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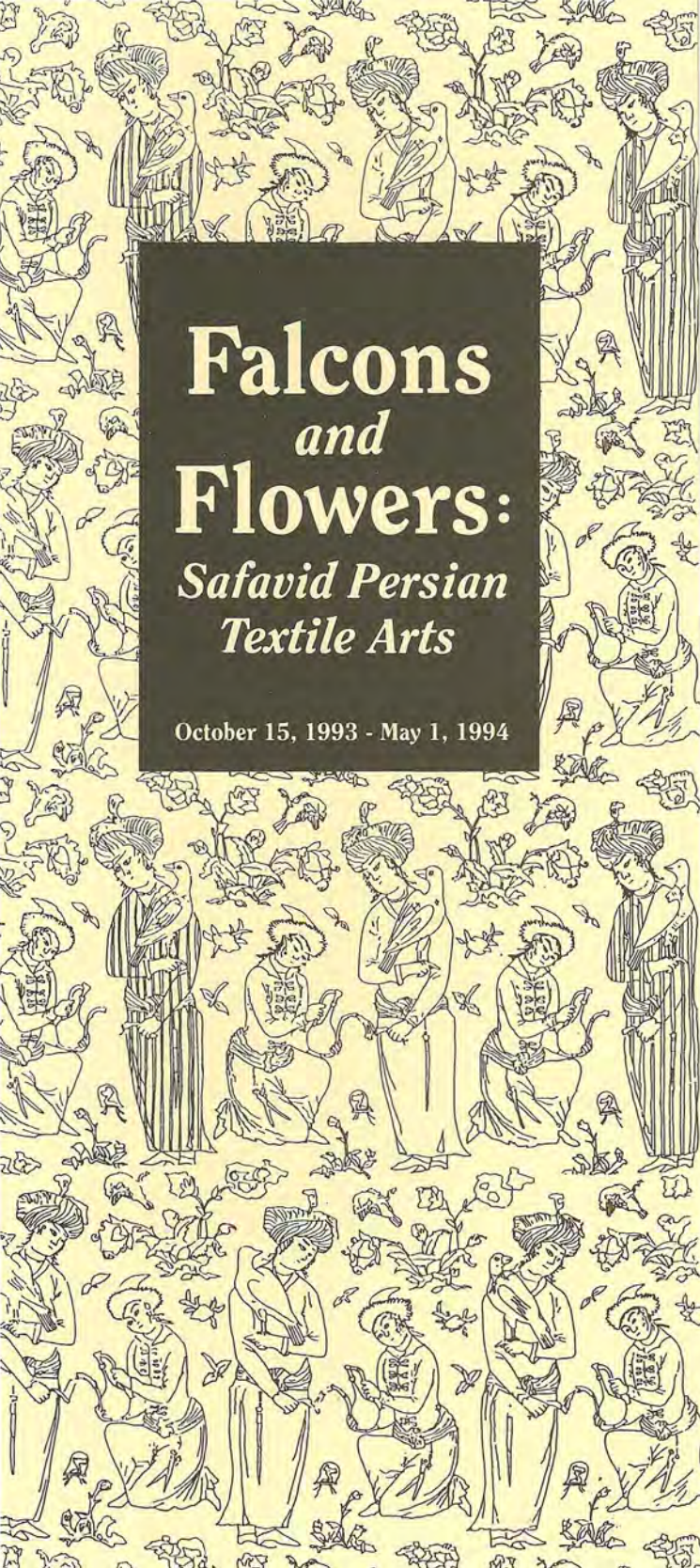
Falcons and Flowers: Safavid Persian Textile Arts

Carol Bier, *The Textile Museum*



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Flowers:
Safavid Persian
Textile Arts

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he Safavid period in Iran was a golden age for textile arts. It was in the 16th century that the Classical Persian carpet evolved to its fully developed form, and it was then that woven silks and velvets reached

the highest technical and aesthetic standards of all time. In subsequent periods of Persian history, textiles and carpets reflect the extraordinary achievements of the Safavid era which have never been surpassed.

Under the reign of Shah Abbas I, who reigned from 1588 to 1629, Iran established important economic ties not only with the rapidly emerging European powers, but with the Mughal empire in India as well. In a flourish of diplomatic and commercial activity, textiles figured prominently and silk was the major item of export. Persia's engagements with the West in the Safavid period contributed dramatically to the presence of Persian carpets and textiles in European and American collections today.

Among the most important survivors of the diplomatic and commercial efforts of the Persian court in the 17th century is a group of extraordinary Safavid velvets today in the collections of Rosenborg Palace, Copenhagen. Recent research has confirmed that these velvets were probably the gift of Shah Safi, successor to Shah Abbas, to Duke Friedrich III, presented by a Persian embassy in 1639 to his court in Schleswig-Holstein. Four textiles of this group have traveled across the Atlantic for the first time to be exhibited at The Textile Museum along with other 17th-century Persian textiles and carpets drawn from our own rich collections.

All of the textiles and carpets selected for this exhibition illustrate a Persian aesthetic of the 17th century that was very much in fashion in northern Renaissance Europe at royal and ducal palaces in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Schleswig-Holstein. Numerous Persian textiles are listed in the palace inventories of household goods, where they are described as interior furnishings used as

bed covers and hangings, and for table covers and carpets. Although today many objects show signs of fading from exposure to light, their original colors were bright, even garish by our standards, dazzling with gold and brightly shining silk in many colors.

Textiles of this period expressed themes familiar from contemporary Persian poetry and painting. Falconers with falcons, and other sports favored by the court are illustrated frequently, along with naturalistic and fanciful flowers, trees, and streams





VELVET, lattice with falconer and attendant, Iran, Safavid period, 16th century. Silk warp and weft; silk pile; metallic-wrapped silk. The Textile Museum 3.219. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1938.

VELVET, depicting flowers beside a pond, Iran, early 17th century. Silk warp and weft, metallic strips. The Textile Museum 3.206. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers.

with fish. Intricate designs of winding branches, sinuous stems, and colorful blossoms express the rapturous concerns of skilled artists and artisans who worked in an era of exceptional court patronage and extraordinary productivity in all areas of the arts.

The aesthetic of the time favored bright color and carefully drawn floral ornament, as seen in the glazed ceramic mosaics and tiles used to decorate the great architectural monuments of the capital city, Isfahan. Arts of the book also flourished, with single page album paintings showing individual portraits of figures engaged in such activities as wine-drinking, conversing, love-making, falconry, or just deep in thought — subjects represented as well in contemporary textiles.

Carpets were commissioned or purchased in the bazaars, and brought back to grace the palace and manor houses of European royalty and nobility.



VELVET, depicting an inebriated youth (detail), Iran, Kashan or Yazd, Safavid period, early 17th century. Silk warp, weft and pile; metallic facing. Collection of Rosenborg Palace, Copenhagen.

“Polonaise” carpets of which two from the Museum’s collections are on view, were produced in Iran and especially favored at European courts. Archival documentation exists in the form of customs records, bills of lading, and purchase receipts. Ordered in pairs, or purchased in the bazaar, they were in great demand in the first half of the 17th century, occasionally appearing in European royal portraits. A large silk tapestry of the period, never before exhibited, includes a European coat-of-arms that would have been commissioned at the time of its manufacture. Two classical carpet fragments, Indo-Persian in style, and three large fragments from “vase” carpets are also be on view.

The carpets and textiles of Safavid Iran that are included in this exhibition are among those that were admired in Iran and abroad for their brilliant color, fine drawing, gold grounds and extraordinary technological achievement. While they once must have astounded their viewers, their impression today offers but a pale remembrance of their rich historical legacy.

Carol Bier, Curator, Eastern Hemisphere Collections

Suggested Readings

Bier, C., ed., 1987

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The Persian Velvets at Rosenborg Palace, Copenhagen.

McWilliams, Mary 1987

"Prisoner Imagery in Safavid Textiles," *The Textile Museum Journal*, vol. 26, pp. 5-22.

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"Allegories Unveiled: European Sources for a Safavid Velvet," in *Textiles in Trade*, Proceedings of The Textile Society of America Biennial Symposium, Washington, pp. 136-148.

Olearius, Adam 1669

The Ambassador's Travels into Muscovy, Tartary, and Persia, London.

Sonday, M. 1987

"Pattern and Weaves: Safavid Lampas and Velvet," in Bier 1987, pp. 57-83.

Soudavar, Abolala 1992

Art of the Persian Courts, New York.

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Shah Abbas and the Arts of Isfahan, New York.

VELVET, depicting falconer and attendant, Iran, Safavid period, drawn by Katia Johansen and Carol Bier, 1992. Collection of Rosenborg Palace, Copenhagen.

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