Dear Friends,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the Museum of the Red River, where we can share the knowledge and curatorial efforts of our good friend, Mehdy Douraghy. He has generously given his time and expertise to organize this wonderful exhibit. Working with a number of private collectors, Mehdy, supported by his wife Leora, has created a unique opportunity for visitors to enjoy an under-appreciated traditional art.

The pictorial weavings of Persia are rarely seen on exhibit. Very few pictorial rugs are woven in comparison to the vast numbers of rugs with geometric or floral patterns, and bringing together this collection for exhibition was a challenging undertaking. A major part of the Museum’s mission is to provide broad and unique aesthetic experiences to our rural audiences. This exhibit certainly meets that requirement, and we as an institution are proud to be both sponsor and host.

We are very grateful to the many lenders, who agreed to literally part “with walls and floors” for the duration of the exhibit. We are also pleased to continue a program partnership with the Mabee-Gerrer Museum of Art in Shawnee, Oklahoma, which will host a similar exhibit in early spring, 2012. Special thanks to Artisan offices of Los Angeles and Chicago for underwriting and producing this publication, as it provides a permanent, well-deserved testament to Mehdy Douraghy’s considerable contribution to our knowledge of Persian rugs, history and culture.

For the MUSEUM OF THE RED RIVER,

Henry Moy, Director
INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, pictorial rugs have been woven in Persia (Iran). The most famous, the "Spring of Khosrow", was in the royal palace in Ctesiphon, Iran’s capital under the Sassanians. It is said to have been woven with gold thread and covered in jewels: diamond snow on the mountains, emerald grass and leaves, sapphire rivers and lakes, colorful gem fruits and flowers. When the Arabs captured Ctesiphon in 637 A.D., they cut up and divided the rug amongst themselves. An Arab historian states that 60,000 Arab soldiers each received a piece worth $3,000.

In the 19th century, the first archeological evidence of rug design was discovered in Iraq on an Assyrian bas-relief (ca. 800 B.C). In 1949 in a Scythian tomb in Siberia, archeologists discovered a pictorial rug preserved in ice for 2,500 years: the famous Pazyryk Carpet now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Because wool is fragile, very few pre 16th century pictorial rugs exist, but a number of examples from the 16th-17th centuries are in European museums, such as the famous “Hunting Carpet” (1543) in Milan’s Poldi Pezzoli.

The reign of the Safavid Shah, Abbas the Great was the golden age of carpet artistry. Fine rugs were often sent as gifts to European royalty. The so-called “Polonaise Rugs”, thought at one time to be of Polish origin, were in fact from Iran during the Safavid period, (1501-1721). After the Afghans invaded Iran in 1721, the carpet industry declined until the mid 19th century, when Westerners became interested in buying Persian rugs. Workshops were later set up in Iran by European merchants such as the Castelli Brothers in Tabriz and Kerman; “The Peacock” was made for the Castelli’s. At the end of the 19th century, pictorial rugs were woven to order, primarily in Kerman and Kashan. Credit for this is given to the Qajar Prince Farman Farma, who returned from his studies in Vienna with European paintings and drawings, and encouraged Kerman weavers to copy them as pictorial rugs.

The earlier 20th century subjects of pictorial rugs were kings, stories from the Bible and the Koran, and legendary heroes. Later, contemporary leaders such as President Kennedy, and even Patrice Lumumba, could be seen in carpet shops. In 1975, Iranian sculptor Parviz Tanavoli curated the first of the few exhibits of pictorial rugs in the literature. Called "Lion Rugs of Fars", it traveled to museums around the world.

From the 1980’s on, popular pictorial rugs began to resemble paintings and scenes described by major poets such as Omar Khayyam and Hafez. Today many pictorial rugs; mainly from Tabriz, are designed to be framed and hung as paintings. The current exhibit ends with a rug that exemplifies this trend: “Grandfather and Grandson”.

M. Mehdy Douraghy
Modern Pazyryk

This modern interpretation of the 2,500 year-old Pazyryk rug has been woven as a rectangle rather than as a square, but has otherwise remained basically true to the design and motifs of the original.

Collection Of Minasian Rug Gallery, Evanston, Illinois

Tabriz, 1998, 4.10x6.3 feet (137x 190 cm)
Peacock

A rather strange-looking peacock with a fully opened tail stands amidst flowers in a central medallion with a pink background that is framed within a larger medallion full of flower motifs set against a deep red background. Separate flower clusters and cartouches are united by the alternating pink and white flowers lining a beige field that eventually becomes the border. The pastel colors and floral designs are typical of Ravar Kermans. The most interesting thing about this rug for a collector is the cartouche at the bottom of the rug that says (upside down) “ordered by Castelli”. The Castelli brothers were Italian merchants, probably Venetian, who came to Iran in the 1880’s and started a carpet business in Tabriz, later setting up additional looms in Kerman. The size of this rug is unusual for a Castelli, which is typically much larger. Could it have been cut down to this size?

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Houshang Shah

The story of the legendary king Houshang Shah is told in the Shahnameh (Book of Kings), by Ferdowsi (940-1020), Iran’s greatest poet. The king is shown seated on a throne bearing the sun symbol, Khorshid Khanam (Lady Sun). In curtained alcoves, men in Sassanian or Parthian dress stand guard. The mighty White Deev holds up the king’s throne. Nearby kneel two black deevs, their arms crossed in submission. The words “deev” and the word “devil” are similar, but in Persian mythology, only the black deevs remained bad after the White Deev had been defeated by Houshang Shah. All deevs have animal ears, spotted fur, a mixed animal-human face, and human hands and feet. At the top, one deev carries a bowl of pomegranates, one holds onto a captured maiden, and one carries a letter. At the bottom of the rug, well-dressed gentlemen in different types of headgear hold flowers. The central figure, in a typical Qajar black felt hat, looks like a rather confused young Ahmad Shah, the last Qajar king. On either side, two snake-like dragons curl around a column. Each column has three deev heads: one with a red face, one with water buffalo horns and one with a bell between its horns. Antelopes graze peacefully within the richly drawn and carefully balanced main border, as a king looks out from each corner.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Nader Shah Afshahr

Written in mirror image in the cartouche seen above and to the right of the king is his name: “Nader Shah”. Famous for his many conquests, Nader Shah Afshahr (ruled 1736-1747) is shown seated on the Peacock Throne (a “bed-throne”) that he brought back from his triumph in India, after having previously defeated the Ottoman Turks to the west. He is wearing the Afshari crown. To his right are three courtiers; to his left, his vizier (high counselor). Below the king are two more courtiers facing two turbaned scholars or wise men. The table that separates them has on it a rug on which stands a vase of flowers, all in flattened perspective. Each person has placed his right hand over his heart as a sign of respect for the king – an ancient gesture that Americans use today to show respect for the flag. The unusual border contains horses, cows, rabbits and deer, interspersed with framed portraits of a Sassanian king (perhaps Shahpour the Great?).

Collection of Connoisseur Rugs, Evanston, Illinois
This very finely woven carpet illustrates an incident during one of the hunting trips of King Bahram Gur (ruled 421-438 AD), as told in a poem by the 12th century poet, Nezami Ganjavi. A prince carrying a falcon accompanies the king. Watching from nearby on horseback are his mistress and her servant. Bahram Gur, renowned as a skilled hunter, was said to have boasted that he could shoot any animal in any position. His mistress challenges him to pin an animal’s foot to its ear with a single arrow. The king then shoots an arrow so close to a wild donkey’s head that it tickles its ear. As it raises a hind leg to scratch the spot, the king shoots a second arrow, successfully meeting her challenge, as is seen in this carpet, where hunting dogs pursue deer and rabbits, while ducks swim undisturbed in a river. Careful attention has been paid to details of Qajar dress and caparisons. The beautiful calligraphy throughout the triple border reproduces the poem as it might appear in a fine book of Nezami’s verse.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Bahram Gur and the Shepherd

These two finely woven Kashan rugs depict another story involving Bahram Gur (ruled AD 421-438). While out riding, Bahram Gur came across a shepherd who had tied his dog to a tree. The king asked the shepherd why he was treating his best friend and protector in this way.

The shepherd replied that the dog had been a very good guard dog until he fell in love with a she-wolf. Every few days, the wolf would let the dog mate with her for the price of a lamb. The shepherd concluded that sometimes you can not trust even your closest friend. The shepherd’s words stayed with Bahram Gur. After he returned to his palace, he sought to find out who among those around him could be trusted, and discovered that he had to purge his court of all his closest advisors.

Some of the shepherd’s herd, and the lovesick dog tied to a tree, can be seen in the flower-filled hills in the background, where a stream with swimming ducks meanders down from the mountains. The tale is written out in fine nasta’aliq calligraphy in the border cartouches, which are separated by birds and flowering plants. The rug on the right is a perfect mirror image of the rug on the left, even to the calligraphy.

Collection of Maybee-Gerrer Museum of Art, Shawnee, Oklahoma
The eye is led from scene to scene on this high quality Mashad rug. As a lion looks out of its den a tiny horse gallops by, and two gazelles raise their heads on a nearby hilltop. Below a tree with birds, a giant flower springs out of a small building, and a chimney spews out smoke that turns into clouds over another small building to the right, above a tree full of songbirds. An oversized rabbit and game birds hang from the tree, shot by the hunter taking aim below. Lovers in a nearby courtyard hold hands, and two emu-like birds stand by a pond. Below, a young lady gestures towards a sheep and domestic birds in a garden. The visual journey ends in the lower right, with a well-dressed gentleman and a cow. The writing in the cartouche in the side borders reads “Kho’ei” indicating that the rug came from the Mashad workshop of (Mr.) Kho’ei, whose name tells us that he or his family came from Khoy, a village in distant Azerbaijan.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Hunting Carpet

In this classical hunting carpet, woven in fine wool on a silk warp, hunters on horseback wielding sword, bow and arrow, or lance attack their prey. At the top, a pheasant flies away towards the clouds, while rabbits, deer, and gazelles scamper off as hunters close in on a bear, a leopard and a lion. On the right, a tiger threatens two gazelles. Only two of the hunters are dressed alike. The others each wear a different tunic and headgear.

The lively horses, each with a distinctive saddlecloth, are beautifully drawn. A dark navy field adds drama to the scene, and provides a striking contrast to the beige background of the very unusual main border containing lions, deer and rabbits in a flowering garden at the top and bottom of the rug; and birds, gazelles, sheep and cows, rabbits and hunting dogs in miniature garden scenes, one on top of the other, at the sides. The two narrower guard borders contain a repeat pattern of delicate birds and flowers against a sky-blue background.

Collection of Toni Sussman, Chicago
Elephant and Lion

It is very unusual to see a lion and an elephant locked in a ferocious struggle as the subject of a pictorial carpet. The colorful birds and flowers placed above and below the scene are beautifully rendered in a style that recalls European needlepoint.

All are enhanced by the dark midnight blue of the field. The strange rabbit-eared creature between the birds in the lower half of the rug -- perhaps added on a whim by the weaver-- defies explanation.

Collection of Minasian Rug Gallery, Evanston, Illinois

Hunter and Gazelles

This finely woven modern carpet was designed to be hung like a painting. A hunter, dagger in hand, stands ready to slit the throat of the gazelle that he has just brought down. His bow and quiver can be seen behind him, hung on his horse alongside the game birds he had killed earlier. He brings one hand to his mouth in a gesture of surprise at the scene he is witnessing: Instead of running off, the female gazelle and one of the fawns draw close to the dying male, while the other fawn bravely faces the hunter and his horse. Twisted trees devoid of leaves (symbolic?) are seen on all sides but one, as birds fly off to the left above swirling cloud bands.

Collection of Cyrus Rug Gallery, New York City

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Tabriz, Circa 1995, 3.9x5.10 feet (110x180 cm)

Farahan, Circa 1920, 2.1x2.5 feet (60x73 cm)
Wild Goats

Within the indigo field of the central medallion, four wild goats are seen around a small circular medallion with flowering pendants. Two pink-headed birds in each corner look up at a cartouche in which a smaller-than-life spotted feline attacks a larger-than-life rabbit. The central medallion is placed within a beige field containing delicately drawn birds and flowers.

The main border contains flower, leaf and vine motifs in an indigo field. The Iranian wild goat is an unusual subject for a Persian pictorial rug, but this animal has a long history in Iran, is depicted on ancient pottery, and has been hunted for millennia.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Blue bull and Panther

Since this finely woven antique carpet has a mehrab (prayer rug) design, it could be called a prayer rug, but the snake-like brown dragon swallowing a ringdove in either corner does not send a prayerful message, nor does the scene at the bottom of the rug where a panther has leapt upon a nilgai (Indian blue bull) and is attempting to bring it down by severing its spinal cord. The rest of the rug, filled with flowers, an elongated vase bearing a tree of life with a pair of ringdoves and a pair of colorful crane-like birds in its branches, makes a contrasting statement about life.

There is a cypress tree below the ringdoves perched on either side of the tree of life. In Persian poetry, the ringdove is spoken of as the lover who comes to his beloved, the cypress tree. The whole forms a pleasing design set against a pale madder field, framed by a border containing plants in bloom set between large decorative flower motifs in a dark brown field.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Multiple Birds and Animals

Every inch of the main field of this incredibly lively rug is covered with birds and animals of every size and description. A partial inventory includes lions, leopards, cats, horses, wild birds, domestic birds, birds of prey, and several types of deer. Two strange creatures claw at a tree on either side of the rug. Two woodpeckers peck at the tree while a snake twists around it, hovering over a bird’s nest decorated with two swans. A geometric cypress tree rises in the middle of this colorful chaos, its base filled with birds, including four chickens. The body of the tree contains two lions. Above them are two large white cats, with an almost invisible brown animal on either side, two smaller orange cats, with a small white animal on either side, a spider and two white horses with saddle blankets – all against an indigo field that, in addition, contains flowers and butterflies. The exuberance of life depicted in this scene is framed within a quiet border that has a traditional geometric floral design in a madder field.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Elongated Men

Some of the most interesting and unusual rug designs produced in northeastern Iran are those with elongated human figures and square-shaped horses. In this example, the central figure represents an officer wearing medals, epaulettes and a military cap. He holds a walking stick in his right hand and is flanked by two men, both wearing a tribal head-dress, and what appears to be a long tunic decorated with birds, over long trousers. At the top and at the bottom of the rug is a king holding the reins of a horse decorated with birds. In addition to six smiling lions, the field contains numerous birds, small animals, flowers, and geometric designs, with X’s, arrows and snake-like shapes filling the interstices. The border is classical Balouch with its geometric designs on a beige field. The position and facial expression of the kings recall those sometimes seen in rugs depicting Khosrow and Shireen.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Sheik San’an

A cartouche at the top identifies Sheikh San’an and the Christian Girl, whose story is told by the 13th century Persian poet, Attar: The Sheikh, an aged and learned Sufi holy man is traveling from Mecca to Greece with his disciples when he sees a beautiful Christian girl on a balcony. Instantly, he loses “all his faith and piety.” His disciples plead, but he will go no further. The maiden offers wine to the Sheikh in the presence of his disciples. When their master, in obedience to her, converts to Christianity, burns the Koran, and becomes the maiden’s swineherd, they leave in disgust. Later, regretting having deserted their master, they return to Tarsus to pray for him for 40 days and 40 nights. The Sheikh awakens to his folly and leaves for Mecca with his disciples. A voice in a dream tells the maiden to follow her lover. She does, but becomes lost in the desert. Close to death, she repents and embraces Islam. A voice tells this to Sheikh San’an, who turns back and finds her. Since “Light has come to her [he] can now be intimately bound to his idol without sin.” At the top, maidens pour wine into a cup. In the lower border, maidens look heavenwards. The man portrayed in a cartouche on each side closely resembles portraits of Iman Ali, who is of great importance to Shi’ite Moslems.

Collection of Toni Rab, Evanston, Illinois
Omar Khayyam Lovers

This rug illustrates a theme -- the seductive powers of wine and feminine beauty -- taken from the poetry of Omar Khayyam (1040-1123). Over the centuries, the depiction of a beautiful girl bringing a cup of wine to an older man, who is reading a book of poetry, is often seen in Persian miniatures, silverwork and carpets. This finely knotted Isfahan rug, woven on a silk foundation (warp) shows such a scene.

The graceful movements of the girl, who is holding a wine carafe and a cup of wine, are echoed in the shapes of the trees and rocks placed against the background of dark earth, grey-green hills and clear blue sky. The border contains single flowers, bouquets and cartouches on a madder field. At the bottom of the carpet is written “Isfahan, Enteshari” Enteshari being the name of the weaver.

Lovers by a Stream

“Come, so we can scatter flowers and pour wine into a cup...” so begins the line of poetry taken from a work by the Persian Poet Hafez (1320-1389 A.D) that appears at the bottom of this scene. Lovers sit beneath a blossoming tree beside a stream running through a field of flowers, set against distant mountains and cypress trees. The lover makes a dramatic gesture as he recites poetry to the beloved, who is holding a cup of wine and a decanter. At her side is a Persian stringed musical instrument. Further down are two more wine jugs. The scene illustrates a number of classic themes found in Persian poetry: lovers, wine, music and the beauties of nature.
Khosrow and Shireen

In this Khosrow and Shireen carpet, Prince Khosrow, who later ruled as King Khosrow Parviz (590-628 AD), is riding to the North, accompanied by an attendant, when he is struck by the beauty of a lovely girl bathing in a river, and falls in love with her. She is Shireen, an Armenian princess. This story is told in one of the famous poems by the 12th century Persian poet, Nezami Ganjavi.

The cartouches on either side of the umbrella (a symbol of royalty) over Khosrow’s head say, “Drawing of Khosrow and Shireen.” To the left of Khosrow is a lion, symbol of strength -- in this case embellished with flowers.

In each corner of the unusually wide border, there is a cartouche in which a Sassanian prince is depicted in front of a miniature landscape. Fierce lions guard a series of thrones (some of them double, which might refer to the importance given at that time to a queen) in the top and bottom sections of the border, and at the sides, deer being attacked by predators are seen above gardens containing flowers, a rabbit and a cow.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Khosrow and Shireen with Maidservant

In this carpet, Prince Khosrow comes upon Shireen bathing in a stream, but in this case, an old maidservant holds up a cloth to shield Shireen --rather unsuccessfully --from view.

To the left of Shireen is a pot of the type traditionally used to pour water over a person who is bathing. On the opposite side, stands a strange Chinese-style creature of unknown significance. Khosrow’s companions are wearing Qashqa’î hats, while Khosrow wears a Sassanian crown.

The scene takes place against a background of green grass and flowers. Near the top of the rug one sees a palace with an enclosed garden. The oak leaves in the guard borders, seen here, are unusual in a Kerman rug.

Collection of Connoisseur Rugs, Evanston, Illinois
Joseph and Pontiphar’s Wife (Yousef and Zoleikha)

Joseph (Yousef) was sold by his brothers and taken to Egypt, he was bought by Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. Potiphar’s wife, Zoleikha, tried to seduce Joseph, who refused her advances. Furious, she told her husband that Joseph had tried to seduce her, thereupon Joseph was thrown into prison. A poem written by the 13th century Persian poet Sa’adi describes the scene on the rug: Zoleikha, struck by the beauty of Joseph (dressed in blue with a flaming halo around his head) clutches at his robe. The women in the room, who had been peeling apples, are so overcome by his beauty that they cut their fingers. In the lower right corner is a bowl of apples. Several figures in swirling robes flow out of the scene into the pale beige border.

Collection of Cyrus Haghighi, Chicago

Moses and the Ten Commandments

Moses is shown teaching the Ten Commandments to his followers. He stands under an arch on which the twelve tribes of Israel are named in pictorial cartouches. Beneath Moses is written “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” Below are three menorah, the seven-branch candelabra associated with Judaism. As can happen in Persian carpets with writing on them, errors committed by an unlettered weaver may be found in the text, but in no way detract from the interest or beauty of the rug.

Property of an anonymous collector
Abraham and Isaac-Ismael

The cartouche at the top of the carpet gives the date the carpet was woven and identifies Abraham and his son Ismael. Although the name of Abraham’s son in the story as it is told in the Bible is Isaac, some moslems believe that it was Ismael whom Abraham brought to the top of the mountain, bound, and laid on the altar.

The carpet depicts the moment when the angel Gabriel stops Abraham, dagger in hand, from sacrificing his son, while showing him the ram caught in a thicket that should be sacrificed instead. It is interesting to note that this scene is played out against a blood-red background.

Abraham, Isaac-Ismael and Angels

This rug also depicts the moment when Abraham, with dagger poised to strike, is stopped from sacrificing his son. In this case there are nine angels with different facial features, no two of whom are dressed exactly alike.

Some wear a cap or a hat, while others wear a Sassanian-style crown. One is holding back Abraham’s arm. Another, with a rather pained expression, is holding the ram that is to be sacrificed. The cartouches in the border tell the story of the event in a script that is somewhat difficult to read.
Ahmad Shah Qajar

His Majesty Ahmad Shah written near the top of the field, identifies the portrait as being that of Ahmad Shah (reigned 1909-1925) the last king of the Qajar dynasty. This extremely finely knotted rug shows Shah Abbas with his signature bristling moustache wearing a 17th century jeweled turban with aigrettes. The portrait is framed within an archway resting on pillars. In the lower portion of the main field is a fanciful garden scene containing a peacock, cypress trees and various flowers. A bird reposes in each of the four corners. The mehrab design, common in prayer rugs, is unusual in a portrait rug.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago

Shah Abbas

Shah Abbas the Great was the most famous of the Safavid kings. During his reign (1587-1629), Persian art was at its zenith. This portrait shows Shah Abbas with his signature bristling moustache wearing a 17th century jeweled turban with aigrettes. The portrait is framed within an archway resting on pillars. In the lower portion of the main field is a fanciful garden scene containing a peacock, cypress trees and various flowers. A bird reposes in each of the four corners. The mehrab design, common in prayer rugs, is unusual in a portrait rug.

Collection of Minasian Rug Gallery, Evanston, Illinois

Ahmad Shah Qajar

In this village rendition of a royal portrait, set against a red madder background, an Ahmad Shah with a tiny moustache sits on a chair, his legs crossed, holding a sword. His medals are scattered over his tunic. Around his feet are four small primitive animal shapes that are characteristic of village weavings, as are the flowers scattered over the background. The main border is a simplified version of a classical design. The crookedness of the sash and sword illustrate the type of challenge that a village weaver, in spite of his many skills and ability to improvise, might not be able to overcome.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Dervish with Master

There are many portraits of Nur Ali Shah, a famous dervish (member of a Sufi religious order) who was renowned for his wisdom and beauty. This rug is unusual in that it shows Nur Ali Shah at the completion of his studies. After only a few years, Nur Ali Shah’s master, Mostaq Ali Shah, told his student that he had nothing more to teach him and that it was time to begin his travels. As a dove of peace looks down on them, the bearded master offers what could be a lotus flower to Nur Ali Shah, who is already wearing the traditional embroidered tall dervish hat. He will also give him the traditional dervish axe (tabarzine) in his right hand and the begging bowl (kashkol) hanging on a nearby tree. One section of the building complex behind the two figures, which could represent a Sufi center, appears to be an observatory. A delicate scrolling vine pattern fills the narrow border that frames the scene.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago

Dervish under Willow Tree

Nur Ali Shah, portrayed as a traveling dervish, is resting in a garden under a weeping willow that encloses him in a cascade of pink flowers. He sits on the leopard skin traditionally carried by dervishes. His tabarzine (axe) is at his side; his decoratively carved kashkol (begging bowl) is filled with a wealth of flowers. He wears a small woven purse and a finely embroidered traditional dervish hat. The narrow border contains a classical Kerman floral design.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Dervish in a Garden

Flowering trees surround the famous dervish Nur Ali Shah sitting by a pool where a duck and two fish are swimming. Ducks are considered to symbolize perfection because they are at home on land, in the water and in the air. Fish are said to symbolize life, sunlight, and Mithra, a Persian deity whose cult competed with Christianity in the Roman army. The main border contains a series of red and black cartouches. Each small red cartouche contains the word “congratulations” which leads one to believe that the rug was ordered as a gift for an important occasion. The larger cartouches each contain a different line of poetry written in nasta’liq -- a decorative Persian style of calligraphy. A rug very similar to this one is on display at the Carpet Museum in Tehran.

Collection of Connoisseur Rugs, Evanston, Illinois
European Woman

Portraits of women are fairly rare in pictorial rugs. This appears to have been taken from a painting or drawing of an idealized young blue-eyed European (Spanish or Italian) woman dressed in the style of about 100 years earlier. Her sultry look and pouting mouth, however, recall film stars of a more recent era. Careful attention has been paid to her luxuriant hair, hair ribbon and the flowers at her bosom.

Collection of Leora and Mehdy Douraghy, Chicago

Arthur Henderson, Nobel Laureate

This portrait has been described as having been specifically ordered as a tribute to Arthur Henderson, the Scottish-born English statesman who prodded the League of Nations to call The Disarmament Conference of 1931.

He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1934 in recognition of his efforts towards world disarmament, and died in 1935. The rug, which shows considerable wear in the center of the face, was woven in a first-class Kashan workshop. The portrait appears to have been drawn based on a photo of Henderson in his younger days. Delicately rendered leaves and spirals fill the madder field surrounding the portrait. This field is framed within three borders, the main border having a classic floral design on a light blue background.

Collection of Toni Rab, Evanston, Illinois
Eagle and Flag

This rug was woven at a time of very warm relations between Iran and America.

The fact that the flag has 48 stars suggests that it may have been woven before Alaska and Hawaii had become states (1950 and 1959, respectively). The design is quite an original interpretation of the eagle flying off into a deep blue sky with the flag clutched in its claws. A narrow border with a classical floral pattern frames the scene.

Collection of Minasian Rug Gallery, Evanston, Illinois

President Kennedy

John F. Kennedy was greatly admired and respected in Iran. During the 1960’s one could find pictures of him in Iran in many shops and even on carpets. This is a very fine example of a realistic portrait, carefully copied knot by knot from a well-known black and white photo of President Kennedy. The simplicity of the linear border design in black provides a pleasing contrast to the photographic detail in the portrait.

Collection of Minasian Rug Gallery, Evanston, Illinois

President Kennedy

This colored portrait of JFK, set against a pistachio green background, has also been drawn from a photograph, but in this case the portrait is more of an interpretation of the image rather than an attempt to make an exact copy of it. The eyes are more soft and dreamy, the hair more reddish and smooth than in colored photos of the late president. A classic Tabriz border serves to frame the seated figure.

Collection of Toni Rab, Chicago
Lion Rug

The animal depicted here has more the appearance of a snow leopard than that of a lion, but this type of rug is always called a “lion rug” by the nomadic tribes in the province of Fars that weave them. The Persian lion (smaller than the African lion) once roamed throughout the region. As a symbol of strength and courage, lions have been part of Iran’s folklore and artistic heritage for more than 3,000 years. Persian Lions and other large felines are seen not only on tribal rugs, but also on city rugs, sometimes being hunted, but more often seen in pursuit of their prey. The apparently intentional and beautiful changes of color (abrash) across the madder field in this rug are due to the use of different batches of wool in different shades of madder, ranging from deep burgundy to almost pink. The colors in the simple geometric borders are varied, but consistent. Gabbehs are more coarsely woven than carpets and have a deep, thick pile.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago

Siberian Tigers

This realistic representation of a majestic-looking blue-eyed white Siberian tiger, with a Siberian tiger of the usual coloring resting beside it, is pictured in a natural setting that is precise in every detail, even to the grasses sprouting up between the stones. Siberian tigers are considered to be an eastern extension of the now-extinct Caspian tiger of Iran, which -- given the frequent presence of lions, tigers and other large felines in Persian carpets -- may account for the choice of subject.

Collection of Cyrus Haghighi, Chicago
Twins

This tightly-woven rug comes from the Shahr-e Babak (Kerman Province) area. Two young men wearing colorful coats and Qashqai-style felt hats are seen against a dark indigo field, holding a flower. Below them, two lively figures are beating what appears to be an African drum. The corner spandrels contain out-sized flowers in an ivory field, while the main border contains a more classical flower and leaf design on a madder field.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago

Tapestry Period Scene

One can see at a glance that this rug was not only inspired by a French tapestry, but that it has been carefully copied by a skilled weaver. Such scenes, as well as period furniture, are often found in the homes of the wealthy in Iran.

Collection of Cyrus Rug Gallery, New York City

Traveling Musician with Monkey

Traveling musicians could once be seen playing their instruments in Persian cities and villages, much like the proverbial organ grinder and his monkey in Europe and America. Here the shabbily dressed, sad but somewhat refined-looking musician plays a setar (a classical three-stringed instrument) while his monkey, attached by a chain to keep him in check, dances for the public. The simplicity of the presentation of this scene, with its otherwise empty field and no border, is unusual in a Persian pictorial rug.

Collection of Cyrus Haghighi, Chicago
Sunrise

A peaceful sunrise scene framed by a wreath of leaves is enclosed within a large central medallion. Swans float past water lilies, an eagle flies over cypress trees in a garden, and the sun casts its first rays across the sky as it appears from behind a mountain. A crisscross and square-cross pattern, recalling tile work, fills the surrounding field, interrupted only by four botehs (paisley shapes) in each corner — the largest containing two beautifully designed roses.

Collection of Minasian Rug Galleries, Evanston, Illinois

Tree of Life

In the central oval-shaped medallion are a “Tree of Life” with two birds, many different kinds of flowers, and three ducks swimming in a pond. The medallion is framed within a floral design against a delicate madder red field. A poem by the 13th century Persian poet, Sa’adi, fills the larger cartouches in the main border. Starting at the bottom center and continuing counter-clockwise, Sa’adi says:

“In the view of learned men, every [written] page is like a book. To know God, a leaf from a tree is enough for a wise man.”

The corner cartouches contain congratulatory messages in Persian, such as “good luck,” “first class,” “the best.” The rug could have been ordered specifically as a gift to mark an important event in someone’s life.

Collection of Toni Rab, Evanston, Illinois
Gate of Paradise

Although this rug is based on a mehrab (prayer rug) format, it is highly unusual in design. In the lower corners of the main field, deer rest beneath bunches of grapes on vines that spiral upwards to meet near the center of the rug. Below, a cypress tree and a pomegranate tree bearing fruit on its upper branches, stand by a small pool of blue water on either side of a tall central vase. Flowering branches with birds extend from the vase to the top of the mehrab arch. The main border contains luxuriant clusters of gol-e-farang (European-style flowers) in which nestle a few small birds. The dominant background color of the rug is a deep indigo blue.

Collection of Connoisseur Rugs, Evanston, Illinois
The mehrab (prayer rug) design of this rug, which was thought for a time to be from Kerman, is unusual for an Isfahan. A large vase with a floral design, bearing an elaborate, layered bouquet of leaves, roses, and spring flowers, dominates the lower half of the rug. A tree of life rises on either side of the vase, reaching towards the top of the rug, where the branches join beneath two flying ducks.

The two trees, in which different kinds of birds are perched, bear many types of spring blossoms. In the upper branches of each tree a pair of birds watches over a nest containing colored eggs. Inside the main border, lions pursue deer against a madder field, separated from their prey by alternating plants and trees in full bloom, and a cluster of flowers in each corner.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago
Caravanserai

Behind the simple rural scene in front of the caravanserai (an inn for travelers) the structure evolves into a series of arches and spandrels (corners) filled with beautiful tile and carpet designs. The top arch calls to mind an arch in front of a large niche, but which-- with a trick of the eye -- changes into the dome of an imposing mosque. Back on the ground, a man on his mule and a shepherd guiding his animals, move in the direction of a merchant who is leading his loaded camel toward the half-open entry of the caravanserai. Through the open door one can see a bit of the room’s tiled floor, some internal arches leading to other parts of the caravanserai, and a heating stove with a towering chimney, to warm winter guests.

Collection of Oscar Isberian, Evanston, Illinois
In Iran, pictorial rugs – and particularly portrait rugs – are often framed and hung, as is done with paintings in other parts of the world. This depiction of an old man and a boy, probably grandfather and grandson, was framed in Iran.

The difficulty of reproducing the changes of color required to show, for example, the wrinkles, beard, and major blemish on the face of the grandfather would be difficult for a painter, let alone for a weaver. The two appear to have come from their village carrying rugs to be sold. The wary look on the grandfather’s face contrasts with the innocent look of the boy.

Their rugs are, in themselves, works of art – one primarily geometric in design, the other containing birds and flowers. A faint signature (“Hasani” - ?) can be seen in the upper left-hand corner of this extremely fine Tabriz weave.

Collection of Mehdy and Leora Douraghy, Chicago


Schurmann, Ulrich. The Pasyryk: “a 2500 years old knotted rug found in an icegrave in the Altai” (paper read at the Symposium of the Armenian Rug Society, New York, September 26, 1982).


