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PERSIAN CARPETS
AS REFLECTIONS OF IRANIAN SOCIETY

In Iran, the handcrafted pile floor coverings called qālī in Persian are, in a word, ubiquitous. They are woven on migrations, in villages, towns, and cities, in fields, yards, private homes, and large factories. They are underfoot during ritual Muslim prayers and used as floor coverings in nomad tents, in hovels and palaces, in dingy slum rooms, high-rise apartments and villas, and in hotels and government offices. They are a first concern on the part of newlyweds about to set up a household and inevitable gift of government leaders to foreign dignitaries. They are sold in fancy hotel shops, hawked by villagers, door-to-door, in north Tih-rān, shipped abroad by the ton from bazaar warehouses, and purchased as investment and a hedge against inflation. They are the single most important piece of furniture in Iranian homes of all kinds, and Iran's most important industrial art. In early 1978, however, overt civil dissent from monarchial rule burgeoned and by the year's end had brought the monarchy down and down with it the socio-political context that had obtained in Iran since the overthrow of Muḥammad Muṣaddiq's nationalist government in August, 1953 and the concomitant return of the monarch from a brief exile. And from 1979 onward, things will no more be the same for Persian carpets than for Iranian oil, the foreign presence in Iran, or much else. Already some Firdawsī Street and hotel retail shops are spoken of as a thing of the past, as are their foreign cu-

stomers who were obliged in early 1979 to depart Iran and as are many of their Jewish Iranian owners who have emigrated in the face of presumed xenophobic, religious nationalism.

Still, Persian carpets constitute a rich focus of attention in any attempt to appreciate Iranian society and culture. Moreover, in several senses, Persian carpets have been one of a very few significant common denominators in Iranian life amenable to such an attempt. For the Iranian peoples in the very different environments of the tribe, the village, the town, the city, and the capital, do not share a single life style or even the same culture, at least not in the same way. Although all Iranians share a citizenship, national borders, a history, the pervasiveness of a state religion now become a religious state, and a relationship with the central government, even in these regards, geographical facts, financial circumstances, ethnic and religious diversity, class distinctions, differing exposures to formal education, and regional or political allegiances mean that any common characteristics may be shared in different ways. Thus, the involvement by tribal, village, town, and urban Iranians in the production, marketing, and especially use of Persian carpets has been both a significant common denominator and a manageable focus of attention in attempting to understand and appreciate contemporary Iran.

The carpets with which the lives of so many Iranians have been involved are not those on display in the great museums and depicted in most of the hundreds of book-length studies of oriental carpets. They are the carpets whose story begins in the middle 1950s when the carpet industry and Iranian interest in and use of carpets began to develop in ways and display characteristics that persisted through the mid - 1970s. A. C. Edwards' *The Persian Carpet*, (1953) demonstrates this fact clearly by being outdated in basic respects. In other words, Edwards' description of the deplorable state of the industry in economic, social, and aesthetic terms as of 1952 is in marked contrast with even the casual observer's impression of the industry

in Iran through 1977. Significantly, the important post-Muṣaddiq pre-Khumāynī period (1953-1978) in Iran, to whose understanding a careful study of carpets may contribute, seems to parallel the continuum observable in the carpet industry. And perhaps the evidence of social and cultural facts that the study of modern Persian carpets offers may also provide insights into some of what lay behind the civil upheaval of 1978 in Iran and what may lie ahead in post-Pahlavi Iran.

Unfortunately, modern Persian carpets are little studied for various reasons. First, there is a general feeling on the part of carpet amateurs and collectors that modern Persian carpets are aesthetically inferior to the carpets of yesteryear. Second, some orientalist bias toward the past in general, *vis-à-vis* which the present is often seen as an indefinable and unromantic epilogue, persists in several humanistic disciplines of Iranian studies. Third, Islamic art historians, still involved with basic research in more prominent areas of their field, have not turned their attention often to the study of carpets, even the most famous carpets of the so-called golden age during the Ṣafavid period. Lacking the kind of information that Islamic art historians might provide, other persons potentially interested in carpets have few resources to serve as necessary preliminary background or as a context in which they might develop their own ideas about carpets. Fourth, the commonly held view that Persian carpets, antique and modern, exhibit design elements and patterns that are merely decorative has probably convinced some people that an investigation of carpets in terms of cultural information and possible symbolism would be fruitless. Fifth, the majority of persons who have been inspired to write books on the subject of oriental carpets have been unfortunately lacking in expertise in the Persian language and firsthand familiarity with life in Iran and thus choose the safer course of concentrating their attention on antique carpets for which there is at least some literature upon which to draw.

On the market and in homes in Iran from the 1950s through the 1970s were literally hundreds of distinguishable types of carpets, from postage stamp to audience hall size, from coarsely to finely woven, from the simplest geometric, so-called tribal carpet to the most obviously floral, so-called city carpet, from various sort of overall repeat patterns to equally common compartment and medallion designs, as well as one-directional scene, portrait, and prayer carpets. A relatively accurate impression of this variety is available in the plates and illustrations of such surveys as Erwin Gans-Ruedin's Modern Oriental Carpets (1971), Reinhard G. Hübel's The Book of Carpets (1971), the Iran Carpet Company's two-volume Persian Carpet (1973-1974), and Gans-Ruedin's more recent The Splendor of Persian Carpets (1978). In fact, as these recent surveys intimate, the variety of designs and visual effects in general in contemporary Persian carpets seems greater than that exhibited by Persian carpets of any period from the early 16th century onward. This itself may be evidence for a number of observations about Iranian society, the first being testimony to the state and rate of change and contemporary variety in nearly all aspects of post-World War II Iran. Karim Imāmi observed in 1971 that:

The artistic scene in Iran is remarkable for the variety and diversity of its trends, a development ... hardly surprising for a country going through rapid change.

And

The diversity of the art movement has its parallels in the current life of the country. For here, too, we see the same preoccupation with the archaic past and the futuristic present, and the same regular pendulum-like swing between the "modern" West and the "ancient" East¹.

But if the variety in Persian carpets in the 1960s and 1970s reflected a diversity of taste and creative impulses among Iranian designers and some weavers, it just as significantly, insofar as carpets, besides constituting Iran's most important export after oil, have been a relatively expensive yet widely distributed and purchased commodity within Iran, the very activity of the carpet market through the 1960s and the 1970s indicated the existence of a large group of people in an economic middle class. Further, the availability of carpets in sufficient numbers and variety in urban centers throughout the country, the presumably temporary distribution and other marketing problems caused by the civil upheaval commencing in 1978 notwithstanding, is testimony to the existence of organized exploitation of weavers, efficient distribution and marketing, and the development of production centers to meet domestic consumer demands. The retail operations in the larger cities, particularly in bazaars and fancy boulevard and hotel shops, signalled the importance of tourism in pre-Khumayni Iran and Iranian awareness of the appeal of carpets to foreign tourists. And if tourism was one indication of pre-Khumayni Iran's openness to the outside world, the diversity in carpet designs and patterns is equally interesting evidence. For contemporary Persian carpets clearly exhibit influences from Central Asia in the Turkaman group of carpets, the Soviet Union in the Causasus-inspired carpets of Ardabil and Mishkinshahr, and Western Europe and North America in general widening of carpets and muting of colors, which fact demonstrates that Iran continued through the later Pahlavi years to be a culture at the crossroads as it were, with a distinctive capacity for assimilation and adaptation. Finally, at the other extreme in economic and production terms, the continuing high production level of carpets indicates that a giant labor force, composed of some children, some men, and many women, still exists in both rural and urban communities and remains uncompetited for by mechanized industry, which means that industrialization in the sense of an

infrastructure that naturally draws to it the bulk of the so-called unskilled labor force is still a long way off in Iran, regardless of governmental attitudes toward modernization and industrialization. It is possible that, should the Islamic Republic of Iran instituted in the spring of 1979 prove enduring, carpet production in Iran will increase since the religious establishment is not likely to encourage Western-influenced industrialization, employment in modern occupations, or the large scale participation in public life of women, the traditional cottage industry weaving force.

On the other hand, in tandem with this remarkable variety exhibited by modern Persian carpets, there exists an almost startling conservatism and conventionality characterizing carpets of all sorts whether designed by and executed under the supervision of a professional designer or woven by rote in oblivious poverty by a Balūchī villager in Khurāsān. This conservatism and conventionality link contemporary carpets with the earliest fragments and depictions of carpets in the Islamic Middle East and may reveal more about Iranian culture and society than aspects of variety in carpets do.

For example, among numerous conventional aspects of Persian carpet-weaving, three are particularly significant: (1) color is the nearly exclusive means of creating design in Persian carpets, with motifs usually bounded by a line of another color; (2) nearly all Persian carpets exhibit a division of design elements into border and field areas; and (3) almost all carpets depict plant or floral forms however stylized². These traditional aspects of Persian carpets both suggest a commonality of thrust aesthetically between carpets and other traditional forms of Iranian art and highlight something of what art has to say about Iran. For example, Richard Ettinghausen argues that traditional Iranian art of different periods exhibits three basic features: (1) "... strong stress on color, which presents itself in nearly every form of art"; (2) "... a strong tendency for highly stylized form and even for abstraction which manifests itself in the countless

arabesque decoration in carpets, tile decorations, and in manuscript illuminations"; and (3) idealism, which is to say that traditional "Iranian art has transfigured life to a higher plane" so that the observer is "thus never aware of poverty, personal or political stresses, or even the terrible conditions that the countless wars and changes of dynasties must have brought about in the country and to its inhabitants". What is generally presented "is an enchanted world shown in the most harmonious possible fashion and playing in a realm that is well removed from everyday life"³.

Exhibiting these traditional characteristics of Iranian art, modern Persian carpets are a paean to color, a vivid display of sometimes naturalistic and mostly stylized plant and floral forms, an appeal to an impersonal vision of order and rationality, and the epitome of rich decoration.

The significance of vivid colors and floral forms in Persian carpets can be viewed obviously as the expression of an ideal or vision of the ideal environment by people whose physical surroundings have relatively little colorful, floral beauty in it. As one writer, discussing Qashqā'ī carpets, observes: "These fabric gardens, besides fulfilling a useful function, rest the eye in a hot, dry, dazzling, and at times inhospitable land"⁴. The Persian carpet captures this vision of greenery and floral beauty or the fleeting reality of spring, the one season when the environment approaches the ideal, and preserves it in the tent or house.

The display of order and rationality in Persian carpet patterns may suggest the importance of these qualities for people whose society has historically experienced continuing uncertainty and periodic chaos as a result of a series of devastating invasions from Alexander's 2300 years ago to Iraq's in 1980 and whose society has traditionally derived its order from royal fiat and what may appear to some as divine caprice.

The impersonality of the vision of perfect natural beauty in a context of perfect order and rationally exhibited by many car-

pets may suggest aspects of a traditional religious and social order characterized by a lack of significance attached to individual effort and the individual voice addressing itself to individual rights, needs, emotions and views. Sa'Id Nafisi offers evidence for this view in a description of a most important traditional Iranian art form, literature:

For centuries and centuries Persian literature remained, so to say, impersonal.

The artist was always supposed to follow the lines which had been laid down before him, and to produce a work in the admitted and respected social cadre. He could seldom be seen in his work; he was to follow the precepts of accepted morality, the exigencies of his readers who were exclusively members of the ruling class and of the intellectual elite⁵.

Finally, rich decoration may parallel decorative, ritual, and formal aspects of social intercourse by which a person may obscure individual emotions and thoughts seen not to be efficacious or at least by which a person may maintain individual privacy. This so-called *ta'aruf* system, assumed to be a distinctively Persian Iranian phenomenon, is a core element of Iranian society⁶.

Although these possibilities relating to the colorfulness, floral content, rationality, impersonality, and decorativeness of traditional Persian carpet patterns are here presented as merely suggestive, if such dimensions have had something to do with Persian carpets and their appeal in the past and if many Iranians today feel particularly at home or comfortable with traditional Persian carpet patterns, that may imply that the import of such carpets remains somehow still relevant.

In any case, the commonplace assumption that Persian carpet designs are exclusively decorative, as if so-called mere decoration were itself insignificant, seems farfetched. For even if

the conventional aspects of color, stylization, and the preponderance of floral forms in Persian carpets cannot be demonstrated to represent the sorts of attitudes suggested here, it is unlikely for many reasons that the traditional craft of carpet weaving on the Iranian plateau, unlike traditional arts and crafts elsewhere in the world, has embodied no symbolic content in design elements and their patterning or does not give voice to a culture-specific world view.

First, as Eric Schroeder long ago argued:

It would really be well to throw the phrase "mere decoration" right out of the window, and to wake up to the fact that proportions and rhythms the most significant, whether universal, physical, or tragical-comical-historical, pastoral have been expressed in all serious and masterly decoration.

In Persian carpets, such proportions and rhythms, according to Schroeder, include:

shape and color, quantity (size of figure and field, intensity of hue), quality (the energy, calm, ambiguity, joyousness, solemnity, of a particular shape or hue in its surroundings), dynamics (the systems of felt forces which govern... rugs)...[and] spacing... so fundamental to the rug-weaver's craft⁷.

Second, as a response to the assertion that many Persian carpet designs are decorative because they are abstract, there is the potential significance or meaning behind geometric forms and patterns. According to Sayyid Husayn Naṣr,

Islamic art is... a means of relating multiplicity to unity by means of mathematical forms which are seen, not as mental abstractions,

but as reflections of the celestial archetypes
within both the cosmos and the minds and souls
of men⁸.

Specifically, in the view of Titus Burckhardt and others, "Muslim artists... explored all the geometric systems that depend upon the regular division of the circle", a method asserted to constitute "no more than a symbolic way of expressing tawhid"⁹.

Third, there are numerous examples of individual Persian carpets or carpet types in which specific motifs or patterns are presumed by viewers to have meaning. For example, the depiction of a whole tree with trunk, branches, and leaves as the major field motif in so-called tribal carpets of Lor, Baluchi, and Zabol provenance, among others, seems at the very least an expression of hope or thankfulness for abundance or fertility, if not all the further meaning that so-called "cosmic tree" or "tree of life" images can embody¹⁰. Another example is the use of lion figures as motifs in various Persian carpet types, among them one traditional sort of Qashqā'i and Khamsah carpets. Ettinghausen has this to say of depictions of this king of beasts:

As the noblest and most powerful of the animals, he was regarded as the traditional adversary of kings and as such he was shown in battle on the reliefs of Persepolis, on Sasanian silver plates, and in 16th century Persian Hunting Carpets...

As the feline was always associated with kings, it naturally became a royal symbol when shown by itself or it connoted at least great courage and power. Hence Persian or Arabic words for "lion" appear in combination in male names, and the image of the animal was applied as a suitable symbol on the carpets which the tribal

women knotted for the tents of their chieftains or with him in mind even if they were to be used for their own, personal, purposes¹¹.

A more common and significant example of a particular subject matter or content in some Persian carpets that has had meaning for Iranians in their traditional monarchical system and appears still to be a natural, comfortable part of the visual living environment is the so-called hunting carpet, a most traditional sort of carpet popular in modern Tabriz versions whose patterns derive from 16th century Safavid hunting carpets¹².

What is important about these Safavid carpets and thus about modern carpets they have inspired are the demonstrable associations between them and royalty. First, the very theme of the hunting carpets is royal, the hunt having been in Iran throughout recorded history a royal occupation or diversion and practice for maintenance of martial skills. Furthermore, in their depiction of hunting scenes, the hunting carpets display various stages and themes. For example, as Ettinghausen on one of those Safavid carpets there are "four stages of huntsmanship", the monarch naturally represented as the epitome of courage and strength:

At the lowest range is a young man, apparently a prince and a novice at the game, who just manages to kill a rabbit. For this he uses a mace, so that one might say that this little scene stands for the Safavid form of "overskill". The next stage is represented by a man who is older and more experienced than the rabbit-killer; he is seen piercing a fleet gazelle with a spear. He in turn is bested by a third, who slays another fast game animal at close range with his sword. But the supreme act of courage and physical force is achieved by a

hunter who is shown combatting a lion bare-handed and slaying it. This is the battle royal par excellence and the Iranian counterpart of Samson's feat¹³.

The naturality and frequency of representations of hunting scenes in modern Persian carpets for Iranians personally unfamiliar with hunting or with lions would seem to imply the persisting expectedness of traditional ruler-subject relationship in Iran even though the specific message about kingship in the Safavid prototypes of such carpets is no longer appreciated.

As for the potential symbolism of Persian carpet patterns as a whole, an obvious starting point is again those traditional aspects of carpet designs and patterns that seem to have no reason for their maintenance except convention. For example, the conventional division of design elements on Persian carpets into border and field is popularly viewed as the mere framing of the decorative structure of the field by the border material that also serves as a transition to the space beyond the carpet¹⁴. But, as Erdmann, Hubel, and others, have noted, the designs of many carpets, continuing a tradition dating back at least to 13th Century Saljuq carpets, "are not conceived purely from the decorative point of view". For

... the border creates a frame round a little detail of the infinite that is flowing on freely without beginning or end. The way the border cuts through single motifs of the central field implies that the field is imagined as endless¹⁵.

Many contemporary Persian carpets exhibit this representation of infinity, among them the so-called Tikkah Turkaman carpet, the Isfahān garden scene carpet, the Kāshān afshān carpet, the Varāmīn carpet with the mīnā khānī pattern, Bīrjand and Kurdish

carpets with the hirātī pattern, the Arāk carpet with the butah pattern, and numerous carpets of varied provenance that exhibit a central medallion with or without corner elements in a field of so-called shāh 'abbāsī motifs, vines, leaves, and/or arabesques.

As for the significance of this representation of infinity, Ernst J. Grube calls the "continuous infinite pattern... a true textile pattern concept... connected with the basic concepts of Islamic thought on the infinity of all true being and on the nothingness of all temporary existence"¹⁶, which is to say the infinity of Allah and spiritual reality. Whether or not the pattern of infinity is "a true textile pattern", it is a very obvious feature of Islamic religious architecture in Iran. For example, both interior and exterior domes often embody infinite patterns that disappear behind bands at the bottom of the dome. And the patterns on the concave and convex dome surfaces, as the eye circles around, prove to be literally unending.

A second concept also derived from Moslem architectural decoration and recognizable in the decorative structure of the field of many carpets relates to the fact that most traditional carpet designs feature elements in the field which through size, coloring, or movement compete for visual attention, the eye being drawn from one element to another and back again to the medallion if there is one and then away from it to the corners to one element of an arrangement of so-called shāh 'abbāsī motifs, then along vines and tendrils to another. The eye cannot isolate for long any particular element or design surface or shape, including the background color of the field. This effecting of a sort of equilibrium or balance in terms of the observer's experience of the design elements in the field patterns of many carpets can be observed in most carpets with over-all repeat patterns, such as the Tikkah Turkaman, hirātī, boteh, and mīnā khānī, in medallion and afshān carpets featuring shāh 'abbāsī motifs linked with arabesques, Caucasus-inspired Ardabīl and Mīshkīnshahr carpets, in Afshār, Qashqā'ī, and Khamsah carpets featuring rosette and

other floral scatter within and outside of the basic polygon defining much of the field area, various compartment carpets, and even in the traditional Hirīs carpet with its impression of superimposed and intersecting field polygons. And it involves what Grube and others term "the dissolution of matter"¹⁷, an approach to decoration, in Islamic architecture originally, whereby solid surfaces are dissolved as it were by constituting the whole surfaces with smaller and smaller decorative units and motifs "to reflect the temporary character of all earthly structures and imply thereby the impermanence of human existence"¹⁸. At the same time, the specific design elements on twodimensional surfaces that create this sense of dissolution of matter are themselves chosen for originally religious reasons. This is to say that the predominance in Persian carpets of stylized floral and vegetal forms has to do with Oleg Grabar calls Islamic iconophobia¹⁹.

All of this argues to the intimate connections between Persian carpet designs and Islamic architectural decoration and to the association of the former with religious notions and values because the same design elements and patterns when part of the latter are naturally religious. The many varieties of Persian prayer carpets are a most graphic illustration of this and a first step toward appreciation of the comprehensive symbolic message a whole carpet design may communicate.

Some prayer carpets exhibit a mihrāb shape in the upper part of their thus one-directional field, while other prayer carpets, implying a mihrāb, also seem to depict a sort of gateway sometimes with a garden beyond it to which the viewer seems invited. One immediately supposes that the garden is the garden of heaven as described in the Koran. In either case, a pattern has been borrowed literally from a mosque wall²⁰. Another sort of obviously religious carpet, at least originally, are those carpets of various provenance that depict in their fields adaptations of the whole decorative structure of interior mosque domes, notably those of the Shaykh Luṭfullāh and Shāh Mosques in Isfahān.

Then there are carpets of varied provenance that replicate the patterns of Ṣafavid carpets specifically intended for a religious setting, such as the famous pair of 16th Century carpets that were made for the Shaykh Ṣaffiyuddīn Shrine in Ardabīl, whose central medallions seem also to be reflections of interior mosque dome medallions²¹.

In view of these connections between carpet designs and architectural decoration, one answer to what some carpet patterns may symbolize may be found in seeing what is symbolized by the religious architectural decoration that has inspired some carpet designs. Isfahān's Shāh Mosque illustrates the possibilities. According to L. V. Golombek, the Shāh Mosque is the "royal" or "imperial" monument par excellence of Islamic Iran and "a suitable choice for the study of the role of monarchy in Iranian civilization"²². In religious terms, Golombek goes on to say of mosques in general that:

Obviously a mosque is more than a shelter from the sun oriented in the proper direction. To the Muslim the sanctuary of the mosque is a microcosm of the universe. The surface of the dome was often decorated with sunburst or stellar designs. This brought the worshipper in direct contact with the awesome heavenly bodies... In the Masjid-i Shah, or any other Persian mosque, the heavens themselves are brought down to the level of man. They are completely visible. Their divine order and beauty are appreciated although never fully grasped²³.

Further,

The use of trees and water in the mosque is an allusion to the concept of the mosque as a preview of paradise, a splendid garden, the jannah of the Qur'ān... Foliate and floral ornament covers the surfaces of the architecture²⁴.

And Golombek finds special significance in the "spectacular" entrance portal to the Shāh Mosque:

The mosque portal, perhaps borrowed from shrine architecture, became a gateway to salvation... In the Masjid-i Shāh, the symbolic significance of the portal is conveyed with particular success by its architecture - its soaring portal screen and minarets which, in the words of the Persian poet, 'Compete with the heavens' - and by the extension of its sides to form wings, inviting and embracing the worshipper²⁵.

As for related symbolism in traditional carpet designs, royal and imperial symbolism aside for the moment, on the basis of inscriptions, poems, and other literary evidence, not to speak of the contextual evidence offered by carpets themselves from the Šafavīd formal garden carpets down to contemporary Bahktīyārī garden compartment and Turkaman gul carpets, it is obvious that many carpets depict an idealized garden, an earthly or heavenly paradise²⁶. The facts of the manifold influence of religious architectural decoration on carpet design and the representation therein of infinity and the dissolution of matter persuade the observer that the motifs and patterns of many traditional carpet types besides prayer carpets are as religious as these same elements in mosque decoration. As David James puts it: "The spiritual, contemplative quality of an arabesque pattern is always there in potential". Or "... because floral forms, which were an important part of the [mosque] decoration, had distinct associations with Paradise, the believer could be brought to contemplate the goal of existence"²⁷.

In the context of the appreciation of the field patterns on many traditional Persian carpets as depictions of paradise, the border pattern sometimes offers further symbolic import. As Schuyler Cammann argues, the whole carpet, border and field, sometimes represents a "universe in miniature". The infinite and

the spiritual are represented in the field in contrast to the finite and the temporal symbolized in the border by "bold, repeating motifs" that imply "the orderly progress of time as it proceeds in regularly recurring cycles," sometimes with the suggestion of alternating night and day when alternating motifs within the border are inverted or when one is darker than the other²⁸. What appear to be alternating sun and moon shapes in the border of many tikkah Turkaman carpets seems a good example of the border area representing the physical world and the field symbolizing Allāh's paradise beyond this world.

Much more can be said of potential symbolism in modern Persian carpets. This mainly suggestive discussion, however, will close with a summary consideration of implications of those aspects of symbolic significance presented above. And two preliminary observations are necessary in that context. First, although some Iranian writers and other intellectuals today attach considerable cultural and nationalistic significance to Persian carpets²⁹, very few Iranians ever consciously reflect on aspects of their own carpets in terms such as the foregoing. Thus, whatever conclusions are drawn about modern Persian carpets as reflections of Iranian society, they cannot include assertions to the effect that many Iranians consciously demonstrate cultural or values in their purchase or use of particular carpet types. Second, nothing could be or has been here suggested about Iranian culture and society on the basis of an appreciation of Persian carpets that could not be elucidated in a study of other important components or manifestations of Iranian society and culture, studies, for example, of socio-linguistic aspects of the Persian language or of themes contemporary Persian literature.

Still, in conclusion, there may not be a more graphic representation of significant features of Iranian society and culture than Persian carpets. Muḥammad Riḏā Pahlavī (reigned 1941-1978) had only to look down at his feet to recognize that the Iran he presumed to lead toward secular modernization was

at the core a society attached to and most at home with the traditional Shi'ite Islamic world view, with its infinite Allāh, the promise of Paradise, and the message that this material world and transient human existence not be valued too highly. Ruḥullāh Khumaynī (in power, 1979-) need only reflect on those same carpets underfoot to recognize that Iranian society is not a monolith of devout Shi'ite Muslims, that Iranianness involves essentially non-religious elements, and that many Iranians have been comfortable with the sort of ruler-subject relations and the ceremonial, ritual aspects of social intercourse that traditional monarchy fosters. It is, parenthetically, ironic that many of the carpets woven in the religious city of Qum exhibit intimate royalist associations; that is to say, that the smaller afshān, arabesque and other stellate medallion carpets and other carpets exhibiting shāh 'abbāsī motifs and other curvilinear elements in field and border areas are heirs to the design traditions originally commissioned by the Ṣafavīd monarchs.

More generally, Persian carpets today seem to represent something significant for and say something significant about those Iranians who, confronted by the manifold influences and pressures of an alien West, may subconsciously gravitate toward visual links and symbolic reminders of Iranian traditions and the traditional past. These Iranians seem, further, to prize in the privacy of their minds and homes the very logic, rationality, and order that they may feel is lacking beyond courtyard walls. In reaction to the facts of the physical environment, an idealized depiction of natural beauty, in particular the spring seasons as the moment of vitality and color in the time cycle, has great appeal. As individualistic as many literate, urban Iranians may seem to be, the impersonality of carpet designs and anonymity of their weavers and designers may imply the continuing significance of a traditional view of the insignificance of the individual in the order of things and, perhaps, the insignificance of at least one moment, that is the present, in the infinite scheme of things. This,

in turn, may seem part of a palpable fatalism among such Iranians, whether it takes the form of trust in Allāh, a Khayyāmīc resignation, or Hedāyatesque misanthropic pessimism. In all these and other regards, modern Persian carpets may offer some insights. In fact, a case could be proposed for not using the term "revolution" to describe upheavals in the political and social order in Iran until such time as apparently revolutionary events in political and social life are accompanied by essential changes in that most significant cultural common denominator, the motifs and patterns of Persian carpets!

NOTES

¹ Karim Emāmi, Modern Persian Artists, [in:] Iran Faces the Seventies, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 349.

² Murray L. Eiland, Oriental Rugs: A Comprehensive Guide, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged, Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1976, p. 8. However, Eiland does not seek to find significance in any traditional or conventional aspects of carpets, deciding at the outset (p. 14) that "we may well consider the design elements as merely part of an arrangement of form and color that produce a pleasing effect".

³ Richard Ettinghausen, An Introduction to Modern Persian Painting [in:] Iran Faces the Seventies, p. 344.

⁴ Joan Allgrove and others, The Qashqa'i of Iran, Manchester: World of Islam Festival, 1976, p. 68.

⁵ Sa'id Nafisi, A General Survey of the Existing Situation in Persian Literature, Bulletin of the Institute of Islamic Studies, no. 1 (1957): 15-16.

⁶ Michael C. Hillmann, Language and Social Distinctions in Iran [in:] Modern Iran: Continuity and Change, eds. Nikki Keddie and Michael Bonine, Albany: State University of New York, 1981.

⁷ Eric Schroeder, The Art of Looking at Rugs, Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, 1949, pp. 11 and 12 (mimeographed text). [in:] Rugs of Turkey, Persian and Central Asia from the Collection of Josef V.

⁸ McMullan Seyyid Hossein Nasr, [in:] Keith Critchlow, Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach, New York: Schocken Books, 1976, p. 6.

⁹ Titus Burckhardt [in:] Issam El-Said and Ayse Parman, Geometric Concepts in Islamic Art, London: World of Islam Festival, 1976, pp. IX-X. An illustration of carpet design perceived as the division of the circle is offered for the famous Ardabil Shrine Carpet, figure 100, page 146, whose design is used in many modern Persian carpets, e.g., from Tabriz, Kashan, and Isfahan.

¹⁰ E.g., Jasleen Dhamija, Living Tradition of Iran's Crafts, New Delhi: Vikas, 1979, p. 48; and Walter A. Hawley, Oriental Rugs, Antique and Modern, New York: Dover, 1970 [first published in 1913], p. 68.

¹¹ Richard Ettinghausen, "Foreword", Lion Rugs from Fars, Oshkosh, Wisconsin: Castle-Pierce, 1974, pp. 7-8.

¹² The four most famous Safavid hunting carpets are discussed in Maurice S. Dimand, Persian Hunting Carpets of the Sixteenth Century, Boston Museum Journal 69, nos. 355 & 356 (1971): 15-20.

¹³ Richard Ettinghausen, The Boston Hunting Carpet in Historical Perspective, Boston Museum Bulletin 69, nos. 355 & 356 (1971): 74-75; black and white illustrations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 (pp. 35-39 and 41) and the color plates on the cover and frontispiece of the journal show this battle royal.

¹⁴ E.g., according to Rugs and Carpets, [in:] Encyclopedia Britannica, 15 edition (1974), vol. 16, p. 11, the border "serves, like the cornice on a building or the frame on a picture, to emphasize the limits, isolate the field, and sometimes control the implied movements of the interim pattern".

¹⁵ Reinhard G. Hubel, The Book of Carpets, [tr. Katherine Watson], London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1971, p. 21; Kurt Erdmann, Oriental Carpets, An Essay on Their History, [tr. C. G. Ellis], New York: Universe, 1962, p. 35; and Ernst J. Grube, The World of Islam, London: Paul Hamlyn, 1966, p. 11.

¹⁶ Idem, The Joseph V. McMullan Collection of Islamic Carpets [in:] Islamic Carpets, New York: Near Eastern Research Center, 1965, pp. 12-13.

¹⁷ Idem, The World of Islam, p. 11.

¹⁸ David James, Islamic Art: An Introduction, London: Hamlyn, 1974, pp. 65-66.

¹⁹ Oleg Grabar, The Formation of Islamic Art, New Haven: Yale University, 1973, pp. 75-103.

²⁰ Idem, Islamic Architecture and Its Decoration A. D. 800-1500, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964, pp. 77-79, cites similarities between the mihṛāb and gate in terms of the development of decoration in and around them as well as in terms of "basic features... such as a central void, side walls, and a re-

ctangular frame", but mentions only the mihṛāb and not the gate "as the inspiration for decorative designs on... prayer rugs". There also seems to be nothing in the denotations and etymology of the word mihṛāb to suggest "gate" or "gateway". Nevertheless, many contemporary prayer carpets from Kāshān, Isfahān, and Qum seem obviously to depict both an idealized garden and a gateway to it that the mihṛāb arch shape helps to effect.

²¹ Grube, The World of Islam, p. 162, note to plate 87, says: "... the magnificent central medallion... has been rightly compared to with the patterns in the domes of Safavid mosques. The reflection of a dome design is emphasized by the appearance of mosque lamps hanging from the central medallion."

²² L. V. Golombek, Anatomy of a Mosque - The Masjid-i Shāh of Isfahān, [in:] Iranian Civilization and Culture, ed. Charles J. Adams, Montreal: McGill University Institute of Islamic Studies, 1972, p. 5.

²³ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ According to Maurice S. Dimand, Oriental Rugs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973, pp. 40-41: "To the Persians of the Šafavīd period such designs i.e., floral and animal-floral suggested gardens. The verses that appear in a number of Šafavīd rugs confirm this, those of [one] rug reading in part, 'This is no carpet, but a wild white rose... a garden full of tulips and roses'. Speaking of early Šafavīd medallion carpets, Erdmann, Oriental Carpets, p. 33, observes: "The carpet turns into a landscape... Here the garden concept has indeed expanded - the carpet has become a portrayal of paradise itself". Evidence for this view is offered by an anonymous early 16th century Persian poem, presented in translation in A. U. Pope, A Survey of Persian Art 14 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937-39), 14: 3185-3186. In part it reads:

Here in this carpet lives an ever-lovely spring...
The handsome wide border is the garden wall
Protecting, preserving the Park within
For refuge and renewal: a magic space...
In the Garden all find security.
Here...
The world at last reveals its destiny.

Man but briefly in earthly gardens dwell;
His pilgrim way he thenceforth must resume
Until at last if faithful to his Lord,
The fadeless Garden of Paradise will open
wide to him.

Of the Garden of Paradise
[this carpet] is token and counterpart;
Heaven's glory brought more night:
An assurance and a prophecy...

27 James, Islamic Art, p. 57.

28 Schuyler V. R. Cammann, Symbolic Meanings in Oriental Rug Patterns, Textile Museum Journal 3, no. 3 (December, 1972): 8 and 14. Cammann has investigated symbolic aspects of oriental carpets in a series of articles; e.g., Cosmic Symbolism on Carpets from the Sanguszko Group, [in:] Studies in Art and Literature of the Near East, ed. Peter Chelkowski, New York: New York University, 1974, pp. 181-208; Religious Symbolism in Persian Art, History of Religious 15, no. 3 (February, 1976): 193-208; Some Symbolic Meanings in Caucasian Rugs Designs, Paper read at the Annual Conference of International Rug Societies (Washington, D. C.: The Textile Museum, November 7, 1975), 9 pp.; and The Systematic Study of Oriental Rugs: Techniques and Patterns, Journal of the American Oriental Society 95 (1975): 248-260.

29 E. g., M. I. Bih'āzīn, Qālī-yi Irān, [in:] Naqsh-i Pārand, Tih'rān: Nīl, 1956, p. 56; and the carpetweaver and her carpet in Shahīd Sālīs' motion picture Tabī'at-i Bijān [Still Life].

Brian SPOONER

FESENJAN AND KASHK: CULTURE AND METACULTURE

I

The term "popular culture"¹ or "folk culture" presupposes a dichotomy. In anthropology - which of all the academic disciplines is the most concerned with the study of culture - this dichotomy has been rendered analytically explicit by the use of the terms "great tradition" and "little tradition" (Redfield 1956: 41ff.; cf. also von Grunebaum 1955). The terminology was developed so late, because it is only relatively recently that anthropology has come to take its subject matter from complex societies with long literary and historical traditions where the distinction is relevant.

At the out set must be stressed that such a distinction derives from the difference in medium of transmission (the great tradition is to a significant extent literary, while the little tradition is non-literary) and is valid only as an analytical device. Any exclusive application of the terms to empirical phenomena leads inevitably to difficulty and controversy. Among the factors which underlie such difficulty, two should be noted here. Firstly, since the great tradition is by definition literary and historical and the little tradition is non-literary and ahistorical, the latter has always had to be recorded through the medium of the former. This observation might appear to imply that the spread of literacy must lead to the eclipse of the folk tradition.