The Burrell Collection

Oriental Carpets

99 The Wagner garden carpet. Iran, 17th century. 530.8 × 431.8 cms. 9/2

Fig 99 Wagner Garden Carpet 9-2

A VISITOR TO the spacious galleries of The Burrell Collection, with their exhibits ranging across such great spans of time and culture, might justifiably wonder if there was any consistent theme linking this

material together or whether Sir William had bought entirely by personal whim. As initially his collection was private he was of course entitled to indulge his own tastes. The collection began with pictures mainly of the nineteenth century French and Dutch Schools, but soon extended to such fields as medieval tapestries, stained glass, Dutch and German silver and furniture, and Oriental carpets—all summarised effectively by the two hundred objects which he lent to the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1901. Thereafter he continued to collect until 1957, still buying European paintings, sculptures, glass, metalwork and furniture, but developing his Oriental interests beyond carpets to Chinese ceramics bronzes and jades. During the 1930s, however, he began thinking about ultimately transferring his collect into public ownership, a decision which influenced acquisition policy. He no longer bought exclusively his personal taste but attempted to provide balanced coverage needed for a museum collection.

A discerning examination of his collection reveals that, even before he began thinking about a museum, there was a consistent and strongly defined theme to purchases. His tastes were catholic and traditional developed in the circle of wealthy Scottish shipowners and industrialists who were the main collectors of art in late nineteenth century Glasgow. He had a preference for clarity of form coupled with rich intense colour. Both qualities feature in nineteenth century French painting, late Gothic and Renaissance stained glass and narrative tapestries, and Oriental carpets. Hutton Castle in Berwickshire, built during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was his home from 1915 until his death in 1958 and provided an ideal setting for grand decorative schemes using his treasures. Surviving photographs show spacious rooms filled with Tudor furniture, lit by-medieval stained glass, hung with Renaissance tapestries, and carpeted with Oriental rugs. The flavour of this style of interior decoration is preserved today in the hall, dining and drawing-rooms of Hutton Castle recreated in The Burrell Collection. Some of the large carpets are displayed in their original context of these room settings, others are separately mounted and hung elsewhere in the museum's galleries.

Although Burrell had travelled widely, there is no evidence from the records which he kept of his purchases from 1911 to 1957 that he acquired any Oriental carpets while abroad. They indicate that he-bought them from dealers and agents from the 1890s to about 1940. Altogether his collection numbers about a hundred pieces from the main carpet weaving areas of Iran, India, the Caucasus and Turkey, ranging in date from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. He concentrated on classic knotted pile carpets whose opulent designs and colours were in harmony with his artistic tastes. He did not venture into the equally interesting field of flat weaves—tapestry-woven kilims and complex wrapped and overcast techniques—from these same Middle Eastern areas, whose geometric designs are popular among collectors today. He was following a long-established tradition as Oriental carpets had been admired and collected in Europe through merchants and agents for centuries. Iranian and Turkish carpets are represented in Flemish and Italian paintings from the fifteenth century onwards. They feature as floor, table and bench coverings and also as decorative hangings draped over balconies during festivals and processions. Household inventories of royal and aristocratic families list carpets. The princes of Transylvania in the seventeenth century, for example, regularly commissioned their agents at Istanbul to purchase Turkish carpets. Also in Transylvania, German merchants of the town of Brasov during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries acquired Turkish rugs which they draped around their church pews, where they can still be seen today.

97 Fragment from an Ardabil carpet. Iran, 946 H (1539 A.D.). 32.3 × 20.3 cms. 9/120

Fig 97 Fragment from an Ardabil Carpet 9-120

98 Carpet with a floral lattice design. Iran, 16th century. 299 × 195 cms. 9/5

Fig 98 Carpet with a floral lattice design, Iran 9-5

The Burrell carpets are all woven in the same technique allowing for regional differences of material, tension and fineness of knotting. A foundation of cotton, wool or silk vertical warp threads was stretched taut on a loom. A mesh of horizontal weft threads, again of cotton, wool or silk, was then woven across them in alternating rows of plain weave. At the same time rows of knots in wool of silk were wrapped around pairs of warps and clipped to form an even pile. Two types of knot were used—the symmetrical knot in which the threads were pulled out together between the pair of warps, and the asymmetrical knot in which the threads were twisted separately around each warp. Additional variations were seen in methods of selvage finish and end fringing.

Knotted pile carpets are among the most sumptuous examples of Iranian textiles, especially those made during the rule of the Safavid Shahs (1501-1732; from their capital at Isfahan. Royal patronage of arts and industries encouraged the production of large carpets in such centres at Isfahan, Kashan, Tabriz, Meshed and Kerman, all of which are still active today. Surviving carpets of sixteenth and seventeenth century date astonish by their vibrant colours***(96)*** and fluency of design based on intricate foliate and floral scrolls coiled into infinitely repeating lobes and spirals, intermingled with animals, birds and human figures, or enfolding medallions and palmettes. Such carpets were not the results of random imagination but required great practical and organisational ability to compose large scale designs which could then be precisely followed during weaving. Considerable technical skill was essential as the curved shapes of these complex designs were only to be seen to advantage in an even short pile made of innumerable fine knots. Carpets were but one expression of Safavid taste as related designs are seen in such contemporary arts as polychrome tile work, manuscript illumination and miniature painting.
Most of the carpets in The Burrell Collection are Iranian and include fifteen examples of four classical types—eleven with flowering plant motifs, three with arabesque and medallion designs, and one with a garden scheme. The earliest piece***(97)*** is a modest border fragment reputedly from one of the two carpets woven for the shrine of Sheikh Safi at Ardabil in North Iran by the master weaver Maqsud Kashani in 946 H (1539 A.D.). These carpets, whose condition had deteriorated with age, were sold in the 1880s to raise funds for the repair of the shrine. They were skilfully fashioned into two beautiful carpets now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and in the Los Angeles County Museum. Fragments left over from this reconstruction work are scattered among various museums. The origin and attribution of the Ardabil carpets are still matters of controversy. They may have been woven, at Tabriz or Kashan. Whatever its origin, the Burrell fragment is a good example of the quality of weaving and design of sixteenth century carpets. The pile is woven in a well-balanced colour scheme of cream, yellow, crimson and dark blue wools on a foundation of silk warps and wool wefts. It is part of the corner rosette from a deep border composed of alternating elongated cartouches and rosettes which was regularly used around medallion carpets. The design skilfully interlaces radiating lobes of arabesque and delicate spiralling stems bearing lotus palmettes and roses. A complete carpet***(98)*** of mid sixteenth century date shows how lotus and peony palmettes were used on a large scale. The carpet was woven in fine wools in tones of beige, yellow, blue and a soft pink against a wine-red ground on a foundation of cotton warps and wefts, probably in the city of Kerman in Southwest Iran. The design is composed of many beautifully drawn motifs—lotus and peony palmettes, ribbon-like cloud scrolls of Chinese inspiration mingled with open roses, and graceful curving leaves on a lattice of flowering stems. A narrow border of alternating lotus, palmette and rose scroll frames the carpet.

100 Carpet with medallion and arabesque design. Iran, 17th century. 347.9 × 284.4 cms. 9/3

Fig 100 Carpet with Medallion and arabesque design 9-3

One of the most versatile designs used in Iranian carpets is that composed of a central medallion flanked by a quarter medallion at each corner. This scheme is also found in gilded leather book bindings and polychrome tile panels. Medallions can vary in their shape, colour and proportions, and can be combined with all manner of backgrounds. A handsome carpet of seventeenth century date***(100)***, woven in fine wool on a base of mixed cotton and wool warps and wefts, illustrates a disciplined subtle interpretation of the medallion design. The medallion -motifs and background are filled with arabesque foliage, yet they are kept distinct from each other by skilful use of colour. Soft crimson and white medallions are placed against a yellow ground. The design shows how effectively the arabesque foliage scroll can be used, trained into a series of repeated quatrefoils and spirals and intertwined with an underlying coiled flowering stem. In the carpet's border the arabesque is used again as a double interlacing scroll. One of the deservedly famous carpets is the Wagner garden carpet***(99)***, which has had an eventful history. It was first known in Istanbul at the beginning of this century, progressed to the Wagner Collection in Berlin, and reached The Burrell Collection by way of the Royal Bank of Scotland, Glasgow. Knotted in fine wool in a colour scheme of white, yellow, blues, greens and soft reds on a foundation of cotton warps and mixed cotton and wool wefts, it has been dated to the late seventeenth century and was probably woven in Kerman. The garden is one of the handsome and distinctive themes in Iranian carpet design in which geometric form blends with

the luxuriant formalised naturalism of plant and animal life. The garden design is charmingly attributed to an origin in the famous Sassanian carpet romantically named "The Spring of Khosraw", which dazzled all who saw its gem-studded trees and flowers. It was destroyed after the fall of Ctesiphon in 637 A.D. The design presents a bird's-eye view of an enclosed garden divided up into plots by a grid of water channels. Gardens of this type may still be seen in Iran—for example the Bagh-e Eram at Shiraz and the Bagh-e Fin at Kashan. They provide an inviting and cool refuge from the hot and dusty world outside. Like the medallion design the range of interpretation is infinite. Here a lively procession of ducks and fish swim in water indicated by a stylised diamond lattice. The garden plots are crowded with, flowering shrubs and cypress trees, through which leopards, gazelles, ibex, foxes, peacocks and rabbits may be seen. The carpet's outer border returns to a conventional scroll of lotus, peony and rose foliage. Overall the scheme is well composed with finely drawn detail.

101 Carpet with flower trellis design. Iran, 18th century. 306 × 100 cms. 9/7

Fig 101 Carpet with flower trellis design, Iran 9-7

102 The Dietrichstein medallion carpet. Iran. 19th century.
426 x 193 cms. 9/37

Fig 102 The Dietrichstein Medallion Carpet 9-37

A narrow strip of carpet***(101)*** shows how the flowering shrubs in the garden scheme were adapted and used in a formal repeating design. The carpet, which has been attributed to the eighteenth century and was probably woven in Kerman, is technically related to the Wagner garden carpet as it is knotted in wool on a foundation of cotton warps and mixed cotton and wool wefts. The colours are similar with motifs in white, yellow, green, and brick red, against a deep blue ground. Here long serrated leaves form a repeated diamond trellis with open roses at each intersection. Each compartment encloses a different flower—carnation, daisy, peony, thistle, lily—grouped into symmetrical bouquets and as finely drawn as the motifs of the garden carpet.

103 Fragment of an animal motif carpet. India, 16th–17th century. 40.6 × 78.7 cms. 9/23

Fig 103 Fragment of an animal motif carpet 9-23

104 Carpet with an animal design. India, 17th–18th century. 474 × 200 cms. 9/32

Fig 104 Carpet with an animal design, India 9-32

105 Dragon carpet. Caucasus, 17th century.
505.4 × 243.8 cms. 9/38

Fig 105 Dragon Carpet 9-38

The Dietrichstein carpet***(102)*** is interesting for the fanciful story concerning its origins, its possible date and its design. The carpet was reputedly given by the Shah of Iran to the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa in the eighteenth century. She in turn supposedly gave it to a Prince Dietrichstein on one of her visits to his castle at Nikolsberg, where it remained in the throne room until it was sold in London in 1929, eventually reaching The Burrell Collection. This account is compounded of myth and uncertainty. The story of the Shah and the Empress is unknown to the surviving members of the family. Nobody knows how long the carpet was in the throne room and Nikolsberg Castle was severely damaged during World War II and so probably were any archives. Objectively, however, it would have been very unlikely that any Shah gave a carpet to Maria Theresa as she reigned from 1740 to 1780, a time when Iran was in chaos and civil war with no effective ruler to control the country, let alone think of sending lavish gifts abroad.

Technically the carpet is of a thin texture with a short close wool pile woven on cotton warps and wefts. The dominant colours are dark blue, golden yellow, red and green, and have a hard uniform appearance. These features all suggest that the carpet was woven at Tabriz sometime after the mid nineteenth century when the Iranian carpet industry was enjoying a revival. Certainly the elaborate and ordered treatment of the design has parallels with other nineteenth century medallion carpets. Here the medallion in red and green is a dominant motif, filled with rhythmic arabesque lobes over a flower scroll and precisely outlined by a scalloped border. The medallion is reserved against a dark blue background carefully organised into a scheme of traditional lotus and peony palmettes within a framework of pairs of deeply curved cloud scrolls. The carpet's border continues the device of striking tonal contrast with an intricate palmette scroll against yellow.

It is not surprising that India with its long tradition of excellence in the textile arts also produced carpets, notably during the long period of Mughal rule from the sixteenth to mid nineteenth centuries. During this period India's indigenous art-forms were much enriched by Iranian cultural influence. In carpets especially this produced works of great beauty, originality and quality. Iranian lotus and peony palmettes mingled with Indian flowers, and tigers, elephants and exotic birds found their way into designs based on pictorial themes of hunting and feasting. Mughal carpets woven in brilliant colours dominated by warm reds and golden yellows, developed such themes to a level of artistry which surpassed their Iranian prototypes.

Some pieces in The Burrell Collection well illustrate the quality of Indian carpets. One example***(104)*** woven in fine wools on a foundation of cotton warps and wefts is of seventeenth to eighteenth century date. The main part of the design is a lively free composition of animals leaping and running among delicate flowering tendrils on a deep red ground. There are leopards, tigers, humpbacked cattle, deer, rabbits, parrots, cockatoos, and pairs of animals in combat whose speed of movement makes their Iranian counterparts seem static. The carpet's border is a fine interpretation of lotus and peony palmette scroll. A fragment of sixteenth to seventeenth century date***(103)***, woven in wool knots on a foundation of silk warps and wefts, shows how animal motifs were woven into a border design. The background consists of lobed reciprocal trefoils in blue and golden yellow. The trefoil motif is usually found as a narrow band defining and containing borders (compare 99. 100, and 104). Here it is on a larger scale and filled with alternating . lion and bull heads integrated into a lattice of flowering scroll work. There is plenty of opportunity here for an ingenious replacement of curved leaves by pairs offish, horse and jackal head finials.

:ail of dragon carpet. Caucasus, 18th century.
3 (full length) × 190 cms. 9/42

Fig106 Detail of a dragon carpet 9-42

107 Prayer rug. Turkey, Ghiordes, 18th century.
182.8 × 119.3 cms. 9/45

Fig 107 Prayer rug, Turkey 9-45

Areas to the north and west of Iran also produced carpets of distinctive quality and design. The mountainous Caucasus region was famous for its carpets woven with bold direct patterns in which motifs of Iranian origin mingled with stylised animals and geometric devices. A handsome carpet***(105)*** in The Burrell Collection of seventeenth century date shows these features well. It is woven in strongly coloured wools—red, dark blue, yellow, white, and green—on a foundation of wool warps and wefts in a design based on two planes of intersecting diamond lattice—one of white, one of blue—composed of bold jagged leaves interpreted in a heavier manner than in Iranian carpets. Equally heavy and bold lotus and peony palmettes are placed at the intersections, while the lattice compartments are filled with stylised animal motifs, including remarkable dragons whose forms are shaped into abstract S-shapes far removed from their Chinese origin. Another Caucasian carpet***(106)*** in the collection, of eighteenth century date, shows a further degree of abstraction in the design of a lattice filled with dragon motifs. The leaves have become flat

jagged shapes, peony and lotus palmettes have evolved into serrated lozenges, while the dragons now resemble articulated blocks.

The Turkish carpets in The Burrell Collection concentrate on small rugs woven in the provinces of Turkey, rather than pieces on a scale as grand as the examples from Iran, India and the Caucasus. Turkey's carpet weaving tradition has been long established—knotted wool pile examples with striking geometric patterns attributed to the thirteenth century survive in museums in Istanbul and Konya. Production was varied and diverse from many centres catering to well developed domestic and export markets. Four pieces here from Ghiordes and Ladik in central Turkey illustrate the type of rug which featured in the export trade to central Europe, though made for Turkish use. They all have a knotted wool pile and date to the eighteenth century. The designs are variations on a one-way scheme with a pointed niche representing the mihrab or prayer niche which in a mosque indicates the direction of Mecca.

108 Prayer rug. Turkey, Ladik, 18th century.
167.6 × 106.6 cms. 9/57

Fig 108 Prayer rug, Turkey 9-57

109 Prayer rug. Turkey. Ladik. 18th century.
200.6 x 111.7 cms. 9/58

Fig 109 Prayer rug, Turkey 9-58

110 Prayer rug. Turkey, Ladik, 1203 H (1788 A.D.).
167.6 × 116.8 cms. 9/60

Fig 110 Prayer rug, Turkey 9-60

The first example from Ghiordes***(107)*** has a deep blue niche framed in elaborate spandrels and borders in cream, golden brown, rust red and green, a colour scheme which is popular in all kinds of Turkish rugs. Motifs are angular versions of carnation scroll and spiky rose palmettes gathered into sprays along the borders. They are interesting not only because they form a rich effective design but because they are comparable with flower motifs used in Turkish domestic embroidery on towels, napkins, and sides and sleeves of village dresses. The solitary flower arrangement in the niche supposedly represents a mosque lamp. The remaining three***(108-110)*** are from Ladik, all worked in colours of rust red, brown, blue, green, yellow and beige. They differ from the Ghiordes type in the style and treatment of their decorative elements. The prayer niche is more shallow with spandrels containing serrated leaf motifs or octagonal rosettes. At the base of the niche is a border of vertical angular tulips, flowers much used in other Turkish arts. The deep borders are organised into triple bands of flower and leaf scroll, angular provincial versions of curved flowing motifs used in Ottoman Turkish court rugs. The plain field of the mihrab niche offered possibilities of adding to the design. Two of the rugs***(111)*** have a spiky flowering tree, the third***(112)*** has a single foliate motif coupled with a water jug. This example is also of interest because the weaver has enclosed the date 1203 H (1788 A.D.- in Arabic numerals in a small square in the panel of the mihrab.