Part 1: Interlaced Patterns

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Wandering Designs

The Repossession of the “Oriental” Carpet and Its Imaginary

Production of so-called oriental carpets is carried out in the geographies currently described as Iran, the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia. These geographies have been the subject of repeated colonization over many centuries. As a consequence carpets produced there offer a rich site for thinking about local, national, regional and imperial identities, and exchange during processes of colonization and decolonization. This essay focuses on one of these geographies of production, Punjab, and the response of its carpet industry to the rise and fall of the British imperial project from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, and to the residual impact of the Mughal imperial project from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

The work of scholars on the constructed nature of interpretations of the colonized by the colonizer offers a platform for this essay.¹ It also draws on thinking which emphasizes the importance of analyzing material culture within a network of many sites of exchange, each with permeable boundaries, producing loops of change and resistance to change.² Building from these concepts, I argue here that the oriental carpet, in addition to its traded and manufactured reality, is a mobile concept within such an archipelago of interacting sites of exchange, a concept materializing colonial systems of power, value, and taste.

This approach differs fundamentally from much specialist and scholarly writing on oriental carpets which, since the nineteenth century, has focused and continues to focus on provenance and authenticity.³ This writing, until quite recently mostly North American and European, created a canon of oriental carpets. Underlying its methods and conclusions is the assumption that there is a stable and objective hierarchy of aesthetic and cultural value in carpets, which can be judged through their places and methods of location, their materials, and designs.

This monolithic approach contrasts markedly with the multivariant response to carpets in their indigenous countries of production. These are often strongly marked

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1 For example, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

2 For example, Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello and Sarah Teasley, eds., *Global Design History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, eds., *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

3 Key figures include Wilhelm Bode (German, 1845–1929), William Morris, (British, 1834–1896), Alois Riegl (Austrian, 1858–1905), Arthur Upham Pope (American 1881–1969) and May Hamilton Beattie (Scottish 1908–1997).

by the perspective of the maker. So, for instance, in tribal or village communities, many of whose members are weavers working on carpets for their own use, intimate accounts are given of the quality of materials and workmanship, and physical and emotional history of weavings.⁴ Equally, within the commercial industry there is a high valuation of customer responsiveness, be it in weaving for local clients or the export market, and on the practice of revered master weavers.⁵ Meanwhile, museological assessments in countries of production express different national agendas to each other, and to those in countries of consumption in Europe and North America.⁶

The traditional European and North American reading is in essence connoisseurial, and has an important role in underpinning the vigorous market for old oriental carpets. This essay challenges the connoisseurial assumption of a set of enduring verities of oriental carpet quality, instead analyzing carpets as a manifestation of repeated conceptual and material reinvention across geographies and cultures, meeting local social, economic, and political needs. To ground this argument, the essay analyzes a range of carpets which are often marginalized because they do not meet these connoisseurial expectations, and consequently receive little or no scholarly attention.

The particular carpets investigated were made in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Punjab, and in Pakistan from independence and partition in 1947.⁷ These carpets sit in a contested relationship with the European and North American commitment to a stable and objective hierarchy of aesthetic and cultural value in carpets, with the idea of the traditional and unchanging at its heart.

In India under British rule, this commitment to the traditional in Indian crafts became part of colonial ideology. The essay contrasts carpets made under the direct influence of the imperial power and its commitment to tradition in, for example, jails, with those made in commercial environments, described by the British in colonial India as the 'private industry'. It goes on to explore how both the Punjabi private industry and the later Pakistani commercial industry challenged that idea of the traditional in carpets by transforming quickly in response to technological change, commercial ties to new markets, and the changing political and economic environment. By exploring locations of production, such as factories, prisons, and cities, rather than the court ateliers, tribal tents, and village workshops of European and North

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⁴ Anna Badkhen, *The World is a Carpet: Four Seasons in an Afghan Village* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2013).

⁵ Hadi Maktabi, *The Persian Carpet: The Forgotten Years 1722–1882* (London: Hali Publications, 2019), 207–56.

⁶ See, for instance, the contrasting accounts and displays of carpets given by the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, Istanbul, and the two museums of Iranian carpets in Tehran and Mashhad, Iran.

⁷ Carpets from Doris Leslie Blau, New York; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Templeton Carpet Factory, Glasgow; PAK Persian Carpet Company, Lahore; Lahore Carpet Manufacturing Company, Lahore.

American imagination and preference, the essay uncovers some less-frequently told histories of the craft of carpet weaving.

For both Punjab and Pakistan, contemporaneous records of production and commercial organization and examples of reception are used as primary evidence, alongside carpet manufacturers' marketing materials.⁸ The close study of these contested carpets, and the interrogation of primary materials about their production and reception provides the platform to return these carpets to the narrative.

Therefore this text is not a connoisseurial account of the provenance and value, commercial or aesthetic, of these carpets. Indeed, the carpets it examines have been at times regarded by connoisseurs as low-value and low-quality commercial export products or copies.⁹ Nor is it an attempt to trace linear stylistic development, an approach to design which is arguably based on a Eurocentric ideology of progressive evolution which took hold from the mid-nineteenth century onward.¹⁰ Instead, it explores the loops of transformation and resistance involved in the modification of a traditional artifact, and of the system for evaluating it.

What Is an “Oriental” Carpet?

At the heart of this discussion are patterned pile carpets woven across Eurasia since at least 300 BCE.¹¹ Patterned pile carpets share structure with other woven textiles. Their unique characteristic is the introduction of knots, really loops, between the

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⁸ London, Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, MA/2/1/1-3, “Mr. C. Purdon Clarke’s visit to and purchases in India”; *Indian Industrial Commission, Minutes of Evidence* (Calcutta, 1916–18), 5 vols.; C. Latimer, *Monograph on Carpet Making in the Punjab, 1905–6* (Lahore, 1907); B. H. Baden Powell, *Handbook of the Manufactures and Arts of the Punjab*, vol. 2 of *Handbook of the Economic Products of the Punjab* (Lahore: Punjab Printing Company, 1872); *Report on the Punjab Exhibition 1881–82: Selections from the Records of the Government of the Punjab and its Dependencies*, n.s., no. xxii (Lahore: Punjab Government Secretariat Press, 1883). *Threadlines Pakistan* (Karachi: Ministry of Industries, Government of Pakistan in concurrence with the United Nations Development Programme, 1977); *Pakistan Economic Survey* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan Finance Division Economic Advisors Wing, 1977); *Pakistan Export Promotion Bureau Data* (Islamabad, 2006); *Handmade Carpet Manufacturing* (Karachi: State Bank of Pakistan, 2015); The Pakistani Carpet Manufacturing and Export Association, accessed June 19, 2021, <https://pcmea.org.pk>.

⁹ For nineteenth century views see George Birdwood, *Industrial Arts of India*, vol. 1 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880); J. K. Mumford, *Oriental Carpets* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 257–59. The leading international carpet periodical *Hali* does not cover modern Pakistani export production.

¹⁰ For example, Alois Riegl, *Problems of Style* (1893), trans. Evelyn Kane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts* (1860), trans. Michael Robinson, ed. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2004).

¹¹ The date of the oldest preserved carpet, the Pazyryk, found in the Altai Mountains, Siberia, production area unknown, possibly Persia. Now in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Fig. 1: Structure of knotted pile carpet.

horizontal weft threads. The decisions made by the weaver about the color of thousands of knots gradually build up the pattern in the carpet (**fig. 1**).

Usually described as oriental carpets, these heavy hand-woven textiles are anthropologically complex objects. Some were made within sophisticated societies such as imperial Persia, Anatolia, India, and China. Some have been and are still made in nomadic and village societies organized for tribal sustainability,

such as those of the Turkmen Federation, or in coercive factory systems like those of the Ottoman Empire or parts of modern South Asia. Carpets participate in diverse economic environments; they can be urban export goods, village cash crops, or an integral part of a sheep-based nomadic economy. Their functions are equally diverse. They play a role in political processes of diplomatic gifting and the performance of kingship, where they express status and power. The tribal or village family's collection of carpet objects, including floor and wall coverings, beds, doors, storage bags, and animal trappings are at one and the same time functional domestic items and the family's wealth and its currency for trade. Carpets are an expression of the aesthetic and the sensual, but are also an exercise in spirituality, evidenced by the strong association between oriental carpets and Islam.

In the Asian carpet-weaving belt, there is a history of exchange between different environments in which carpets are made. The court ateliers of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Islamic emperors who commanded the most expensive resources, the urban workshops of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Iran, Turkey, and India, which produced carpets in volume for a European and North American market—shared techniques, materials, and designs with nomadic and village weavers. From at least 300 BCE, oriental carpet weaving has been a circulating craft.

Creating a European and North American Hierarchy of “Oriental” Carpets: 1840–1900

From around 1840, there was a transformation in the intensity of the encounter between Europe and North America and oriental carpets, as a diverse set of European and North American scholarly, artistic, commercial, and popular agents became

strongly engaged with them. By the 1870s, this had reached the peak described by economic historians and carpet specialists as the oriental carpet boom.¹²

The oriental carpet boom had multiple causes. Throughout the nineteenth century, European and North American exploration and colonialism created encounters with societies producing these artifacts. Improving trade links and communications brought a greater number and variety of types of carpets to the European market.¹³ From the mid-nineteenth century onward, international exhibitions brought both contemporary commercial production and old carpets to a wider public,¹⁴ and newly developing museums across Europe and North America displayed exemplary versions.¹⁵ Collectors, dealers, and intermediaries provided carpets for these foundational collections, establishing European and North American connoisseurial standards in the process.¹⁶ Meanwhile, an increase in and wider distribution of disposable income throughout the nineteenth century enabled more people to decorate their houses with carpets.¹⁷ In the second half of the nineteenth century, magazines and periodicals advertised carpets and gave taste advice on how to choose and use them,¹⁸ while department stores made them easy to acquire.¹⁹

The boom saw an increase in the volume of oriental carpets traded in Europe and America, to a larger and more socially and educationally diverse group of consumers. The commercial opportunity led to a reorganization of oriental carpet weaving by entrepreneurs, producers and traders from both areas of indigenous production and Europe and North America, and to the establishment of a preferred European

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12 Annette Ittig, "CARPETS xi. Qajar Period," *Encycloaedia Iranica*, IV/8, 877–883, last updated: December 15, 1990, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/carpets-xi>; Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 134–42.

13 Leonard Helfgott, *Ties that Bind: A Social History of the Iranian Carpet* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 194), 83–125.

14 For example, the Great Exhibition, London, 1851, the Exposition Universelle, 1878, Paris, "Old Oriental Carpets," 1891, Vienna.

15 These included the South Kensington Museum in London (1852/7), the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris (1905), the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin (1868), the HandelsMuseum (1887) and the K. K. Österreichische Museum für Kunst und Industrie (1863), both in Vienna, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1870), and the Chicago Art Institute (1879).

16 Examples include Wilhelm Bode, Robert Murdoch Smith and Arthur Upham Pope, Goupil Brothers in Paris, Delekian Brothers in New York, Vincent Robinson in London.

17 Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions*, (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2006), 12–13.

18 For example, Charles Eastlake, *Hints on Household Taste* (London: Longman Green and Co., 1869). For influential magazines see Cohen, *Household Gods* (ibid.), 65–76.

19 Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store 1869–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Vicki Howard, *From Main Street to Mall* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

and North American commercial style.²⁰ It was also a period of reassessment of the quality, nature, and history of oriental carpets by European and North American collectors, connoisseurs, curators, and scholars.

The oriental carpet boom was a moment of discontinuity in carpet weaving, when change accelerated. As the industry mobilized to take the commercial opportunity, anxiety arose among European and North American commentators about the quality of carpets produced in and exported from Persia, Turkey, and India in response to the boom.²¹ This took the form of a moral and commercial panic, moral in the sense that the aesthetic and cultural qualities the oriental carpet represented to the West might be compromised by increased contemporary indigenous production, and commercial in the sense that the market for carpets might be reconfigured economically by the increased volume of carpets being made available:

At the time of which I am speaking, carpets had very seldom been exported from Persia, and consequently there was no rubbish manufactured; now it is quite different. If a very good carpet is wanted, an old one must be bought.²²

In this strongly-worded statement, C. J. Wills (1842–1912), a medical officer with the Indo-European Telegraph company in Persia between 1866 and 1881, reveals the confidence of the colonizer in evaluating the culture of “the other.” Putting the best oriental carpet production in the past was “a denial of coevalness,” a distancing mechanism which Johannes Fabian identifies as an indicator of a Western inability to engage with the material culture of non-Western groups on terms of equality.²³

Historical evidence does not support Wills’s assertion. Oriental carpets were traded across Eurasia from at least 300 BCE.²⁴ However, Wills’s assumption that indigenous producers and entrepreneurs could not be trusted to respond to new markets

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20 For Persia, Annette Ittig, “The Kirmani Boom: A Study in Carpet Entrepreneurship,” *Oriental Carpet and Textile Studies*, vol. 1 (1985):111–23; for Turkey, Donald Quataert, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 134–60. For India Tirthankar Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 197–231.

21 This was widespread, but for example see, Alois Riegl, *The Relationship between Oriental Carpet Fabrication and Western Europe* (Vienna, 1891); Vincent Robinson, “Indian Carpets,” *Oriental Carpets*, ed. Caspar Purdon Clarke (London: South Kensington Museum, 1892); William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art: Five Lectures Delivered in Birmingham, London and Nottingham 1878–1881* (London: Ellis and White, 1882); and G. C. M. Birdwood, *Industrial Arts*, (1880).

22 C. J. Wills, *In the Land of the Lion and the Sun or Modern Persia, Being Experiences of Life in Persia during a Residence of Fifteen years in Various Parts of That Country from 1866 to 1881* (London, 1891), 149.

23 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 31.

24 C. Parham, “How Altaic/Nomadic Is the Pazyryk Carpet?,” *Oriental Rug Review* 13/5 (June–July 1993): 34–39.

and technologies was fundamental to the European and North American narrative of oriental carpets. Leading commentators such as Alois Riegl (1858–1905) curator of textiles at the Handelsmuseum in Vienna, and Caspar Purdon Clarke (1846–1911), director of the South Kensington Museum in London, both expressed the view that the quality of contemporaneous production of oriental carpets in their countries of indigenous production could only be ensured if it were supervised by Europeans.²⁵

This moral and commercial panic resulted in the creation of a European and North American hierarchy of so-called better and worse carpets. The characteristics of “better” carpets were the use of preindustrial and local materials, technologies, methods, skills, and designs. Carpets made using any kind of industrialization, from mechanized spinning or weaving, through factory dye-synthesis, or those that used designs from outside their local area, were lower in the hierarchy. Contemporaneous carpets made for export were particularly suspect. European and North American opinion formers believed that these characteristics enabled them to discriminate between carpets that were “authentic” expressions of “traditional” cultures, and those that were not.

This hierarchy bears the marks of orientalism at work, of the colonizer defining the material culture of the colonized as a means of exercising control over it, just as the French Encyclopedists accompanying Napoleon defined Egypt, in Edward Said’s famous example.²⁶ Taking possession of the imaginary of these carpets through a constructed hierarchy of value also created a new source of cultural capital within the nineteenth-century capitalist West, a means to demonstrate superior knowledge, taste, and resources, and gain individual competitive edge.²⁷ The European and North American hierarchy of oriental carpets offered a tool of control that operated exogamously, across the West’s colonies and para-colonies, and endogamously, within its own geographies, society and culture.

The particular qualities valued by European and North American commentators suggest a desire to retreat from the trauma of industrialization and globalization, identified by Glenn Adamson as a driver of nineteenth-century craft revivalism.²⁸ They wished to freeze-frame the oriental carpet at a pre-industrial moment for their own psychological and political purposes, defining this as the “tradition” of “authentic” oriental carpets.

Indigenous producers in South, Central, and West Asia manifested a more flexible attitude to technological innovation, commercial opportunity, and design reinven-

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²⁵ Caspar Purdon Clarke, “Oriental Carpets,” *Oriental Carpets: The Catalogue of the 1891 Exhibition at the Handels-Museum, Vienna*, ed. Caspar Purdon Clarke (London: South Kensington Museum, 1892); Riegl, *Oriental Carpet Fabrication*, 214.

²⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 79–88.

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010), 1–55.

²⁸ Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 211–14.

Fig. 2: Hand-knotted sampler (*wagireh*), wool, Bijar, Persia, early twentieth century.

tion. Adoption of nineteenth-century technologies such as industrially produced dyes, new materials like cross-bred merino wool, and of semi-industrial factory methods, was part of the response in Turkey, Persia, and India to the opportunities offered by the oriental carpet boom. This adaptiveness was not unique to nineteenth-century circumstances, but was rooted in the history of transfer in weaving technology and materials across Eurasia, of which the spread of silk and the drawloom are examples.

Furthermore, there is evidence of long-standing heterodoxy toward design in these geographies. The best efforts of European and North American taxonomists to associate places and time periods with specific designs are frustrated by the fusions, borrowings, and *bricolage* of oriental carpet patterns (**fig. 2**).²⁹ The tribal weavers of the borders of modern Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran have a specific term for these

borrowings, *narche gashtai*, wandering designs.³⁰

Operating within this model of adaptation and exchange, producers from South, Central and West Asia took the emerging commercial opportunities of industrialization, globalizing markets, and the oriental carpet boom and at the same time energized their craft traditions. These developments did not align comfortably with the freeze-framed hierarchy of oriental carpets established by a West struggling to come to terms with modernity.

The result was an effort to transfer agency from the indigenous producers of oriental carpets to hegemonic tastemakers in Europe and North America, and to put control of the speed and nature of change, circulation, and reinvention into their

²⁹ The foundational practitioner of this was Bode, see, for example, Wilhelm Bode and Ernst Kuhnel, *Antique Rugs from the Near East*, trans. Charles Grant Ellis (Berlin: Klinkhardt and Biermann, 1958), 94.

³⁰ R. D. Parsons, *The Carpets of Afghanistan*, (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 1983), 212.

hands. This contest for agency in the production and design of oriental carpets is vividly demonstrated in the case of carpets from pre-independence Punjab and post-partition Pakistan.³¹

Creating Imperial Identities through Carpets in Punjab, 1540–1900

Punjab experienced two major imperial interventions from the sixteenth century, that of the Mughals (1526–1857) and that of the British (1849–1947), both of which were materialized in their carpets.³² Under the Mughal emperors Akbar (1542–1605), Jahangir (1569–1627), and Jahan (1592–1666) elite patterned pile carpets became part of the demonstration of imperial power, as they were in contemporaneous Safavid Persia.³³ Two distinctive local styles developed, one strongly influenced by Persian design traditions, and one by European botanical illustrations (fig. 3).³⁴ The design of their carpets exemplifies the Mughal imperial project to establish connections with

Fig. 3: Mughal carpet, Lahore, Punjab or Kashmir, ca. 1650, wool pile, cotton foundation.

³¹ At Indian independence in 1947, Punjab was partitioned between India and the new Muslim state of Pakistan. For a summary of carpet weaving in Punjab see Nasreen Askari and Rosemary Crill, *Colours of the Indus: Costume and Textiles of Pakistan* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum/Merrell Holberton Publishers, 1997), 95.

³² A short-lived indigenous Sikh Empire existed between 1799 and 1849.

³³ Kishwar Rizvi, *The Safavid Dynastic Shrine: Architecture, Religion and Power in Early Modern Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 93; Daniel Walker, *Flowers Under Foot: Indian Carpets of the Mughal Era* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 3–15.

³⁴ R. Skelton, “A Decorative Motif in Mughal Art,” *Aspects of Indian Art: Papers Presented in a Symposium at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1970*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 147–52.

both the culturally powerful Safavid Empire and the intellectual innovation coming from Europe. Lahore in Punjab was one of the earliest and most important centers of Mughal carpet making, and radical adaptation and identity making were built into it from that point on.³⁵ Court patronage lapsed under the later Mughal emperors, and the Sikh rulers who dominated Punjab in the early nineteenth century were less interested in carpet production.³⁶ Urban factories that had produced more accessible versions of Mughal court carpets declined, and there was little of the domestic and rural production found in Iran, Anatolia, and Central Asia.³⁷ In 1849, the British East India Company seized Punjab, and in 1857, in common with other EIC territories in the subcontinent, it came under direct British rule.

The British set out to revive the carpet making industry in Punjab, first for economic reasons, and then as part of the British project to define and preserve what they saw as “traditional” Indian culture.³⁸ Arindam Dutta has vividly evoked the dynamism of the colonial process by which Britain took possession of the material culture of India, reimagining and physically remaking it to dovetail with the British imperial agenda.³⁹ He describes a cultural system in India of British art schools, museums and exhibitions, publications, regimental workshops, and jails, all responding to the agenda set by the Department of Arts and Sciences in London, and embodied by the South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Carpets were an important part of this cultural system. The moral and commercial panic among European and American commentators about the impact of industrialization and a global market on “traditional” carpets was particularly marked in the discourse on Indian carpets.

Indian carpets sold today are wholly modern creations. The antique fabrics, many of which were admirable, are no longer to be had. . . . The industrial development of India under English rule dissipated the old methods so rapidly that within twenty-five years after the first public exhibition of these fabrics in London, in 1851, the carpet product had become entirely altered in character.⁴⁰

The solution to the “dissipation” described by American commentator J. K. Mumford in 1903 was for the new imperial power to “rescue” Indian carpets. Through their

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³⁵ The lack of surviving examples makes it difficult to discuss the pre-Mughal period.

³⁶ Susan Stronge, “The Arts of the Court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh,” *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, ed. Susan Stronge (London: Victoria and Albert Museum Publications, 1999), 74–91.

³⁷ Tirthankar Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 199.

³⁸ C. Latimer, *Monograph on Carpet Making in the Punjab, 1905–6* (Lahore, 1907); B. H. Baden Powell, *Handbook of the Manufactures and Arts of the Punjab*, vol. 2 of *Handbook of the Economic Products of the Punjab* (Lahore: Punjab Printing Company, 1872).

³⁹ Arindam Dutta, *The Bureaucracy of Beauty: Design in the Age of Its Global Reproducibility*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1–39.

⁴⁰ J. K. Mumford, *Oriental Carpets* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 252.

art schools, regimental workshops, and most significantly in their jails, the British in India directly imposed their vision of what an oriental carpet should be, in terms of methods of production, materials, and ornament.

The work carried out by Indian inmates in British jails in India was intended to be primarily punitive, with a second objective that of defraying jail costs. Unusually, carpets were produced in jail workshops for the commercial export market fueled by the oriental carpet boom. Some jail carpets

Fig. 4: Carpet, wool, Lahore Central Jail, ca. 1880, Victoria and Albert Museum.

were direct copies of Mughal and Indo-Persian carpets collected by the indigenous Indian aristocracy.⁴¹ However, a carpet woven in Lahore jail around 1880 exemplifies a more complex process of borrowing and exchange (**fig. 4**). The ornamental plane of the carpet has a field structure of wreaths and cartouches containing blossoms, and a strong palette of red, black, and dark blue. Alongside its Indo-Persian *millefleurs* characteristics, it has a relationship to urban Persian carpet making of the nineteenth century. It contains no hint of the innovative, specifically Mughal botanical style showing whole plants, sometimes including their roots.

The British preference for Persian styles was part of a Persophilia that had intensified during the nineteenth century, as racial hierarchies developed in Europe within which Persians were perceived as second only to northern Europeans. The Persian Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), famed for its cultural and intellectual excellence, was seen as a particularly attractive model for nineteenth-century European empire builders.⁴² But Persophilia in India also had a local character. British colonialists preferred to identify themselves with Persia and its past glories, rather than the Mughal Empire, which even in decline offered resistance to the British. When Indian groups rose up against the British in 1857, in the events variously known as the Indian Mutiny, the Sepoy Rebellion, and the First Indian War of Independence, depending on the cultural and political affiliations of the commentator, the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah (1775–1862) was their symbolic leader.

⁴¹ Abigail McGowan, “Convict Carpets: Jails and the Revival of Historic Carpet Design in Colonial India,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 72, no. 2 (May 2013): 391–416.

⁴² For the historiography of European and North American Persophilia see Yuka Kadoi and Ivan Szanto, eds., *The Shaping of Persian Art: Collections and Interpretations of the Art of Islamic Iran and Central Asia* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 4–6.

The Lahore rug was displayed in the jail carpet category of the British-organized Punjab exhibition of 1881–82, where it was one of two jail carpets bought for the South Kensington Museum by Caspar Purdon Clarke.⁴³ One of these two carpets won first prize in the exhibition, and one is now misplaced.⁴⁴ The catalogue description is too generic for a confident identification of the illustrated carpet as the prizewinner, but the two carpets were considered the most worthy of purchase by Clarke. Both the purchases and the prize were signals to Punjabi producers that such Indo-Persian styles were the ornamental vocabulary of a British-authorized idea of the “traditional” Indian carpet. The exhibition catalogue describes the prizewinning carpet as copied from a Persian or Indo-Persian carpet in the “Maison de Louvre.” This carpet does not appear to be in the Louvre, so its source was probably from the contemporaneous Parisian department store, Les Grands Magasins du Louvre.⁴⁵ The carpet was doubly endowed with Persophilia, French and British. It also claimed the cachet of a source in “the capital of the nineteenth century,” Paris, the dominant cultural center in Europe.⁴⁶

Caspar Purdon Clarke bought the two jail carpets as part of a £5,000 shopping trip for Indian goods, with the aim of establishing a systematic teaching collection of Indian crafts to improve the design quality of British manufacturing.⁴⁷ They became part of a loan collection sent by the Department of Science and Arts to British industrial centers such as Birmingham, Manchester, and Glasgow, where machine-made versions of such carpets were produced (fig. 5). The prizewinning replica of an Indo-Persian carpet collected by Parisian taste-makers, made in colonial Lahore as part of the imposition of British cultural and political values, was reimagined and remade for the imperial parlor and the colonial lounge in the UK’s manufacturing cities, then sold across the UK and its settled territories.

Carpets like the two from Lahore jail helped unlock the potential of Indian crafts for British capitalism. They offer an example of an Indian “tradition” which had been mediated by Parisian collectors, reimagined by the British in Punjab, then re-exported globally. The multidirectional circulation of design and capital materialized in these two carpets was an expression of late nineteenth-century geopolitics and identity formation, built on previous centuries of similar negotiations between earlier empires in

⁴³ A. M. Dallas, *Report on the Punjab Exhibition 1881–82: Selections from the Records of the Government of the Punjab and its Dependencies*, n.s. no. xxii (Lahore: Punjab Government Secretariat Press, 1883), 59.

⁴⁴ London, Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, MA/2/1/1–3, “Mr. C. Purdon Clarke’s visit to and purchases in India,” inventory numbers 797 and 798.

⁴⁵ I am grateful to Gwenaëlle Fellinger of the Louvre, and Avalon Fotheringham of the V&A for their help with the research on this previously undocumented carpet.

⁴⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Paris – Capital City of the Nineteenth Century,” *Dissent Magazine* (September–October 1970); first published 1920.

⁴⁷ V&A Archives, MA/2/1/1–3.

the region, such as the Mughals and the Persian Safavid dynasty.

Jail carpets offer a record of British colonial power over the creativity and artistic traditions of Punjab, but also over Indian bodies. Jail carpets are part of the broader British organization of punishment and disciplined labor in South Asia, and have been read as a confrontational representation of the hegemony's coercion of both subaltern individuals and subaltern societies.⁴⁸ Michel Foucault offered a framing for such discussions in his identification of the role of jail systems in the formation of both personal identity and the body.⁴⁹ The Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in London in 1886, where Purdon Clarke's Indian purchases were displayed, offered a stark example of this. The five and a half million people who visited the exhibition saw jail weavers themselves displayed alongside their products.⁵⁰

Fig. 5: Machine-woven carpet, Templeton and Company, Glasgow, New Zealand wool and jute, ca. 1950. Author's photograph from "Templeton Presents Carpets of Distinction," Glasgow: Templeton and Co., 1952.

Repossessing "Oriental" Carpets in Punjab: The "Private" Industry, 1870–1947

Jail carpets have been a focus in the historiography of carpets made in nineteenth-century India, written both during and since that period. However, alongside them, a less-studied independent commercial carpet weaving industry developed in the later

⁴⁸ This important topic in South Asian postcolonial thought is explored in, for example, Satadru Sen, *Disciplined Natives: Race, Freedom and Confinement in Colonial India* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2012); David Arnold, "The Colonial Prison: Power, Knowledge and Penology," in *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Gupta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 148–84.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), 135–95.

⁵⁰ Saloni Mathur, "Living Ethnological Exhibits: The Case of 1886," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 15 no. 4 (November 2000): 492–524.

decades of the century. This was described by the British as “the private industry.”⁵¹ The usage of the term “private” for the entire indigenous industry is an indicator of the degree of British identification with, and belief in their control of the Indian public space and the material culture that lay within it.

The center of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century independent carpet industry in Punjab was Amritsar.⁵² Amritsar was already a well-established trading center when the British East India Company annexed Punjab in 1849. Its connections with European and North American entrepreneurs, merchants, and dealers strengthened during the second half of the nineteenth century, giving its traders and producers insight into the tastes and requirements of European and North American consumers.⁵³

In parallel the shawl-weaving industry of neighboring Kashmir came under pressure from a number of factors. British and French industries in replicas, and the economic impact of the Franco-Prussian war and the struggles between Britain and Russia in Central Asia, had by the late nineteenth century caused a collapse in demand for these elite objects across Europe and Asia.⁵⁴ A severe famine in Kashmir in the 1880s led to the migration of shawl weavers to Punjab, in particular Amritsar, a traditional center for the trading of Kashmiri shawls.⁵⁵ Facing a decline in the shawl market, weavers joined the “private” carpet industry. This Kashmiri diaspora brought into Amritsar an infusion of world-class production disciplines, and spinning, weaving, dyeing, and design skills.

Meanwhile, Amritsar was not subject to the full strength of the British imperial carpet system as Lahore was. Both Amritsar and Lahore had a jail workshop, but Lahore was also the location of the main British-founded museum and art school in Punjab.⁵⁶ Carpets produced in Amritsar for the growing market for luxurious interiors in Europe and America were consequently less mediated by a British idea of what an oriental carpet should be.

However, the imposition of a British idea of an Indo-Persian carpet had consequences, albeit unintended, on the independent industry. Rather than encouraging Amritsar carpet makers toward British-authorized “traditions,” I suggest that it instead loosened the bonds of identity between independent Punjabi weavers and their own Mughal and pre-Mughal styles of carpets. Once that bond was broken, energy was

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51 W. Coldstream, *Report on the Punjab Exhibition 1881–2*, 61.

52 Latimer, *Monograph* (1907), 5–7.

53 W. S. Caine, *Picturesque India* (London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd., 1891), 158–60. Mumford, *Oriental Carpets* (1903), 251–65.

54 Michelle Maskiell, “Shawls and Empires, 1500–2000”, *Journal of World History*, vol. 13. No. 1, (Spring 2002): 27–65.

55 Suhail Lone, “Famine in late nineteenth century Kashmir”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 77 (2016): 450–460

56 The Amritsar art school was founded in 1928 by the Sikh artist Gurdit Singh. The Lahore Mayo School of Art was founded by the British in 1875.

Fig. 6: Hand-knotted carpet, cotton, wool, silk, Amritsar, ca.1900.

released for a heterodox idea of what an oriental carpet might look like. Reimagined forms of carpets emerged in Amritsar as a consequence, which did not set out to express British ideological concerns, or to exemplify a static hierarchy of quality and tradition (fig. 6). The Amritsar carpet illustrated is very distinct from the Persian and Indo-Persian carpets promoted by the British, and from Mughal carpets. Its combination of large, simplified motifs and dense, long pile is a reversal of what is often found in accomplished West, Central, and South Asian carpets. There, small detailed motifs and short, fine pile permit high-definition, intricate designs. Thick pile and large motifs give a blurred design. This blurring is increased by the subduing of the palette. Instead of the complex combinations of shades of red, blue, and green associated in Europe and America with oriental carpets, the palette is narrow, muted and almost monochrome. What we perceive is a watery impression of an oriental carpet that does not insist on its centrality in the visual field, or compromise the overall Western interior scheme, in particular the need for furniture to sit on the carpets, and to break into the pattern.

In the face of a British institutional insistence on the traditional, the Amritsar industry introduced innovations in design, palette, and materials. However, the innovation which arguably had the most significance for the production of carpets in Punjab from 1880 onward was Amritsar's business model. Focused on producing carpets for the export market, and with a well-structured legal and financial system of contracts, the Amritsar industry drew together the capital and entrepreneurial skills of indigenous manufacturers, such as the Hutheesing family and Chamba Lal and Company, the skills and production disciplines of the self-managing community of Kashmiri shawl weavers, and North American intermediaries such as Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932), who gave access to the customers and capital of New York dealers and retailers including Louis Comfort Tiffany and W&J Sloane.⁵⁷ By the turn of the nineteenth century, Amritsar was a vigorous industrial city, with a modern infrastructure of railways and telegraphs, and a thriving carpet export industry.⁵⁸

The British establishment in India was interested in the “private” carpet industry as a sign of economic vitality in India, but disturbed by its divergence from the purity of tradition in crafts and carpets that the British had so energetically imagined and endorsed in Punjab and more broadly across British India.⁵⁹ The resistance mounted by contemporaneous European and North American commentators, connoisseurs, curators, and collectors to Amritsar carpets was, however, more intense. They dis-

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57 For a case study of the carpet collaboration in Amritsar and Ahmadebad between Lockwood de Forest (1850–1932) and the Hutheesing family, see Roberta Mayer, *Lockwood de Forest: Furnishing the Gilded Age with a Passion for India* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008). For the collaboration in Amritsar between Shaikh Gulam Hussun and W&J Sloane, see *The Story of Sloane's* (New York: W&J Sloane, 1950).

58 For a contemporaneous description of the difference between the cities of Lahore and Amritsar and rural India see Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (London: Penguin, 1989), 74–89; first published 1901.

59 McGowan, “All that is rare,” 263–86; McGowan, “Convict Carpets,” 391–416.

missed Amritsar carpets as “purely commercial products” produced for export, which abandoned the traditional practices and techniques in which Western connoisseurs were invested.⁶⁰ There was particular criticism of the factory-like, and indeed, jail-like disciplines used in Amritsar. These commentators disregarded the evidence that Indian carpet making had taken place in factories rather than rural workshops and homes since the Mughal invasion,⁶¹ and that many of the production disciplines were adopted from traditional Kashmiri shawl making practices.⁶²

In the Western connoisseurial response to Amritsar carpets, there was a blurring of objections to methods of production, political and economic unease, and aesthetic anxiety, which continues to be characteristic of European and North American responses to oriental carpets. Despite this ideological ferment, the new aesthetic was commercially successful among consumers, particularly in America, where the ideological aspects of the taste authorized by the British possibly had less resonance. Meanwhile, time has done its work and Amritsar rugs are now valued as antiques of high aesthetic and sensual appeal, commanding high prices. The carpet in figure 6 was for sale in 2017 for \$150,000, at a time when an attractive late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century nomadic or village carpet could be bought for around \$3,000.⁶³

The Amritsar carpet industry offers an example of a colonial territory that repossessed its own tradition from the taste precepts of the colonizer, and reworked that tradition to take independent advantage of the commercial opportunity arising from globalizing markets. The attraction of its carpets as antiques in the modern international market for art and antiquities obscures the ideological difficulties they raised at the time of their production. The Amritsar story challenges both the orientalist and postcolonial assumption that something is being done to the East by the West, and linear and binary models of transfer and influence.

Carpets and the New Nation: Pakistan from 1947

When India gained its independence from Britain in 1947 and a separate Muslim state of Pakistan was established, Punjab was partitioned between the two new states. As a result, the production locations of the Lahore jail carpet and the Amritsar carpet were

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⁶⁰ Mumford, *Oriental Carpets*, 251–59; George Birdwood, *Industrial Arts of India* (1880), (Calcutta: 1992), 285–300; Vincent Robinson, “Indian Carpets,” *Oriental Carpets: The Catalogue of the 1891 Exhibition at the Handels-Museum, Vienna*.

⁶¹ Roy, *Traditional Industry*, 199.

⁶² For a description of Dr. Leithner’s exhibit of the Kashmiri shawl-weaving process, see *Report on the Punjab Exhibition 1881*⁹², 31.

⁶³ See “Amritsar Rugs,” DorisLeslieBlau.com, accessed June 22, 2021, dorisleslieblau.com/amritsar-indian-rugs.

Fig. 7: Lahore and Amritsar after 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan.

separated by a national border and by religion. Despite being only thirty miles apart, from 1947 Muslim Lahore was in Pakistan, Sikh Amritsar in India (**fig. 7**).

Carpet making in Indian jails had ceased by 1930, in the face of international economic depression and increasing consumer ambivalence about the circumstances of production. The independent carpet weaving industry of Amritsar was still in operation in 1947, although smaller than at its peak in the 1920s. Most carpet weavers in Amritsar were Muslim, and moved at partition to Pakistan.⁶⁴ The Pakistani handmade carpet industry inherited the skills and production methods of the Amritsar industry, its outward focus on export markets, and its readiness to meet consumer appetites.⁶⁵ The Pakistani industry also adopted its readiness to transgress orthodox expectations of design, reinventing pattern structures, motifs, and palettes (**fig. 8**). Meanwhile, a major industry in copies and versions of well-known Eurasian carpet styles, and of particular famous carpets, developed in Pakistan (**fig. 9**).

As a consequence, Pakistani carpets have also inherited Amritsar's problematic relationship with the European and North American hierarchy of oriental carpets, which has globalized alongside the globalization of the market for art and antiquities.⁶⁶ Pakistan's reinventions and versions of oriental carpets have reactivated the

⁶⁴ Felicia Yacopino, *Threadlines Pakistan* (Karachi: Ministry of Industries, Government of Pakistan in concurrence with the United Nations development Programme, 1977).

⁶⁵ *Handmade Carpet Manufacturing* (Karachi: State Bank of Pakistan, 2015).

⁶⁶ The new museums of Islamic art in the Gulf States have taken advice on their collections from Western carpet specialists, for example.

Fig. 8: Carpet, wool, and cotton, Pakistan, 2017.

Fig. 9: Left: handmade “Bokhara” carpet, Pakistan, New Zealand wool, contemporary 1.8 × 1.2 m, Walmart Online Store, US. Right: similar carpet, John Lewis Online, UK.

anxieties about tradition, authenticity, and export wares at the core of the nineteenth-century rejection of change in oriental carpets, and the suspicion of copies which has been part of the debate on modernity from the mid-nineteenth century onward.⁶⁷ The carpets of postcolonial Pakistan are popular with consumers, but are as controversial with the now-global connoisseurial community as those of colonial Amritsar were in the late nineteenth century.⁶⁸ They demonstrate the level of anxiety that is still present when a geography of indigenous production reclaims its material culture from the ideology of the hegemony.

However, the carpet industry is fundamental to Pakistan's economy and identity. On their present-day websites, both the Lahore Carpet Company and the Multan Handmade Carpet Company claim that they were established in 1947, the year of Pakistani independence.⁶⁹ The PAK Carpet Company makes a subtly different claim, that it became the home for the émigré weavers of Amritsar.⁷⁰ These three modern carpet-making companies see their firms, weaving, and trade as part of the origin story of their nation. Meanwhile, handwoven pile carpets, while not the biggest industry in Pakistan, make an important contribution to Pakistani exports. More than 90% of production is exported, and Pakistan is one of the major exporters of oriental carpets in the world.⁷¹ A circulation of only thirty miles between Lahore and Amritsar established oriental carpets as agents in the creation of both the identity and the economy of the new Pakistani state.

Conclusion

I have argued that the visual plane, materials, and meaning of an oriental carpet have been contested since the beginning of the nineteenth century by interest groups inside and outside the geographies of indigenous production. In particular, I have described the degree to which the assessment of the quality of oriental carpets and their design has been defined by Europe and North America in this period, and has

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⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 211–45; first published 1936. For craft revivalists and copying see Adamson, *The Invention of Craft*, 141–64, 191–98.

⁶⁸ For example, the leading international periodical on oriental carpets, *Hali*, does not cover modern Pakistani export production.

⁶⁹ See Lahorecarpet.com, and Multan Oriental Hand Made Carpet Company Facebook page, accessed June 22, 2021, <https://facebook.com/MOHMC>.

⁷⁰ See Pakpersianrugs.co.uk/oriental-persian-rug-articles.

⁷¹ Trade Development Authority of Pakistan, "Carpet Industry" (2006), accessed June 22, 2021, tdap.gov.pk/tdap-statistics.php; *Pakistan Economic Survey* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan Finance Division Economic Advisors Wing, 1977), 55.

been underpinned by changing European and North American tastes, sensibilities, and hegemonic ideologies.

However, the analysis here of the carpets of Punjab and Pakistan shows how these same international markets and geopolitics have offered an opportunity to carpet makers and traders in the countries of indigenous production to reinvent their own traditions of making and design, and to reclaim agency in the definition of what constitutes an oriental carpet. I have argued that the repossession and reinvention of oriental carpets in Punjab was a transfer of agency from hegemonic powers to local producers, and that this expression of agency was a transgression of power relations in the eyes of the colonizers. The consequence of this was that the carpets themselves were regarded as transgressive by the arbiters of taste in Europe and America, irrespective of their intrinsic design, materials, and cultural qualities. The carpets of Punjab and Pakistan illustrate how political, social, economic, and cultural power works to modify the material culture of those it dominates, and the agency of indigenous makers in resisting that power.