

Iranian and Persian Studies

Mohammad Hossein Keshavarz
Mahdi Noshadi *Editors*

The Handbook of Persian Carpets

Cultural and Semiotic Perspectives

 Springer

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Editors


The Handbook of Persian Carpets

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Figure 1. Map of carpet-producing regions in Iran
Source: <https://www.freepik.com/free-photos-vectors/iranian-carpet-map>

Preface

Many books have been published on Persian carpets (predominantly in Persian language), focusing largely on aesthetic and commercial goals. However, this is the first book to provide an in-depth analysis and thorough description of Persian carpets, examining them from Cultural and Semiotic perspectives. The book aims to scrutinize the manifestation of nature and culture in the warps and wefts of Persian carpets. The value and novelty of the book lie in the fact that various cultural features (e.g., nomadic lifestyle) and environment (e.g., flora and fauna), which are manifested in the design of Persian carpets, are rigorously discussed through the lens of Semiotics and Cultural Linguistics. Various chapters of the book demonstrate that these features are conspicuously imprinted in the culture of different carpet-producing regions of Iran, features that are distributed in the collective memory of people throughout the country as a distinctly ‘Iranian’ concept. In other words, the design elements of carpets (including motifs, patterns, symbols, and colors), which denote symbolic layers of meaning, are iconic representations of natural phenomena and cultural features.

Another significance of the book is its intercultural implications; through the transfer of artworks to other countries, cultural interactions will be established, and mutual understanding among nations will be fostered. Historical examples in this regard include traces of Greek art and that of other nations in Persepolis and other monuments in Iran. In the same vein, readers of the book from different parts of the globe will gain a profound and scholarly insight into Persian culture, history, and heritage through the unparalleled masterpieces of Persian carpets.

The intended readership of this book includes, but is not restricted to, graduate students, scholars, and researchers in the fields of semiotics, cultural studies, anthropology, history, decorative and visual arts, and literature. The book would also be appealing to the general public, particularly readers interested in Persian arts, history, and culture.

The book consists of 14 chapters, organized into three parts: (i) historical perspective, analytical framework, and cultural aesthetic aspects of Persian carpets (Chapters 1–3), (ii) tribal carpets (Chapters 4–8), and (iii) urban carpets (Chapters 9–14). The book’s organization prioritizes hand-woven tribal carpets due to their

authentic and aesthetic significance. The main Iranian tribes that are widely known for their hand-knotted carpets include Qashqā'i, Bakhtiāri, Kermānshāh, Torkaman, and Kurdish tribes in Bijār and Sanandaj. Despite the geographical distance between these tribes, cultural similarities can be reflected in their carpet designs and motifs. Needless to say, regional differences also exist in the design of carpets; accordingly, a separate chapter has been allocated to each carpet-producing region.

In Chapter 1, Mohammad Hossein Keshavarz provides a historical background of Persian carpets as one of the most renowned art heritages of the world. This chapter will demonstrate that Iranian carpet weaving is globally unique. Being the most outstanding Iranian cultural export throughout history, Persian carpets have served as the medium for Iranians to introduce their diverse cultures, rituals, worldviews, and lifestyles to world nations. The chapter begins with the history of carpet weaving in Iran, covering different historical periods, from the Pazyryk Rug in 500 BC to the Sassanid Dynasty, also known as the Sasanian Empire (r. 224–651 CE), and post-Sassanid eras, and from the Safavid Dynasty (r. 1501–1736 CE) to the modern era. The chapter ends with a discussion of carpets belonging to the Qājār (r. 1789–1925 CE) and Pahlavi (r. 1925–1979 CE) dynasties. Samples of carpets from various historical periods are included.

Chapter 2, authored by Mohammad Hossein Keshavarz and Mahdi Noshadi, presents the analytical framework of this book, grounded in a model proposed by the same authors in 2023 that offers a fresh perspective on Cultural Linguistics and Semiotics by integrating key aspects of these two disciplines. This model aims to deepen our understanding of cultural phenomena, addressing gaps that traditional frameworks may have overlooked. By incorporating semiotics into cultural conceptualization, the Semio-Cultural Framework can account for a broad range of cultural phenomena, including paintings, sculptures, and other forms of art. The role of cultural symbols in this framework is crucially important for establishing a link between Semiotics and Cultural Conceptualization. Cultural symbols, which “are derived from *final interpretant*, come under the elements of cultural conceptualizations from a semiotic perspective to Cultural Linguistics” (Keshavarz and Noshadi, p. 56).

In Chapter 3, titled “A Cultural Aesthetics of Persian Carpets,” Michael Graig Hillmann offers a cultural-aesthetic analysis of Persian carpets, applying an American formalist approach to the aesthetic appreciation of carpets. He then raises the issue of symbolism in traditional carpet designs. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of eclecticism in Iranian art and culture-specific Iranian aesthetics of decoration and ornament in Persian carpet designs.

Mohammad Hossein Keshavarz and Saeid Moslemi Nezhad Arani, in Chapter 4, bearing the title “Where Earth Meets the Sky: The Symbolic World of Qashqā'i Carpets,” investigate the Qashqā'i tribal carpets. The chapter begins with an overview of the salient features of the Qashqā'i tribe, including their history, places of residence in Iran, linguistic background, and the hallmark of their hand-made carpets. This is followed by a symbolic analysis of the nomadic designs and symmetrical patterns found in Qashqā'i carpets. The chapter then explores the symbolic language interwoven within each element, from protective borders to vibrant hues inspired

by the environment. The recurring motifs, such as cypress trees, animals, and tribal emblems, convey tales of lineage, nature, and the enduring spirit of the Qashqā'i people. The authors argue that Qashqā'i carpets are a vibrant generational tapestry of cultural expressions.

In Chapter 5, “Grandeur of Lore: The Symbolic Heritage of Bakhtiyāri Carpets,” Mahdi Noshadi commences with an overview of the Bakhtiyāri tribe alongside the distinctive features of their hand-woven carpets. Following this, the chapter delves into an in-depth symbolic analysis of Bakhtiyāri carpets, renowned for their rich symbolism and intricate designs. Each motif within these carpets carries profound cultural and historical significance, reflecting the Bakhtiyāri tribe's heritage and worldview. The chapter explores the theoretical foundations of symbolism and cultural symbols in Bakhtiyāri carpets, focusing on various design elements and their cultural meanings. Key motifs such as the *Kheshti* (Multiple Panel) design, including floral motifs like the cypress tree, weeping willow, grapes, paisley, and rose, as well as bird motifs like the nightingale, peacock, and butterfly, are examined in detail. Additionally, the chapter covers the *Lachak Toranj* (Corner Medallion) design and the *Sharābeh* (Vine Glass) design, providing a comprehensive analysis of the symbolic manifestations in Bakhtiyāri carpets.

Chapter 6, “Nature and Culture Interwoven: An Analysis of Kermānshāh Tribal Carpets from a Semio-Cultural Perspective” by Hossein Bahri, covers Kermānshāh carpets. Adopting a Semio-cultural approach, the author delves into the symbolic meanings embedded in these works of art. The author explains that these exquisite carpets, with their unique designs, motifs, and vibrant colors, serve as visual narratives reflecting the interplay between nature and human culture. Based on the findings of his study, Bahri elucidates the iconic representations of natural phenomena in Kermānshāh carpets and their symbolic layers of meaning.

In Chapter 7, titled “A Journey through Threads and Tradition: The Case of Torkaman Tribal Carpets,” Mohammad Hossein Keshavarz and Roya Bagheri explore the intricate world of Torkaman carpets—a tradition rich in history, culture, and craftsmanship. The chapter begins with an introduction to the salient features of the Torkaman tribe. Then, the authors elaborate on the unique and symbolic geometric designs of Torkaman carpets, delving into the historical evolution and cultural significance of these designs. They further explain how features of the environment and the Torkamans' nomadic lifestyle are intricately woven into the fabric of these carpets.

“Unraveling Cultural Mysteries: A Semio-Cultural Analysis of Sanandaj, Bijār, and Rustic Carpets” (Chapter 8) by Mosayeb Fatahi-Majd explores the cultural narratives and collective meanings embedded within the varieties of Kurdish carpets. Utilizing the Semio-cultural Analytical Framework put forward by Keshavarz and Noshadi (2023), the author examines the *Immediate*, *Dynamical*, and *Final* interpretants of the motifs and patterns that characterize these carpets. He argues that Kurdish carpets are dynamic cultural artifacts that encapsulate the collective memory and identity of the weavers, serving as a bridge between past and present and a canvas for the future.

Saieed Moslemi Nezhad Arani's chapter on Kermān Carpets (Chapter 9) marks the beginning of Part III of the book, which presents analyses of carpets produced

in major Iranian cities, widely known for their exquisite carpets throughout history. These include Kermān, Kāshān, Tabriz, Ardabil, Malāyer, and Qom. Chapter 9, titled “Woven Words: The Semiotic Symphony of Kermān Carpets in Persian Culture,” offers an in-depth analysis of the semiotic elements in Kermān carpets, exploring the rich tapestry of symbols and motifs constituting a unique visual language. It also addresses the dynamic interplay between historical context and contemporary market trends, highlighting how they influence the semiotic evolution of carpet designs. The chapter contributes to the discourse on cultural semiotics, offering a nuanced view of Kermān carpets as more than artisanal creations but rather as emblematic bearers of linguistic heritage.

In Chapter 10, titled “The Loom of Meaning: Semio-Cultural Essence of Kāshān,” Amir Zand-Moghadam and Zhila Kiyanfar examine the semiotics of Kāshān carpets: textiles vividly adorned with botanical and zoological images, each laden with profound cultural implications. They explore how these carpets serve as symbols, reflecting and shaping cultural identity through an elaborate pictorial language. They argue that far beyond their aesthetic appeal, the Kāshān carpet designs establish an elaborate semiotic discourse, weaving a tapestry of colors and patterns deeply rooted in tradition and rich with narrative significance. They conclude by saying that the elaborate semiotic fabric of Kāshān carpets will continue to intertwine with the expansive linguistic and cultural milieu of Persian society.

Chapter 11, “Carpet Weaving in the Safavid Era,” authored by Ali Vandshoari, is dedicated to a historical account of carpet weaving during the Safavid Dynasty (r. 1501-1736 CE). The author explains how the establishment of modern governmental infrastructures across various political, economic, and cultural domains resulted in a profound transformation in the social life of Safavid society. Consequently, alongside various other economic sectors, the carpet industry flourished, resulting in the production of high-quality carpets in the weaving workshops of the era’s economic hubs.

In “Semiotic and Cultural Manifestations of Ardabil Carpets” (Chapter 12), Vali Mohammadi elaborates on the Semio-cultural analysis of Ardabil carpets, shedding light on the complex interplay between art, culture, and history embodied in these carpets. The central medallion and surrounding floral and geometric patterns in Ardabil carpets, woven with meticulous knotting techniques, symbolize divine and eternal themes prevalent in Islamic Art. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, the Ardabil carpets played a vital role in the social and religious life of the Safavid era. They served not only as floor coverings and ceremonial objects but also as diplomatic gifts, reflecting the wealth and power of the Safavid dynasty and facilitating cultural exchanges. Today, the Ardabil Carpet’s presence in prestigious museums underscores its enduring legacy and global significance.

Chapter 13, titled “A Pictorial Discourse Analysis of Visual Arts: The Case of Malāyer Hand-Woven Carpets,” by Hossein Ahmadi, introduces Malāyer, a prominent carpet-weaving city in Iran, which has long attracted traders and buyers seeking exquisite Persian carpets. Malāyer carpets exhibit a wide array of motifs, such as plant and flower designs, and animal symbols, highlighting the region’s agricultural heritage and reverence for nature. Additionally, motifs of kings, demons, mythical

figures, and geometric patterns add layers of historical narratives and artistic expression. Exploring these motifs allows us to understand the unique blend of artistry and narrative expressions that defines Malāyer carpets, underscoring their importance both as functional items and cultural artifacts.

In the final chapter of the book (Chapter 14), bearing the title “Qom Silk Carpets: A Semiotic and Cultural Analysis,” Roya Bagheri presents a detailed description of the aesthetic and semiotic features of Qom silk carpets and highlights their connection to the history and culture of this region. Qom silk carpets are usually adorned with various patterns and designs, utilizing vibrant and captivating colors. Due to their exquisite appearance and high-quality weaving, these carpets are favored choices among individuals seeking artistic and precious carpets both within the country and abroad.

Kyrenia, North Cyprus
Shiraz, Iran

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Mahdi Noshadi

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Part I
Historical Perspective, Analytical
Framework, and Cultural Aesthetics
of Persian Carpets

Chapter 1

Persian Carpets: A Historical Perspective



Mohammad Hossein Keshavarz

Abstract As one of the most acclaimed world art heritages, Persian carpets capture the essence of Iran's rich history and culture. Throughout ancient civilizations, Iranians were at the forefront of carpet weaving. Over time, their ingenuity and creativity led to exceptional mastery of this craft. The carpet-weaving skills of Iranians have been transmitted from generation to generation. Even today, despite society's rapid and expanding modernization and industrialization, the connection between Iranians and this art form is just as strong. Most Iranians consider a house soulless and bare without Persian carpets and rugs. This conceptualization suggests that Persian carpets are a cherished cultural schema among Iranians, who view them as a national art and an essential component of their cultural heritage. Moreover, Persian carpets have served as a medium for Iranians to introduce and communicate their diverse cultures, rituals, worldviews, and lifestyles to the international community throughout history. Thus, the overarching aim of this chapter is to provide a historical background of Persian carpets. The chapter is divided into several sections, each addressing an era in the history of Persian carpets.

Keywords Carpets · Art heritage · Iran · Historical perspective

"All around the world, Iranian carpets are the symbol of poetical luxury."—Alexander Pope.

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