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The Persian Carpet

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The Persian carpet bespeaks certain intriguing profundities, and in this paper, having the honour to join with eminent scholars of Persian culture, I will try to unravel some of them.

When I was younger, a friend and a mentor told me, 'Reza your outer reality is what you have denied within yourself'. He went further and pointed to a green wall and exclaimed paradoxically that 'the colour of the wall is everything but the green'. So with these puzzles the stage was set for me to begin my journey to understand my reality, both inner and outer.

Saadi says:

The door of mystic knowledge stands open to those in whose face other doors are shut.¹

What I will present to you turns out to be my discovery in self-realization - through looking at Persian carpets. As Rumi says: "There is in it, what is in it for you", and I will apply this insight to my fascinating subject.

Our universe consists of forms and functions. Forms are what make up the physical reality and function is what governs the form and gives it its purpose and essence. Forms are tangible and perceived through five senses, whereas function is beyond physical perception and can only be perceived through one's experience.

There lies a great mystery within the forms in Persian rugs. To understand the essence of the forms' mystery and the meaning, we need to understand the knowledge, tradition and religious beliefs that have influenced the master craftsmen of Persian rugs over the ages. We also need to go back to the very origin of Man and human creativity!

At the beginning there was formlessness. The Creator then created the Man (thinker) and set into motion the creative energy, both aggressive and receptive in nature. This creative energy is used by Man to create his universe. Our body and our universe was then created to be the form for the purpose of attaining oneness with our Creator and ultimately to experience Divine Love.

According to theosophical studies and the ancient mystical schools, as we, being the human race, take steps with purpose to attain spiritual awareness, we develop a new identity. Humanity in such a state of mind and awareness has been referred to as the Aryas (i.e., interpreted theosophically rather than physically). Throughout history, in any case, there have been individuals who have represented such an awareness. Our original culture, language, music and rituals, especially those of the Zoroastrians, were designed and developed over years within their forms to stimulate religious experience and spirituality within the heart of individuals. Such Divine perception and experience were transformed and communicated into the form of poetry, to stimulate aid to and lift the spirit of Man.

It was not until after the twelfth century that esoteric ideas were introduced into Persian rugs. They had their greatest influence in early sixteenth century during the Safavid era in Iran and under the Ottomans in Turkey, through such poets of the time as Sadi, Hafez, Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, and many more. Some of these designs find their meaning in doctrines of esoteric and mystical branches of the Islamic religion called Sufism. As the influence of Sufism spread, so did its influence on art

¹ This article was submitted without references. When translations are made they tend to be rather free [Eds.].

and its adaptation within the design of Persian rugs. Persian poets compare their poems to that of the weaver, for a poet weaves words, interlocking them for rhythm and rhyme.

Sufi poets believed that thoughts are things, and the nature of thought gives rise to the form. The quality of the thought determines the colour. They used forms, colours and multiple meanings to create a three-dimensional concept to lead the observer to the underlying unity of the art, which is nothing but the reflection of the spirit in the world of matter. Since the nature of spirit is love, these designs became a means of conveying their message for their search of Divine love.

These poems are written in symbolic language, the language of the soul (or as poets say ‘the Beloved’). This is the same language as our dreams. Therefore poetry becomes a means of communication between the man, or thinker, and his soul. As Molana (Rumi) indicates in *Mathnavi*:

Man’s quest to unite with his soul begins only when he realizes that the world around him is an illusion of five senses. Then begins the work of purifying the soul for the purpose of uniting with God.

There are three principles we need to consider when we look at the Persian rug design.

1. The principle of continuous design.

This applies when the observer can step beyond his comfort zone and limitation and see the continuity of forms and patterns.

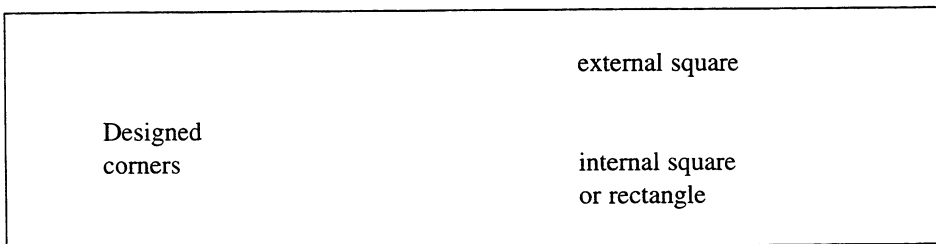
2. The principle of multiple meaning.

Interpretation of the rugs by each individual is relative to his perception of his/her world, both inner and outer.

3. The principle of depth perception.

Using more than just five senses to view the designs, and incorporating feelings and symbology when observing a design.

We can begin by looking at some of the geometrical designs used within the rugs. This applies only to limited designs, as I have encountered them. The geometrical designs are the reflection of stages of awareness humans achieve as they journey toward the unity with God. Within the shape of the rug there has mostly been the use of squares or rectangles. The square or rectangle has four sides and four angles. The number four signifies stability. There is also a use of internal squares with four designed corners. There is usually a central design consisting of multiple geometrical configurations such as medallion, lampstand or flowers with multiple petals.



According to mystical schools, there are three divisions of human consciousness. These are referred to as:

1. Conscious Mind

State of awareness or existence perceived by the five senses and aided by the faculty of reasoning. This is represented by outer square or rectangle. Four corners of outer square or rectangle represent four corners of earth (North, South, East, West)

2. Subconscious Mind

State of soul-awareness. As Man takes the steps toward soul awareness he encounters four stages of growth and understanding. The inner squares represents the subconscious mind and the four corners are the four stages of awareness. The subconscious mind or the soul in Sufi poetry is referred to as the 'Beloved'. In esoteric studies, the creation of Adam and Eve is the representation of creation of the subconscious (Adamic) and conscious (Eve) minds.

3. Superconscious Mind

State of unity with God. There are two stages of understanding and growth within this level of mind. The central design represents the super-conscious mind. The central design is usually on its own within a given space. The reason is that the superconscious mind is separate from the rest of the mind.

The entire mind is a vehicle for the thinker to use to achieve enlightenment. The tool the thinker uses to practise creation is 'thought'. Therefore the weaver becomes the thinker whose thoughts are the thread and his creation is representative of his state of mind.

As you have observed, these levels of mind add up to seven. Seven signifies control of one's destiny. Molana refers to this as seven cities of love and in one of his poems indicates:

Attar has travelled through the seven cities of love, and we are still lost within an alley of the first city.

Molana believed that the true journey of self-awareness and closeness to God begins only when one has experienced, and has become familiar with, these seven levels of realities or cities of love. It is the awareness of seven levels, that allows the man, or the thinker, to have control over his destiny toward unity with his God.

The next design to discuss is the prayer rug. We usually see a mosque and two columns. In some rugs we see a snake wrapped around the columns. The prayer rug represents a sacred place. It is through praying and meditation that a man attempts to unite with his soul and his God. Within this state of bliss, he receives images, messages and experiences Divine love.

The dome in the rug represents time and the square is the symbol of space. Space is the place of hidden treasures. The square or the house is compared to the body of Man. The body encloses the soul which encloses the spirit. Therefore the body is the actual place of ritual transformation. The dome also represents the head. It is through the glands within the brain (pituitary, hypothalamus) that Man can interpret the message coming from different parts of the mind to conscious mind.

As I mentioned earlier, for the soul to pursue and complete its evolutionary path, it has the need to use the conscious mind as a vehicle. The conscious mind uses the body and the five senses and its power of reasoning to gather information, create experiences, and gain understanding from the experiences. These learned experiences are referred earlier as hidden treasures in space.

The columns on either side of the mosque signifies Man's creative energy that rises along the spinal cord. In mystical schools, this energy is referred to as *kundalini* energy.² The two columns represent the aggressive and receptive qualities of *kundalini*. As Man thinks reasons and imagines, this energy rises, creating spiritual experiences. This energy in the world of mythology is symbolized as a snake. Man's failure to use his reasoning is uncontrolled *kundalini* energy. In the *Shahnameh* Zahawk symbolizes this uncontrolled use of creative energy. Sometimes there is only use of one column and with two snakes wrapped around it. The column usually represents the spine and the snakes represent the two polarities of *kundalini* energy.

Within the rugs we observe abstract lines and patterns. Once we concentrate on these designs we experience energy in motion from a stationary phase and there is created a condition that the beholder finds himself engrossed and exalted into the supernatural realm. The perceived images and experiences then become a key to unlock and further travel and experience the world of the Unknown.

We as individuals are in continuous motion. We are not a static energy. Because we are energy in motion, we therefore need to be treated as energy in motion with intelligence. When we take the steps to increase our awareness toward the Divine world, we increase the rate of our vibration and each state of oscillation is known as a state of awareness. This state of heightened awareness is represented in the form of a medallion in Persian rugs. This design can be found in rugs made in Isfahan as well as that of master craftman Habibian. The number of petals within the medallion represents different vibrations and different states of soul awareness. Within the esoteric and spiritual studies, these medallions are referred to as *chakras*. We can relate this concept to ripples created in water by a falling rock. The rock represents stages of growth Man has created in his evolution (seven levels of the mind). Each level of mind has a different vibrational frequency. Now Man faces a new challenge in his evolution! to find his way back to his origin and discover himself, this time with true awareness.

As we use our will power we make conscious choices and our knowledge and understanding of life expands. This new awareness stimulates the individual toward a higher state of consciousness to the point of self-mastery and determining one's own destiny according to the great plan of creation. At this level the thinker has complete control of chakras or energy centres, of his physical body and his ability to use reasoning to cause his learning. This state is represented as tree of life in the Persian rugs. At each level of the mind there are guardian angels protecting that level. These guardians have forms representing unique functions. The symbol of sphinx in Greek mythology, which is also similar to an Assyrian symbol at the entrance of Persepolis signifies these guardians. These are; the head of a man, body of a Bull, wings of an eagle and legs of a Lion. We find some rugs with these images woven into them.

Images of gardens, animal, scrolls and the natural world (Garden, Paradise) form an important part of Persian poetry. Interpretation of meanings of these symbols are only for those who know how to look for it. In poetry these images are associated with the Man, his 'Beloved' and the quest for divine love. This once again leads us to the Sufi doctrines and mysteries.

There are renowned symbols found in Persian rugs:-

² [From here on the author uses medical and meditative models which are not ostensibly Persian, but which he considers are reflected in Persian carpets as 'texts'. Eds.]

Fish

Symbol of spiritual awareness. Fish use water for survival. Water symbolizes conscious life experience. Man uses the daily experiences to attain understanding, aiding him to expand his consciousness.

The Garden of Paradise

Subconscious existence. Soul was created before Man, and so was vegetation. Therefore the Garden is used as a metaphor to draw attention of the aspirant to inner levels of consciousness toward his origin.

Bird

Subconscious thought or intuitive thought. There is no limit to human potential but for our own self-imposed limitation. With soul-awareness, one can see his/her true nature and realizes the freedom that exists within his thoughts - like a bird that can fly without restriction.

Lion

This symbolizes expansion.

Cow

Of Assyrian origin, and symbolizing contraction, or the coming together of our desires to the realm of reality.

Eagle

This symbolizes freedom, motion, or divine aspiration.

Another topic of interest is the meaning behind the colours used in rugs:

Pink represents	love
Purple represents	knowledge
White/Cream represents	purity
Blue represents	spirituality
Green represents	healing
Red/orange represents	emotions and feelings
Yellow	Wisdom

As you can see, each one of us has a certain attraction, a certain affinity for certain designs. There is something within the rugs that draws us; there is something within the rugs that speaks to us and it may not be the same for everyone. Individuals are drawn to different types, designs and colour of rugs, based on their present state of conscious awareness.

To conclude, let me encapsulate what I have been presenting here with a poem from an unknown Sufi source:

Here in this carpet lives an ever-lovely spring
Unscorched by Summer's ardent flame
Safe too, from Autumn's boisterous gales
The handsome wide border is the garden wall
Protecting, preserving the park within
For refuge and renewal, a magic space
For concourse, music and rejoicing
For contemplation's lonely spell
Conversations grave, or lover's shy disclosure
Here, sense and reason in concord blend
In harmony and proportion, in unity transcendent
The mind of God revealing
By our tangled errors so darkly hidden
The goal of all desire
The opener of all doors
The answer to all questions
The reason for all reasons
From snares of self set free
In tranquil beauty
The Beloved's face at last you see
And there attain our journey's end
Our life's reward and final destiny
Refuge and fulfilment in his infinity.

I would like to express in the closing statements that I have come to understand Persian culture to be a very powerful one. Persian culture was designed by mentally and spiritually powerful people such as Zarathustra. He knew from whence he was coming, where he was, and where he was going. It is now our responsibility to carry the Torch of Time through the space of our wisdom to keep the essence of this ancient culture alive by understanding it, living it, and teaching it to our future generations so that one day we may all experience divine love.