

# **Subjectivity and the Cultural Constraints of Academic Literature in Material Culture: An Investigation into the Discussion of Pattern and Symbol in Persian Carpets**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the academic literature on material culture, focusing on inherent cultural standpoints within the European tradition and the impossibility of arriving at an objective position. With regard to the study of the symbolism in Persian carpets, material science approaches the subject with a number of preconceived concepts that colour the interpretation it offers. Persian carpets have been interpreted within European art for over four hundred years, and this has led to a variety of concepts being integrated into the academic perception of them. In particular, it will be shown that methods of valuing Persian carpets over the course of the last century have come to dictate much of the basis on which their patterns and symbols are discussed. The article concludes that ultimately, material culture studies objects from within the confines of its own cultural environment, and does not offer an interpretation that is relevant to the culture in which those objects were created.

## **Introduction**

This article approaches carpets as objects, using the intellectual tradition and theoretical framework of material culture. As Hides points out, ‘the relationship between objects and identity has always been important for archaeology and its cognate disciplines’ (1996: 25). Mauss goes further, claiming that material objects are the most important method we have of gaining knowledge about other times and

cultures, describing them as, ‘authentic, autonomous objects [...] that thus characterize [...] civilizations better than anything else’ (1931: 6-7). Within the material culture tradition, objects are seen as artefacts of identity and social existence capable of describing inherent or universal characteristics of that culture and providing a basis for a better understanding of the nature of a society. However, it is also recognized that the social environment in which this analysis is carried out itself taints the process, and the relationships that exist in our own culture between man and object determine to a high degree the interpretation we place on objects of other cultures. Moallem gives an excellent description of this process in the context of the European interpretation of Persian carpets. With regard to popular European connoisseur books, she notes that ‘the genre has led to the creation of a decontextualized knowledge in which commodities such as the Persian carpet are disconnected from the circuits of labour and complex hybrid trajectories of cultural meaning’ (Moallem 2011: 159). In European society, Persian carpets have undergone centuries of commodification, not only in the commercial context, but also through the Orientalism (Said 2003) and intellectual fetishism that has periodically occurred in European and American museums and anthropological exhibits.

### **The Eurocentric Interpretation of Persian Carpets**

The various waves of interpretation within European culture, ranging from journalism, anthropology and travelogues from the eighteenth century right up to the present day, to religious and Islamic studies and political discourse on the labour conditions under which the carpets are produced, have all significantly coloured European understanding and view of Persian carpets. These influences can cloud our ability to accurately appreciate the meaning that objects have in their own culture. Moallem (2011: 159) points out that in the years since Persian carpets have been introduced to Europe, a complex process has instilled them with values and identities aimed at creating an object of exoticism and desire that is unconnected to the notions, values and cultural ideas of the people that made them. In this paper therefore, effort will be made to approach the meaning and symbolism of Persian carpets from the perspective of both pre and post Islamic Persian culture.

### **Material Culture**

At its simplest level, material culture starts from the position that objects are created by specific social and cultural groups for a purpose, and in some way reflect the social

reality of that group. In practice, however, the process quickly becomes more complex. The problem is not with the underlying hypothesis – that the object can tell us about the group that made it – but rather with the difficulty of identifying the correct cultural origin and the adoption of an appropriate intellectual and interpretative attitude that will lead us to accurate conclusions. Harrison (1980), Renfrew (1984) and Shennan (1978) have all illustrated that the conclusions drawn from the analysis of material objects often end up telling us far more about the archaeologists and anthropologists that analysed them than they do about the cultures that created them.

Even at the logical level, theories such as those of Collingwood (1946), Hodder (1982) and Childe (1930) illustrate the circular logic scholars use when attempting to interpret cultures through their objects, while simultaneously attempting to gain a better understanding of objects through their cultural context. As Hides states, ‘a problematic circularity exists here; the artefact’s meaning is derived from its context, and its context is defined by those associated artefacts which give it meaning’ (1996: 27). Material culture relies on the idea that an object’s meaning depends on its social and cultural context. However, this also implies that the social and cultural context of the interpreter’s society shapes his or her attempts to interpret the objects they find.

### **The History of Interpretation in Europe**

Looking specifically at the theory relating to the interpretation of Persian carpets, it is important to remember how long these artefacts have been important in Europe. Although few of the carpets themselves survive, from the fourteenth century onwards there is a clear record of Persian, Ottoman and North African decorative carpets in Renaissance paintings. Venetian commercial records begin to mention trading relationships with carpet-producing regions in Anatolia in Turkey from about 1220 (Mack 2006: 187). Marco Polo discussed Ottoman carpets in his own travel records and made it clear that judgments as to the quality of carpets was an active subject in Italy at the time of his travels. A fresco dating from the 1340s at the Palais des Papes in Avignon likewise demonstrates a familiarity with Eastern carpets, which entered Christendom from Spain (Mack 2006: 188). It was not until the late Renaissance period of the sixteenth century, however, that Persian carpets began to be introduced into Europe. Immediately these were seen to be of a much superior quality than any that had previously been brought into the continent and they quickly became desired status symbols throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The popularity of the carpets in Europe during the Renaissance is well illustrated

by the frequency with which they appear in paintings of the time, both in images of religious significance, and in images depicting royalty and events of a political nature. Carpets feature so prominently in these paintings that they have become one of the most important records of carpet history. Kurt Erdmann, one of the preeminent scholars on Persian carpets and former director of the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin, began the practice of classifying Persian carpets according to the Renaissance painters that depicted them (Erdmann 1970). For this reason and because of the difficulty of accurately tracking down the places of origin of many of the older patterns, we now have Bellini carpets (appearing frequently in the paintings of Giovanni and Gentile Bellini after 1479), Crivelli carpets (painted by Carlo Crivelli circa 1486), Memling carpets (recorded in the work of Hans Memling around the end of the fifteenth century) and Holbein carpets. Holbein carpets are broken into four sub-groups and are based on a great number of paintings, not all of which were painted by Holbein. One of the groups is now more commonly referred to as Lotto carpets, because Lorenzo Lotto is known to have painted far more of this pattern than Holbein ever did.

What this illustrates is that European culture has an impact on the interpretation of Oriental carpets, and indeed, has been having such an impact for about 460 years. It is necessary, therefore, that the enormous impact of Europe's own interaction with Persian carpets is taken into account, and that we try to consciously look beyond it if one is to attempt to understand what these carpets meant in their own cultural context.

### **Foucault's Methodology**

Foucault (1970: 111) provides us with an extremely useful framework for overcoming what can be described as the European contamination of the historical and cultural significance of Persian carpets. Foucault is well known for having developed the idea of 'epistemes', or modes of knowledge. He suggests that during the Late Renaissance period (c. 1550-1650), the Classical period (c. 1650-1790) and the Modern period (c. 1790-1900), European thought went through three distinct worldviews, or epistemes. And perhaps nowhere are these epistemes better illustrated than in the context of the Persian carpet, which has been highly subjected to these European epistemes and also corresponds closely in time to Foucault's three periods of analysis.

Looking first at the Late Renaissance period, the factors that coloured European interest in the East have been well documented (Trigger 1989). Figures such as John Leland (1503-52) and William Camden (1551-1623), demonstrated a keen interest in

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antiquity, but lacked clear methodological and theoretical frameworks. As noted by Trigger (1989: 48), these writers ‘did little deliberate digging and had no sense of chronology apart from what was known from written records’. Historians of the time put together largely literary collections of old written material that were not organized hierarchically, chronologically or according to any other fixed or clear methodology (Piggot 1976: 6-8). These collections were then given significance and meaning based on concepts important during the Renaissance, such as ideas about what was exotic, and objects were grouped and displayed according to their similarities to one other and their similarities to contemporary objects. Collections frequently revealed the influence of biblical reading, the fear of foreign barbarians, and conceptions of the exotic. For the most part, Persian carpets, as objects of an artistic nature that were popular with the aristocracy and nobility, fell into the category of exotic, luxuriant and fantastic.

Following the Late Renaissance comes Foucault’s Classical period (c. 1650-1790), framed as the search for an ideal language capable of holding the meaning necessary for a growing understanding of the natural and human sciences (Foucault 1970: 124). As Foucault describes it, ‘the essential problem of Classical thought lay in the relations between name and order: how to discover a nomenclature that would be taxonomy’ (Foucault 1970: 208).

For the study of cultures, this meant a refinement of vague notions of ‘exotic’ or ‘barbaric’ into more specific descriptions and measurements of how foreign customs and practices differed from the European cultural norm. Boon (1982: 34), illustrates this tendency in relation to Buffon who, in 1749, published a study on foreign cultural practices such as eunuchs, harems, and human sacrifice. Similarly, Helvetius studied groups such as the Hottentots, Caribs, Fakirs and Brahmins. Divergence from the European conception of the norm was what was of interest, and the task of the scientist was to describe the divergence, and develop the vocabulary or taxonomy necessary to classify it. For the Persian carpet, this meant the development of terms and classes that described variation among patterns and symbols. What was most important was not the inherent meaning of any particular symbol or pattern within the culture that created it, but the noticing, naming and cataloguing of each symbol, pattern and characteristic by the ethnographer. If the Renaissance episteme was concerned with gathering a collection of exotic carpets, the Classical period was concerned with describing and cataloguing the noticed variations and classes within that collection.

The Modern period was characterized by the growth of the nation, and the idea of

society as a totality that completely dictated and defined the existence of those living within it (Foucault 1970). This was combined with Darwin's theory of evolution, suggesting a natural process of development within each society or nation. Artefacts then became evidence of the evolution and social development of each nation (Foucault 1970: 23). In the great museum system of post-Revolutionary France, art was organised, not according to subject matter, but by the country of origin of the artist, and it was used to explain the development and evolution of the art and society of that country. This was when Persian carpets finally came to be more than simply examples of the 'other,' and instead became evidence of the nature and characteristics of the society and culture that created it (Hooper-Greenhill 1992).

While the twentieth century has seen a radical transformation of the way in which Europeans view other cultures, the understanding gained of other cultures through their artefacts remains subjective. The theoretical framework available today for analysing and gaining an understanding of the Persian carpet is still very limited. As Shennan observes, 'we have tended to create the past in our own image. The challenge for the future [...] is to try to transcend this parochial subjectivism' (Shennan 1989: 30).

Any attempt we make to understand the culture, society and thoughts of others by examining their carpets will be inherently and necessarily limited by the horizons of our own understanding. For example, while it may be entirely accurate to conclude that a certain carpet pattern was intended to reflect an Islamic concept, the statement is inherently limited by our understanding of Islam and the specific concept at issue, and is entirely unrelated to the understanding of that concept prevalent in the culture that made the carpet.

Similarly, an observation that a pattern is essentially Zoroastrian<sup>1</sup> and not Islamic, as previously supposed, will still be contained within a European idea of Islam and Zoroastrianism and will therefore be unable to illuminate the depths of thought or emotion these ideologies held for the people who made the carpet. Added to this is the fact that the entire discussion will be taking place within a paradigm which has altered little in its essentials since 1750, and which Foucault describes as our attempt to chart the social and cultural evolution of each society and nation separately (Foucault, 1970). This is a paradigm which is heavily influenced by the immense impact that state apparatus and institutions have had on Europeans since the seventeenth century. However, it is unlikely to find resonance among the people who have been making Persian carpets for the last seven hundred years. Therefore, while it is inevitable that

European understanding of the Persian carpet is limited in its intellectual capacity due to the misinterpretation of the origins of its motifs and symbols, it is nevertheless valuable to acknowledge this. Part of this involves understanding that today's interpretation of terms such as 'Islamic' and 'Zoroastrian' have also been influenced by the Persian misappropriations of these terms over the centuries (Said 2003). It also acknowledges that we are discussing these artefacts within a broad framework, influenced by the fact that, since the French revolution, nationality, state institutions and country of birth have had a huge impact on the people of Europe. However, for a Persian living five hundred years ago, the nation meant something different, as the world was not divided into nations, and the state did not have the ability to influence individuals or set the terms of their cultural existence in the way that it has in Europe.

It is important, therefore, that while we are engaged in a description of carpets as material artefacts reflecting the social evolution of a particular part of the world, this is a function of our theoretical framework and not inherent to the objects. While it is not possible in the space allowed here to offer up an analysis of the meaning of specific Persian carpets, much less to offer a survey of the meaning of such carpets in their entirety, it is possible to discuss our understanding of their meaning.

### **Persian Carpet and Placement of Symbols, Originality and Value**

As Erdmann points out, there is very little literature on Persian carpets from the nineteenth century because of a conscious attempt on the part of experts in the subject to maintain secrecy, in order to purchase valuable carpets as cheaply as possible (1970: 36). It was not really until the great exhibition of Persian carpets that took place in Vienna in 1891, and the sale of the Ardebil carpet the following year, that information began to become available on how to detect features in carpets that had a bearing on their commercial value.

In 1891, the German scholar Riegl published a work entitled *Altorientalische Teppiche* [Old Oriental Carpets]. While this work delved into the theory and meaning of the carpets, it was another work, one that focused on the commercial aspects of Persian carpets, that attracted attention (Bode 1892). Bode's work was based on carpet purchases he had made and on his experience dealing with carpet traders. Therefore, because it was heavily influenced by the commercial value of such information, knowledge about Oriental carpets was based on detecting their age and place of origin. Various methods were available at the turn of the century to differentiate between Turkish and the more valuable Persian carpets. At the time, Indian carpets were still



being classed as Persian, and it was not known that the Caucasus were a significant producer.

Based on the aforementioned Renaissance paintings, it was also possible to place dates on some designs or even on specific carpets. However, interpretation of symbols and patterns was limited to detecting the place and date of origin in order to make sound commercial decisions. Bode (1901) used the following terms to describe different carpet patterns: Holbein, Dragon, Polish, Bird, Portuguese, Damascus, Garden, Medallion, Vase, and Animal. These terms have become extremely important in the study of Persian carpets, but it must be remembered that they were introduced originally as a means of cataloguing the value of carpets in the market, as it existed in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, and do not directly relate to the intended meaning or significance of the carpets. To illustrate this point, we can go back to an article by Riegl's (1894), which settled a popular misconception that the carpets within the 'Polish' category were actually made in Poland. Despite this clarification, however, the name is still used today as a means of classifying this group.

Regarding the 'Garden', 'Medallion,' 'Vase', and 'Animal' groups of carpet, Erdmann (1970) quotes Arthur Pope, an archaeologist and historian of Persian art, who says that relying on this classification is equivalent to classifying all of European art as 'Madonnas,' 'Portraits,' 'Landscapes,' and 'Still-life'. Erdmann's own opinion of these classifications is that 'there is no real foundation for these names and it is annoying that they are still used' (1970: 37). Improvements in our knowledge mean that today we know that 'Damascus' carpets are in fact Mamluk, and that the 'Polish' carpets were made during the reign of Shah Abbas (1587-1629), and in the decades following that period. Carpets can also now be narrowed down to the city of their origin, such as Isfahan (Iran).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, European understanding of Persian carpets is firmly rooted in the epistemes outlined by Foucault. Patterns and symbols are primarily used to determine the place and date of origin of the carpet and, by and large, the purpose of this classification scheme has been to facilitate the carpet trade. Truly engaging in the symbolism and meaning of Persian carpets is a pursuit that has yet to be tackled by European scholars. Academic literature on material culture that approaches its subject matter from cultural standpoints within the European tradition cannot provide an objective understanding of objects. With regard to the study of the symbolism of



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Persian carpets, material science approaches the subject with a number of preconceived concepts, which have been established over the four hundred years that these carpets have been significant in European culture. As a result, many of these concepts have been integrated into the academic perception of them. In particular, methods of valuing Persian carpets over the course of the last century have come to dictate much of the basis on which their patterns and symbols are discussed. Ultimately, the literature discussed in this article tells us about the position of Persian carpets in European society, rather than about the meanings of these objects in the culture that created them.



*Figure 1: Copy of the Pazyryc carpet (J.Lewis Gallery, London Oxford; photograph by F. Safaii, 2010).<sup>2</sup>*



*Figure 2: The Chelsea Carpet, mid sixteenth century, (540x360cm). Kept in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. (Photograph by F. Safaii, 2010)*



*Figure 3: The symbol of Faravahar (Guardian Angel) in Persepolis, Iran. This symbol appears in both pre- and post-Islamic carpets, and is one of the best-known symbols of Zoroastrianism.*

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1. Boyce (1979) claims Zoroastrianism is the most difficult of the living religions to study, largely due to the fact that it stretches back some 3500 years and few written records have survived. We do know that Zoroastrianism was the official religion of at least three ancient Persian dynasties (Achaemenid). Zoroastrian spiritual and religious concepts were extremely influential throughout the Middle East, where Judaism, Christianity and Islam all originated.
  2. The Pazyryc Carpet is the oldest known surviving Carpet in the world, dating back to the fifth century, before Islam came to Iran. At present, the original Pazyryc Carpet is kept in the Leningrad Museum. Its design is similar to those seen in the Islamic section of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Persian section of the British Museum. One can relate this style of weaving to the Persian culture of the Achaemenian dynasty.

## **Biography**

**Fatemeh Safaii Rad** is a second-year PhD student in the Faculty of Art, Media and Design at London Metropolitan University. After completing a BA in Textile Design and a Masters of Art in Jewellery Design, she is now undertaking research for her PhD on pattern and symbol in the Persian Carpet. This work has involved a museum survey, providing a visual journey of symbolic choices in the carpets. Applying these symbols to findings of relevant literature has enabled the analysis of the evolution of symbols used in Persian carpets and further into other forms of visual art. It is hoped that this model will be of use to curators and designers in the future.

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