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Salon du Tapis d'Orient

The Salon du Tapis d'Orient is a moderated discussion group in the manner of the 19th century salon devoted to oriental rugs and textiles and all aspects of their appreciation. Please include your full name and e-mail address in your posting.

Rugs and Old Masters

by **Filiberto Boncompagni and Pierre Galafassi**

INTRODUCTION

Anyone with a little knowledge of Oriental rugs should be familiar with appellations such as “Memling gul”, “Lotto carpet” or “Bellini carpet”, descriptors based on famous Renaissance artists who depicted rugs in their paintings. But how did they influence the rug lexicon?

When the German art historian **Julius Lessing** (1843 –1908) wrote the first study on ancient carpets (*Altorientalische Teppichmuster: Nach Bildern und Originalen des XV. - XVI. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, 1877; translated into English as *Ancient Oriental Carpet Patterns after Pictures and Originals of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*), the surviving specimens were so rare that he had to rely mostly on the examples he found in old paintings. The first collections of real “classic” carpets started later with the important contribution of **Wilhelm von Bode** (1845-1929), who found several examples of them mainly in Italy, especially in churches. Bode, an art historian and curator, started a classification of ancient carpets based on their motifs. At the same time he continued the parallel study of their appearance in Renaissance paintings, dating them accordingly. He actually originated the appellations, *Holbein Rug* and *Lotto Rug*. In 1902 he wrote *Vorderasiatische Knüpfteppiche*, later expanded with the contribution of **Ernst Kühnel** and translated in English in 1922 as *Antique Rugs from the Near East*. This was practically the foundation of the so-called the "Berlin School of carpet science".

Another important member of the "Berlin School" was **Kurt Erdmann** (1901-1964), the director of the Islamic Department of West Berlin State Museums. He continued systematic research of the sources through travel and European paintings, the analysis of patterns, structures and technical characteristics of the carpets. There are, of course many other scholars that studied carpets in paintings and published books on the subject. One is **John Mills**, who also wrote several articles in HALI.

The reason behind this short introduction is that we are starting a section on Turkotek devoted to discussing rugs in ancient paintings. It will be more or less in the style of [Salon 105: Rugs in Orientalist paintings](#) but because the subject matter is much wider it will run for an indefinite term. The subject is, after all, a natural choice for a website discussing Oriental rug. The proposal came from Pierre Galafassi who had gathered a number of digital reproductions and, like me, is fascinated by both arts: the one of the loom and the one of the brush, and especially by their combination. Of course, we are not scholars. Personally, apart the mighty internet, I have only a few books as resources - a few more than at the time of Salon 105. Although the task is enormous, we would like to give it a try with your help and contribution. If, for example, you have the whole collection of HALI and, during the future discussions of certain paintings you find (with the help of HALI's CD index) that there is a pertinent article by John Mills, it would be nice to post a digest of what could be useful to the discussion.

The related images shouldn't be a problem: even if you don't have a scanner. If you mention the name of

the painting, we should be able to locate its image on the web.

Major countries and periods for rugs in paintings:

Rugs started to appear in European paintings during the 13th century. Their usage steadily increased and reached its peak of popularity as studio props, during the 17th century, quickly decreasing afterwards, probably because the 18th century marked the start of carpet "industrial" manufacturing in Europe and Persia, and Turkey had switched increasingly to producing degenerated rugs catering to European taste, thus destroying their image as prestigious luxury objects. Rugs remained relatively rare in paintings, no doubt in good part due to their very high price.

During the early and mid-Renaissance the major use of rugs was as props at the feet of enthroned Madonnas, but even then I'd estimate that rugs were present in less than one per cent of such paintings. These ruggy-painters were mostly Italians with a few Flemish, Spaniards and Germans. Judging from the variety of rugs he used as props, one of them (Hans Memling) may have been the first motivated collector.

During this first period, all rugs featured either stylized animals or geometric motifs, the former style fading out around 1450, perhaps as a secondary effect of Timur's (1336-1405) wanton massacres and of forced artisan displacements from most western Asian areas to his capital at Samarkand. Or, it may have been simply because of a change of fashion or a more rigorous implementation of religious taboos.

From mid-15th to late 17th century, late Renaissance -and Baroque Italian, Flemish or Dutch painters increasingly adopted rugs as studio props, still in paintings with religious themes, but also later in portraits, "genre" and still-life paintings. It had become a status symbol to be displayed at windows or balconies, curvilinear "Persian" style rugs gradually supplanting the geometric style after 1620. Again hardly more than 1% of the paintings of the time feature a carpet.

Trade Routes and Origins of Carpets

The "geometrical" and "animal" rugs in Early Renaissance Italian paintings were probably made in Konya under the Seljuk sultanate that preceded the Ottoman Turks and the rule of the Mamluks of Egypt.

Carpets were also produced in Moorish Spain:

"Carpet weaving in Spain developed during its Moorish occupation in the early medieval period. There is evidence as early as the late 12th century for the export of some sort of carpets from Murcia, in Southern Spain, and Spanish carpets were brought to London in 1255 for the marriage of Eleanor of Castile and the future Edward I. Inventories from the late 13th to the 15th centuries show that Spanish carpets were highly prized in many European countries at a time when almost no floor coverings were being woven elsewhere in Europe". (1)

Spanish carpet reached Italy, too, through relationships between the Spanish court of Naples and the other Italian courts. Those carpets often imitated Ottoman production. There are records of local manufactures of rugs in Italy as well. In the 16th century England also started carpet production, followed by France a century later. The practice lasted in both countries until the 19th century.

It is interesting to note that *"Sixteenth-century Florentine and Venetian inventories often list ten or more carpets and name different origins: "cagiarini" (Mamluk designs, from Egypt) "damaschini" (either Mamluk or Turkish carpets sold in Damascus or the para-Mamluk type perhaps made in the Damascus region), "barbareschi (North African) and rhodiotei (probably imported via Rhodes) "turcheschi" (Ottoman), and "simiscasa" (Circassian or Caucasian)". (2)*

In any case, Ottoman-style products dominated rugs appearing in Renaissance paintings. Venice had a near monopoly on rug importation. Following the establishment of close diplomatic relations between Safavid Persia and major Italian cities (including Venice and Florence) many gifts were exchanged between Persia and Italy. In this manner, a number of Persian carpets found their way to both these cities. At about the same time, a short-lived, indirect contact was established between Persia and Poland (hence

the “Polonaise” carpets) but no direct commercial link had existed between Persia and Europe until the Portuguese, English and Dutch started direct trade with Asia by circumnavigating Africa. Slowly, Persian rugs started to appear in Baroque paintings, eventually being more frequent than Ottoman-style carpets.

According to Jon Thompson’s classification of carpets by their production (i.e., tribal, cottage, city workshop and court atelier), until the 16th century rugs depicted in paintings appear to have been urban products (either from city workshop or from court atelier). Cottage and tribal rugs first appear in European paintings in the 19th century, especially as consequence of a renovated westerner interest toward the Orient. Orientalist painters started depicting exotic scenes with Caucasian or Anatolian "rustic" carpets, kilims and even the very first Turkmen rugs; the latter were the result of Russian expansion in Central Asia. We stop here, for the moment. Hopefully, more in-depth detail will be discussed later, with your help.

Pierre Galafassi & Filiberto Boncompagni

1) - source: *Victoria & Albert Museum website*

2) - *Bazaar to piazza: Islamic trade and italian art, 1300-1600* By Rosamond E. Mack – page 77.

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