





## Four So-Called Polish Rugs in the Rijksmuseum

• FRIEDRICH SPÜHLER •

As its century-old catalogue explains, the largest exhibition of 'Mohammedan' art ever assembled in Munich came about because 'some time ago, His Royal Highness Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria discovered in the Munich Residenz a number of extraordinary Old Persian carpets,' which had been in the possession of the House of Wittelsbach for centuries. Prompted by this precious and rare find, His Royal Highness proposed organizing an "Exhibition of Masterpieces of Mohammedan Art" in 1910.<sup>2</sup>

We experienced a similar feeling when in September 2010 we again saw four magnificent 'Polish rugs', which had not been exhibited in the Rijksmuseum's galleries for many years. Their rediscovery was occasioned by an exhibition of Islamic art from the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum's collections scheduled for April 2011 at the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden.

Something over two hundred Oriental carpets have been accumulated by the Rijksmuseum over the years, most of them gifts from private collections such as Aalderink, Van Aardenne and Von Pannwitz. The majority are not fit to exhibit because they have been disfigured by poor 'restoration' work, including large-scale re-knotting and overpainting. Most of these careless interventions were done by dealers following the ideas of beautification

*Detail of fig. 2*

prevalent in the early twentieth century, which ultimately left us with irreversibly damaged pieces. On the whole, however, people did not dare to tackle the re-knotting of silk carpets, so that these pieces are in relatively good condition compared with those in other collections.

Much like other inappropriate names, such as Holbein or Lotto carpets, the rather unfortunate choice of name, 'Polish rugs', has its origin in the art-historical interest in Oriental carpets that developed more than a hundred years ago. The German word *Polentepiche*, originally intended as a descriptive term, became an ineradicable designation that was even adopted in other languages: *tarpetto detto polacco*, *tapis dit polonaise* and the 'Polish rug'.

On the occasion of the wedding of his daughter Anna Catherine Constance, the Polish king Sigismund Vasa III commissioned silk carpets, at least one of which was decorated with the Polish coat of arms. For this purpose, he specifically sent Safer Muratowicz with a model of the coat of arms to Persia, from where he returned in 1602. The invoice for the commission specified a separate sum for executing the design of the coat of arms.<sup>3</sup> This constituted one of the references to Poland, the second being the carpet with the Czartoryski family's presumed



coat of arms, which was presented in 1878 at the Paris World Exhibition in the *Salle Polonoise du Palais du Trocadéro*.<sup>4</sup> These two 'early' sources served only to distract attention from the actual origin of the carpets, Persia, and continued to be reflected in the term 'Polish rug'.

A characteristic feature of the two hundred and fifty or so Polish rugs worldwide is their silk pile and the usually extensive gold and silver brocading. The study of all the surviving pieces, which I completed in 1968, revealed that they were based on twelve pattern systems,<sup>5</sup> from which ever-new designs were created by varying details, horizontal and vertical duplications and the transposition of palmette and medallion motifs. This points to their production in royal manufactories. More than fifty of the rugs that have survived were produced as identical pairs, in the two common sizes of about 130 x 220 cm and about 180 x 400 cm. They survived almost exclusively in Europe and subsequently, at a later stage, in the United States,

where they once served as diplomatic gifts, bribes or barter objects. These carpets were much coveted because of their silky lustre and the rich gold and silver brocading, and, unlike other Safavid carpet types, they were mentioned by many contemporary travellers in numerous accounts.<sup>6</sup>

Since dyed silk suffers greatly from exposure to sunlight, most of the carpets are quite faded. There are very few pieces that still shine today with their original colourful splendour. One that does is the 'coronation carpet' at Rosenborg Castle in Copenhagen, which was only ever laid out for the coronation of Danish kings (fig. 1).<sup>7</sup>

The Rijksmuseum has four examples in its collection, each one so different that they provide an excellent overview of the entire genre of Polish rugs.

I would like to start by introducing the unusually delicately designed piece – formerly in the Bernheimer Collection, Munich – that had already occupied a place of honour at the Persian Art Exhibition in London in 1936 (fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> It remains a unique piece

Fig. 1  
Detail of the  
Coronation Carpet,  
Isfahan, 1650-60.  
Copenhagen,  
Rosenborg Palace, 31.1.



Fig. 2  
Silk Carpet, Kashan/  
Isfahan, c. 1600.  
Warp: cotton, undyed,  
S-spun; weft: first and  
third cotton, undyed,  
straight, second weft  
silk rose, sinuous;  
knots, asymmetrical:  
height 59, width 67  
on 10 cm; brocading:  
gold and silver passing  
over seven warps;  
ends: narrow  
embroidered band  
and silk fringe,  
335 x 156 cm.  
Provenance:  
Bernheimer K.G.,  
Munich;  
Dr F. Mannheimer  
Collection; 1952  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum,  
BK-17273.









Fig. 3  
Detail of fig. 2

in many ways. Its pattern does not fit into any of the systems mentioned, and there is no companion piece with which it would form a pair. It is, moreover, the only knotted carpet in the group to display a series of half-concealed letters, which raises a number of questions. Oriental carpets of the classical era very rarely had inscriptions knotted into their pile. They have a cartouche-like border and are placed on the horizontal axis.<sup>9</sup> This is where the short series of letters *خ ره اش* (*Sā h r(u)h*) is hidden virtually underneath the arch of the cartouche (fig. 3). The order of the letters has not been unequivocally interpreted as yet. Taken together, they could be read as a man's name in Persian. Taken separately, they are familiar words in poetry and signify something like 'Young man, beautiful countenance'. In other words the inscription does not contain a designer's name, nor the place or date of the carpet's manufacture. A gift dedication or the master's signature would have been positioned more prominently.

However, the execution of the letters in black silk knots at the same time as the carpet's manufacture cannot be challenged.<sup>10</sup>

The second piece, a fragment of a large carpet, was also exhibited in London in 1936 and does not feature any brocading (fig. 4). Its magnificently curved, spiral tendrils, bands of clouds and fork blades suggest the early seventeenth century.

Another 'Polish rug' is one of the small examples that were frequently produced in pairs (fig. 5). It gained considerable attention thanks to its Munich Residenz provenance, because this indicates that it might originally have been one of the carpets commissioned by Sigismund Vasa III.

The striking feature of the fourth piece (fig. 6), assembled from individual elements, is its attached, scaled-down border. Other pieces with a similar design consisting of a repeated shield pattern have been verified.<sup>11</sup> None of these has a medallion or corner treatment so that the pattern remains a pure repetition of rows.

Fig. 4  
*Silk Carpet*  
(fragment), Isfahan,  
1600-25.  
Warp: cotton, undyed,  
S-spun; weft: first  
and third cotton,  
undyed, straight,  
second weft silk  
rose, sinuous;  
knots, asymmetrical:  
height 45, width  
48 on 10 cm;  
brocading: none.  
Provenance: originates  
from the church in  
Volders near Hall,  
Tyrol (after Falke, the  
Figdor Collection);  
Dr Albert Figdor,  
Vienna; Bernheimer  
K.G., Munich; 1952  
Amsterdam, Rijks-  
museum, BK-17276.









Fig. 5

*Silk Carpet*, Isfahan, 1600-25.

Warp: cotton, undyed, S-spun, 5-ply; weft: first and third cotton, undyed, straight, second weft silk rose, sinuous; knots, asymmetrical: height 60, width 56; brocading: gold and silver passing over seven warps; ends: narrow embroidered band and silk fringe, 225 x 140 cm.

Provenance: originates from the Munich Residenz, sold on 27 May 1930 to the S. Drey Art Collection; Dr F. Mannheimer Collection; 1952 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, BK-17274.

Fig. 6

*Silk Carpet*, Isfahan, 1625-50.

Warp: cotton, undyed, S-spun; weft: first and third cotton, undyed, straight, second weft silk rose, sinuous; knots, asymmetrical: height 59, width 67 on 10 cm; brocading: gold and silver passing over seven warps; ends: narrow embroidered band and silk fringe.

Provenance: Dr Albert Figdor Collection, Vienna; Bernheimer K.G., Munich; Dr F. Mannheimer Collection; Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, BK-17275.



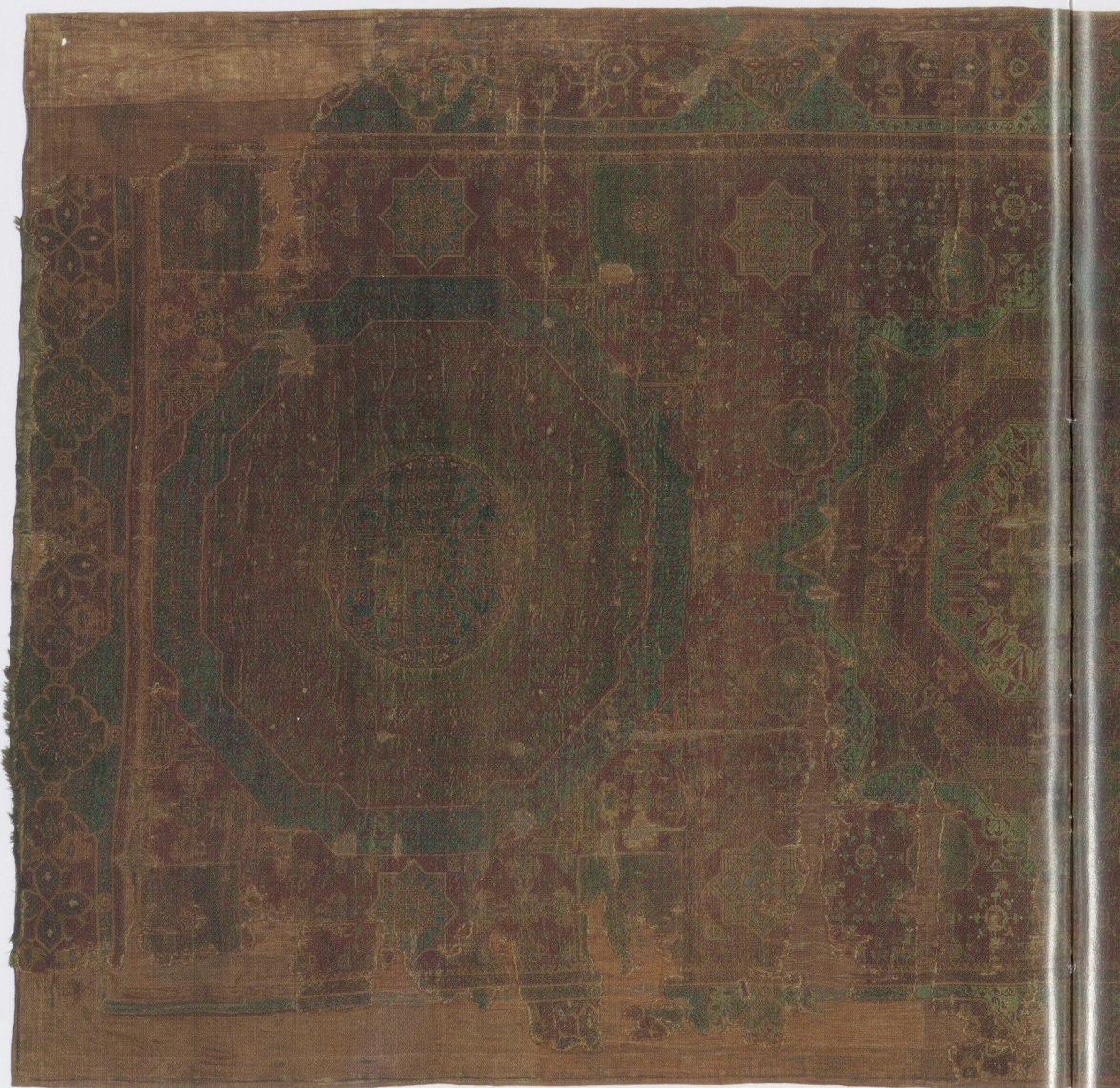




Also exhibited in Leiden will be a series of other, mainly large Safavid carpets and examples from workshops in Cairo, which will be examined in a separate article.<sup>12</sup> Among them is a large fifteenth-century Mamluk rug, considered to be one of the three most outstanding examples of its kind in the world (fig. 7). Unfortunately, this piece is not fit to be exhibited in its present condition and must remain first priority on the list of restoration projects.

It can be considered a stroke of luck that only the linen backing and not the carpet itself has been painted over. This is its saving grace and has rendered it 'restorable', albeit with considerable effort.

Although the group of classical Oriental carpets selected from the Rijksmuseum holdings for the Leiden exhibition cannot be viewed as comprehensive, it can be considered the backbone of an Islamic Art collection.



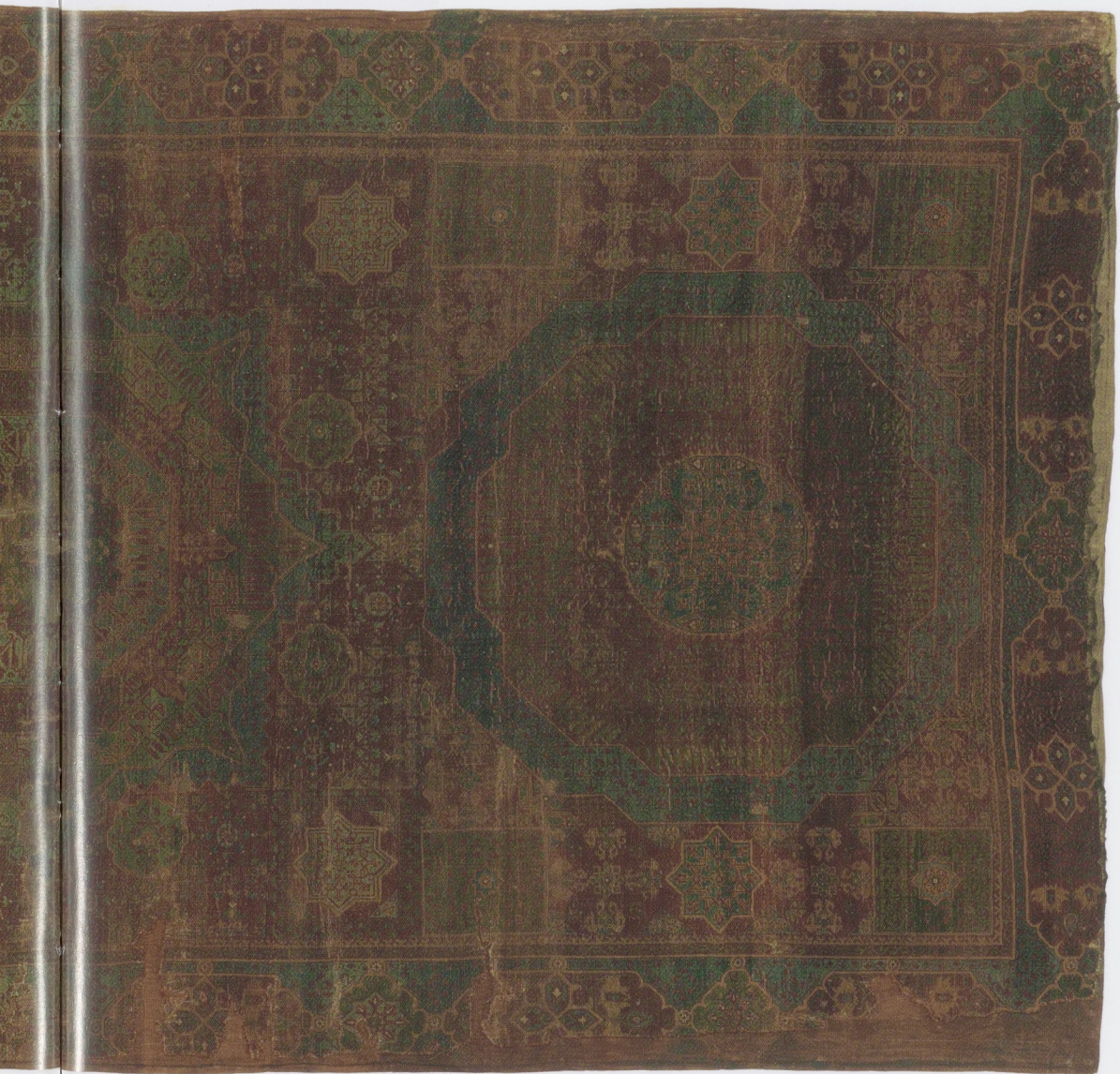


The Rijksmuseum's holdings of Islamic fabrics also include highlights that are far above average in quality.

A museum or department of Islamic art, as can be found today in nearly all European art museums of international significance, would not only be feasible, but also highly desirable in the Netherlands, given the concentration of these scattered masterpieces existing in this country.

Fig. 7

*Mamluk Carpet*,  
Cairo, 1450-1500.  
Wool, 480 x 235 cm.  
Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum,  
M.I.E.V. Countess  
von Oberdorff-  
de Stuers Bequest,  
Lausanne, BK-14545.





## NOTES

- 1 The legendary Polish rugs into which the Polish coat of arms had been woven.
- 2 *Amtlicher Katalog Ausstellung München 1910, Munich 1910*, p. 33.
- 3 Friedrich Spuhler, *Seidene Repräsentationsteppiche der mittleren bis späten Safawidenzeit. Die sog. Polenteppiche*, diss., Free University Berlin 1968, p. 30.
- 4 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 45.106.
- 5 *Mustersysteme*: Spuhler, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 69 ff.
- 6 *Reiseberichte*: *ibid.*, pp. 132 ff.
- 7 Friedrich Spuhler and Preben Mellbye-Hansen, *Denmark's Coronation Carpets. The Royal Collections at Rosenborg Palace*, Copenhagen 1987, pl. I.
- 8 A.U. Pope, *A Survey of Persian Art*, Oxford 1938/39, pl. 1248.
- 9 *Op. cit.* (note 8), pl. 1134 (Ardabil carpet) and pl. 1118 (Milan hunting carpet).
- 10 I am indebted to the Berlin State Library for the information.
- 11 *Op. cit.* (note 3), *Mustersystem XIII b*, p. 275.
- 12 Later article in the RMO magazine (RMO: National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden).

