Welch 1976

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## Notes

1. While her particular example is earlier than the ones we are considering here, readers should be aware that Eleanor Sims (2002, pp. 191–92) has expressed some reservations about the degree to which miniature paintings depicting carpets can be taken as a faithful representation of actual carpets. She wonders “whether the aesthetics of one distinctive and sophisticated art form—a woven one—could ever be found truly reproduced in an utterly different, and even more sophisticated art form, whose purpose was highly formal, whose mode was archetypal, and whose practitioners did not necessarily choose to reproduce anything—much less literally so—unless it served the internal aesthetics of painting.”

2. For the Victoria and Albert Museum’s “Chelsea Carpet” (Museum no. 589-1890) see <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85144/the-chelsea-carpet-carpet-unknown/>>; for its “Ardabil Carpet” (Museum no. 272-1893), <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O54307/the-ardabil-carpet-carpet-unknown/>>, both web pages including many detailed photographs. For the Metropolitan Museum’s Anhalt Carpet (accession no. 46.168), see <[http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/450716?rpp=30&p-g=1&gallerynos=462&rndkey=20141103&ft=\\*&pos=11](http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/450716?rpp=30&p-g=1&gallerynos=462&rndkey=20141103&ft=*&pos=11)>, where there are many close-up details; also *Masterpieces*

2011, pp. 257–58. For the “Hunting Carpet” in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Inventory No. D.T.1, see <<http://www.museopoldipezzoli.it/#!/it/scopri/collezioni/1095>>, which includes a link to the two-minute audio guide description (in Italian) but no close-up photographic details. An analogous animal carpet is that in the Metropolitan Museum (Inv. no. 14.40.721), on which see *Masterpieces* 2011, pp. 261–63, and <<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/446642?rpp=30&pg=1&ft=animal+carpet&pos=1>>; other famous examples are in Boston and Vienna. In his analysis of all these hunting carpets in a special volume of the *Boston Museum Bulletin* devoted to the one in its collection, Dimand (1971, esp. p. 16) argues that the Milan carpet must be dated 1522–23, given its distinct stylistic differences from the Boston and Vienna examples of hunting carpets and from the Ardabil carpet, all of which were produced later, in Shah Tahmasp’s reign. If he is right, then the inscription in the central medallion which indicates a date of the early 1540s must be a later addition. That number of the Boston Museum’s *Bulletin* contains detailed photographs from these several carpets, which allow one to compare their decorative elements.

3. Grabar, whose phrases are quoted here, expresses reservations as to whether it is possible to assign artistic styles to specific localities in the way that is normally done; he considers that there was a very fluid pattern of artistic exchange and influence not so easily connected with one “school” or another.

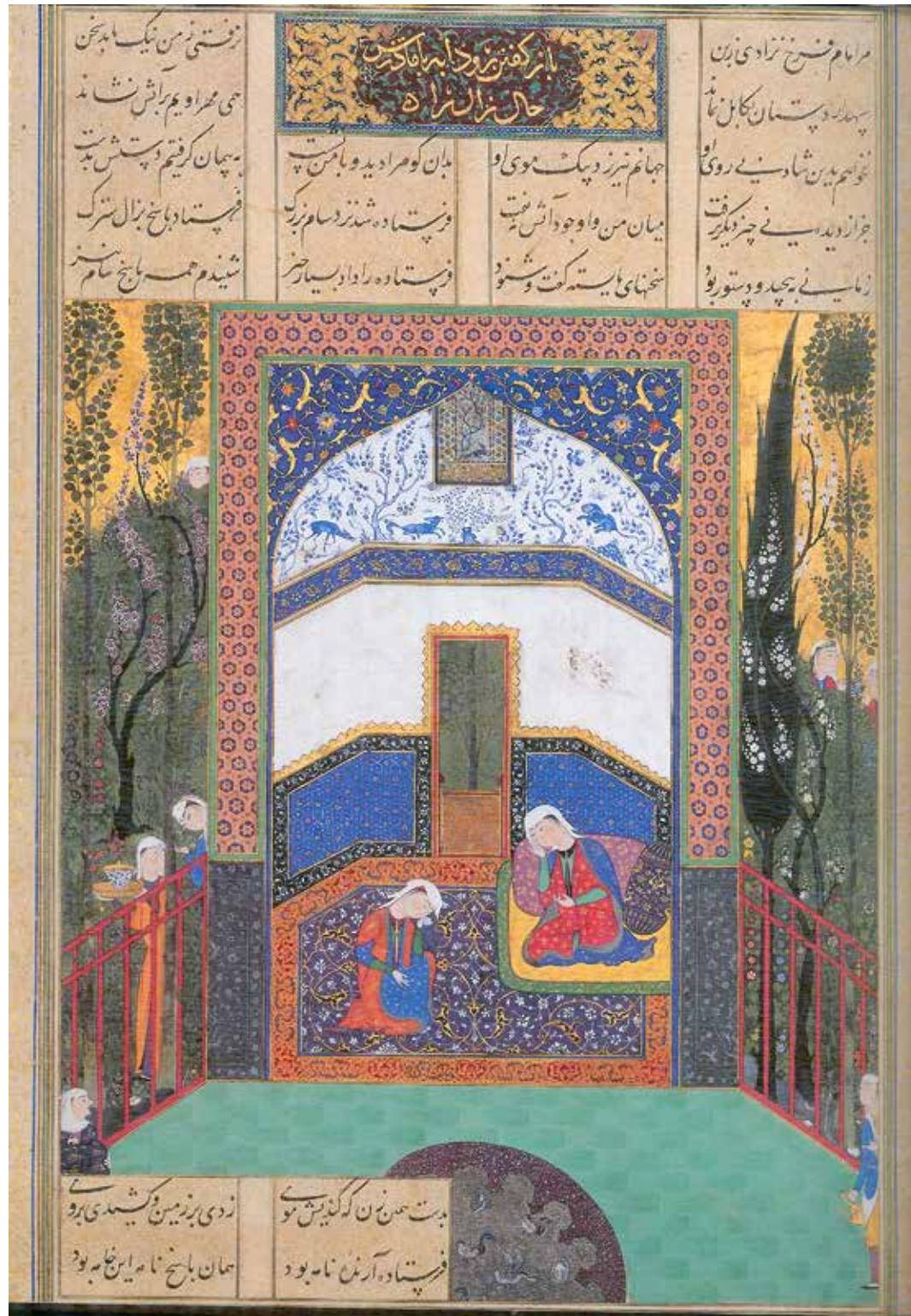
4. Various dates have been given for the *Shāhnāma* project: it may have started only in the year of Shah Ismailo’s death, 1524; its completion could have been around 1540.

5. This tradition apparently is not supported by explicit documentation. See the skepticism of Blair and Bloom, 1995, p. 171. It is not clear that the two carpets could have fitted into the antechamber to Sheykh Safi’s tomb. A replica of the Ardabil carpet, presumably full size, is currently in the *Chīnī-khāna*, built in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and the repository for Shah Abbas I’s collection of Chinese porcelain. However, that carpet is too long for the space.

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PLATE VII

[Yazdani et al., "Safavid Carpets," p. 108]

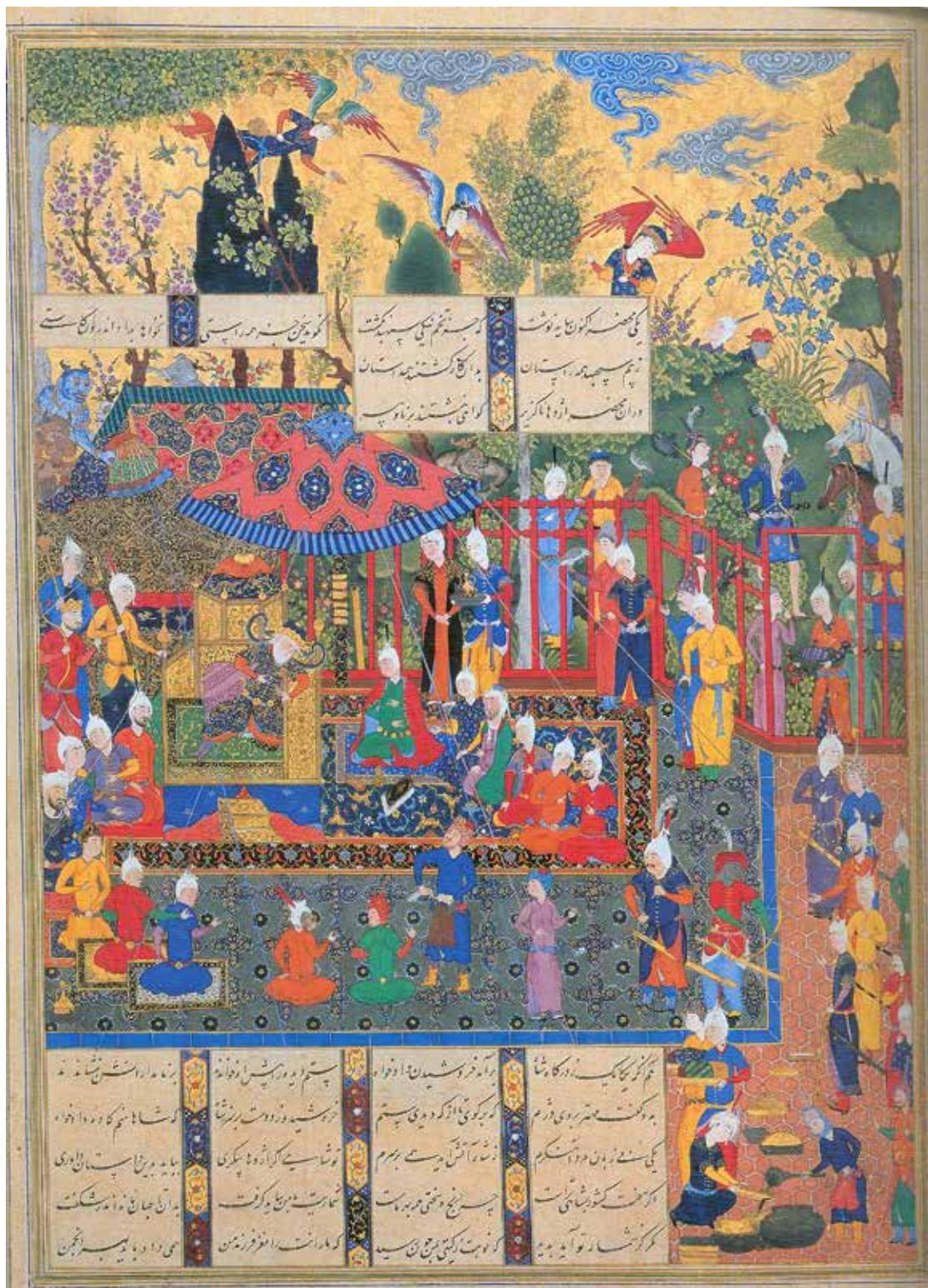


*Sindukht and Rudabeh. Miniature from the Shāhnāma of Shah Tahmasp.*

*After: Miniature Masterpieces 2005, p. 254.*

PLATE VIII

[Yazdani et al., "Safavid Carpets," p. 108]



*Kava tears Zahhak's scroll. Miniature from the Shāhnāma of Shah Tahmasp.*

*After: Miniature Masterpieces 2005, p. 234*