



The historical process of Persian carpet trade

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To trace the history of the Persian carpet is to follow a path of cultural growth of one of the most ancient civilizations the world has ever known. From being simply articles of need, as pure and simple floor entrance coverings to protect the nomadic tribesmen from the cold and damp, the increasing beauty of the carpets attracted new owners - kings and noblemen, and those who looked for signs of wealth or adornment for their fine buildings.

Many people in Iran have invested their entire wealth in Persian carpets - often referred to as an Iranian stocks and shares - and there are underground storage areas in Tehran's Carpet Bazaar that are full of fine specimens, kept as investments by shrewd businessmen. And for many centuries, the Persian carpet has received international acknowledgement for its artistic splendour. In palaces, famous buildings, homes of the rich, and museums throughout the world, a Persian carpet is amongst the most treasured possessions. Thus, today,

Iran produces more carpets than all the other carpet making centres of the world put together. The element of luxury with which the Persian carpet is associated today is in marked contrast to its humble beginning among the nomadic tribes that at one time wandered the great expanse of Persia in search of a livelihood. Then, it was an article of necessity to protect the tribes from the bitterly cold winters of the country. But out of necessity was born art. Through their bright colours and magical designs, the floor and entrance coverings that protected the tribesmen from the ravages of the weather also brought much relief to their dour and hard lives. In those early days the size of the carpet was often small, being dependent upon the size of the tents or room in which the people lived. Besides being an article of furnishing, the carpet was also a form of writing for the illiterate tribesmen, who wove into their carpets, illustrations of their fortunes and setbacks, their aspirations and joys. It also came to be used as a prayer mat by thousands of Muslim believers.

Thus began a process of

people handing down their skills to their children, who built on those skills and in turn handed down the closely guarded family secrets to their offspring. To make a carpet in those days required tremendous perseverance. Even when carpet making developed to the stage of workshops, with several employees working on the same carpet, it was a question of months and often years of painstaking work. A key feature in making the carpets was the bright colours used to form the intricate designs. The manufacture of dyes used involved well kept secrets handed down through the generations. Insects, plants, roots, barks and other substances found outside the tents and in the course of their wanderings were all used by the ingenious tribesmen.

Historical records show that the court of Cyrus the Great, was bedecked with magnificent carpets. Classical tales recount how Alexander the Great found carpet of a very fine fabric in a Cyrus tomb. The next great period in the history of Persian carpets came during the Sassanian dynasty, from the third to the seventh century AD. By the sixth



century Persian carpets had won international prestige and were being exported to distant lands. The climax came with the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century. When Shah Ismail occupied the throne in 1499 he began laying the foundation for what was to become a national industry that was the envy of surrounding countries. The most famous of the kings of this era, Shah Abbas, more than any one else transformed the industry, bringing it from the tents of the wandering nomads into the towns and cities. In Isfahan, which he made his capital, he established a royal carpet factory and hired artisans to prepare designs to be made by master craftsmen. He charged officers of the crown to ensure that the integrity of the industry was maintained and during his reign the art of carpet weaving/knotting once again achieved monumental acclaim. The

best known carpets of the period, dated 1539, come from the mosque of Ardebil in Azarbaijan province and, in the opinion of many experts, represents the summit of achievement in carpet design. The larger of the two is now kept in London's Victoria and Albert Museum while the other can be seen at the Los Angeles County Museum. Shah Abbas also developed the use of gold and silver thread in carpet weaving, culminating in the great coronation carpet now held in the Rosenburg Castle, Copenhagen, which has a perfect velvet-like pile and gleaming gold background.

These carpets were, of course, made for the court and the great nobles, and were protected as well as any gold treasure. Growing demand from the great royal courts of Europe for these gold and silver threaded carpets

led to a great export industry. A large number went to Poland after King Sigmund specially sent merchants to Persia to acquire them. King Louis XIV of France even sent his own craftsmen to Persia to learn the trade. As the seventeenth century wore on there was an increasing demand for luxury and refinement. A set of silk carpets woven to surround the sarcophagus of Shah Abbas II achieved such a rare quality that many mistook them for velvet. But they were the last example of really high achievement in carpet making from that era in Persian history. Somehow, inspiration steadily began to diminish and, as the court became increasingly impoverished, the quality of the craftsmanship began to fall away. When Shah Abbas' capital city of Isfahan was sacked in 1722 a magnificent period in the history of not only carpet weaving but also of



art itself came dramatically to an end. The great carpet weaving tradition fell back into the hands of wandering nomads who had maintained their centuries-old traditions and skills, that is apart from a few centres, principally, Josheghan, Kerman, Mashad, and Azarbaidjan. Even the less prestigious/lower quality school rugs produced by the remaining centres were in danger of being ruined as an artform by the growing demand of the West in the mid nineteenth century for quantity at the expense of quality. Since the first decade of the twentieth century only a few foreign companies, especially the British O.C.M., known as the East London Company, had exclusive rights to trade in Persian carpets.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century the last Gajarieh monarch was dethroned and Reza Pahlavi came to the throne. Cheap dyes, low quality wool, chemical washing and even meaningless designs supplied by the European importers almost brought the industry to its knees. After sporadic and largely unsuccessful efforts to stop the rot, the government took drastic action and confiscated the carpets in which cheap dyes and low quality wool had been used. The dye masters soon came to their senses, and there began a new era of revival for the carpet crafts.

The new monarchy took some steps toward

nationalization of certain industries. One of the steps was establishing the "Iran Carpet Company" in 1935, firstly diminishing and then later abolishing, the role of foreign companies in the carpet trade, especially the British O.C.M. company. It was at this point that the nationalization process began. Reza Pahlavis ideas led to the creation of a "State Monopoly" on the Persian carpet trade and gave sole trading rights to the "Iran Carpet Company". But soon after, following an initiative by a private trader from Tabriz (the Ghalichi family, described below as one of the "pioneers", headed the delegation), a meeting was set up in Tehran and Reza Pahlavi agreed to let private traders operate on equal terms with the "Iran Carpet Company" (Persian Carpet, p. 28, No. 7, 1995). The "Iran Carpet Company" is, today, the biggest producer of Persian carpets employing approximately 20,000 weavers and knotters located variously across 580 Iranian villages and 96 Iranian towns and cities, supported by 40 regional offices. Today, the activities of the "Iran Carpet Company" is divided into 2 divisions:

1. Production and Trade
2. Support and Advisory services.

(Persian Carpet, pp. 44 - 45, No. 7, 1995).

Before WW I the Iranian "Persian Carpet" traders (the pioneers) were based in Istanbul and they exported from there to

Europe. Evidence indicates that it was in 1874 when the first known case was recorded of a first private Persian carpet trader. He was named Hadj Yousef Ghalichi ("Ghali" is one of the ways to say "Carpet" in Persian), and he came from Tabriz, the capital of Iranian Azarbaidjan province. The evidence also indicates that by increasing foreign demand for the Persian carpets, pioneers from Tabriz area could not meet the demand by only supplying Persian carpets from the Azarbaidjan area, mainly from Tabriz Carpet Bazaar. Pioneers tried to recruit purchasing agents in different parts of Iran. The purchasing agent's task at the beginning was to purchase, collect and gather carpets together and send them to Tabriz Carpet Bazaar. Soon after, however, they began to locate their agents in different parts of Iran and establish a few more centres across the country. The main gathering centre was, for geographical and political reasons, placed in the middle of the country, i.e. the Capital city, thus making Tehran the biggest new centre of trade. This was the beginning of the gradually increasing concentration of "Azari", "Persian Carpet" traders in the Tehran Carpet Bazaar. Establishing international customer contacts via Istanbul and the setting up of a trade centre in the capital city of Iran almost in the middle of the country, made the traders less dependent on Istanbul. Due to defeat of



the Ottoman empire which created insecurity in the country, the pioneers decided to move to London, by then the world's biggest trading centre including the "carpet trade" while some others moved to Tehran

(Farsh Iran, p. 16, No. 5, 1994). The Tabriz-Istanbul axis 1874-1930s was now replaced by a Tehran-Istanbul-London axis and later, in 1940, changed again to the Tehran-London axis. This lasted until 1945, when

the Tehran-Hamburg axis replaced all former organizational arrangements and still is in force.

Box 1: The Pioneers of International Persian Carpet Trade: The Case of the Ghalichi Family

Evidence is based on the life story of Mr. Majid Ghalichi, who was born in 1926 and who became one of the Persian carpet traders in Hamburg Free Harbour. The story is also published in "Persian Carpet, pp. 25-36, No. 7, 1995" and, according to the same source, is also documented in the Iranian Encyclopaedia by G. Mosaheb, Persian Carpet section. Majid Ghalichi's maternal grand father, Yousef Ghalichi, is officially recognised as the first known/documented case of a Persian carpet exporter to Istanbul. In 1874 Yousef Ghalichi began his journey from Tabriz to Istanbul carrying four carpets on the back of a camel. Yousef Ghalichi returned home from the journey six months later and prepared another trip - this time with his cousin, Hadj Abdollah Ghalichi, and his paternal grandfather, Majid Ghalichis. The journey took place in 1876-7 and Abdollah's oldest son, Ali Akbar Ghalichi, (Majid Ghalichi's oldest uncle) also accompanied them on the second trip. The duration of the trip was about 3-4 months. Abdollah returned to Tabriz and this time Yousef travelled to Istanbul with Abdollah's second son, Mirza Ali Asghar Ghalighi, who was 18 years old. Mirza Ali Asghar Ghalichi was the father of Majid Ghalichi. Yousef Ghalichi returned to Tabriz and supplied the two brothers with carpet from Tabriz to Istanbul. The two brothers and, later, a third one, changed their bases between Istanbul and Tabriz every second year. After two years stay in Istanbul, Mirza Ali Asghar Ghalichi (Majid Ghalichis father) returned to Tabriz and married Yousef Ghalichi's daughter (Majid Ghalichi's mother). Later on when they expanded the business, the Tabriz carpet production was insufficient to meet demand. Therefore, they expanded their business concept to collect carpets from different regions of Iran, gathering the carpets together in Tabriz Carpet Bazaar and then sending the carpets on to Istanbul.

From Istanbul the carpets were despatched to different European destinations. Ghalichi's family business expanded and became well known and European traders travelled led to visit the family's "Trade House". On one occasion, one of the European customers invited the family to participate in the "First International Fair of Vienna" in 1892. The Ghalichi family, as the only Persian Carpet traders, participated in the fair with huge success. This led to the beginning of collecting a huge number of carpets from different parts of Iran, resulting in a sizeable carpet demand in Iran. Soon after, some other Persian traders, mainly from Azarbaijan province, started the same business in Istanbul. They were all gathered in the same area in Istanbul, "Valedeh Khan Saray". The most well-known pioneer families in Istanbul were: 1. Karbasi, 2. Dilmaghani, 3. Ahranjani, 4. Aerabi, 5. Sadaghiani, 6. Shalchi and 7. Reza Shahla. During WW I, the "Valedeh Khan Saray", was known as the Iranian "Saray", (Saray in Turkish means a kind of Bazaar). In the "Saray" all Iranian traders were situated in two-storey buildings, and had office and warehouse space on the ground floor, while living on the first floor. Majid Ghalichi quoted his father, Mirza Ali Asgar, as saying "the funny thing was that our (the traders in the "Saray") kitchen chefs were all coming from Khoi, the first one of them came to Istanbul then suddenly they brought their family and friends to Istanbul and worked for us, "Persian Carpet", p. 29, No. 7, 1995, (Khoi is a small town in Azarbaijan approximately 80 kilometres north west of Tabriz and very close to the Turkish border). After WW I some traders went back to Iran, and worked in Tabriz, mainly due to the insecurity in Istanbul. Some other traders from Azarbaijan, mainly Tabriz, were active in Tehran Carpet Bazaar, due to the geographical position of Tehran, it being located almost in the middle of the country. Another group of traders tried to make their base in other countries. That resulted in some of the traders settling down in London and making new bases. Majid Ghalichi's father and many others, however, decided to stay in Istanbul until 1939 when WWII began.

Taking the new situation into consideration and the condition of the buildings in the "Saray" the remaining Iranian traders were reconsidering their situation. All buildings in the "Saray" were built of wood and many places in Istanbul were subject to fire attacks and burned



down. The possibility of Turkey's participation in the war worried traders. Majid Ghalichi's father, Mirza Ali Asgher Ghalichi, and all the other remaining Iranian traders started to ship out their assets from Turkey to different destinations. Majid Ghalichi said that his father, Mirza Ali Asgher Ghalichi, and all the other remaining traders, left Istanbul the same day as Hitler's troops entered Paris, namely, June 14th 1940 (Persian Carpet, p. 29, No. 7, 1995). This was the end of the Iranian Carpet traders' history in Istanbul at the "Saray" where, according to Majid Ghalichi, the ruins of the "Saray" can still be seen in Istanbul. The Ghalichi family returned back to Iran, while other traders started a new Persian carpet trade centre in London. According to Majid Ghalichi, after WWII, due to particular economic opportunities, Iranian Persian carpet traders moved from London and tried to build up a new centre in Hamburg. Majid Ghalichi decided to stay in Iran until 1962 and then moved to Hamburg and settled down in Hamburg Free Harbour (Persian Carpet, p. 25, No. 7, 1995).

Majid Ghalichi mentioned that his father, Mirza Ali Asghar Ghalichi, appointed one of their relatives, Mr. Javad Lavari, in around 1904, to work as the Ghalichi family's "purchasing agent" in Arak province, being located in central Iran approximately 150 miles south of Tehran and approximately 1000 miles south east of Tabriz, to purchase "Sarough carpets" (Sarough carpets are knotted in Arak province and are known to be of the finest quality) and then send the carpets to Tabriz. Finally, due to the long transportation time of round four to five months, the family decided to gather the carpets in Arak and ship them from the Persian Gulf to the USA. (Persian Carpet, p. 32, No. 7, 1995). This was the beginning of the new strategy, where traders not only sent their purchasing agents around Iran to collect different kinds of carpets with the aim of sending them back to Tabriz Carpet Bazaar, but they also decided to set up other trading centres across Iran. The consequence was the establishment of a concentration of carpet traders, mainly from Azarbaijan, in the heart of the capital city's Bazaar, Tehran Carpets Bazaar.

Figure 1 summarizes the developments in the international Persian carpet trade as well as illustrating the Ghalichi family's affinity relationships based on the patrilineal system that forms alliances of kinship, based on Box 1. Figure 1

The Pioneers of the International Persian Carpet trade

