

The Analysis of the Role of Specialized Islamic Art Exhibitions in the Recognition and Categorization of Safavid Carpets in the Western Academies (1900-1910)

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Introduction

Since the middle of the 19th century, the first international exhibitions were shaped in Europe with the aim of displaying emerging industrial products and Eastern and Western cultural goods. The first international exhibitions of Islamic art, such as Vienna's 1873 and 1891 Oriental carpets exhibitions, were held in the last decades of the same century. Formed on some museums' initiatives, those exhibitions first encouraged European collectors to try to surpass each other in collecting and displaying such works. Collectors, who had yet to be experts in Islamic arts, collected such works because of their aesthetic charm and material worth, not paying much attention to their historical or cultural aspects. Deeper knowledge of Islamic arts caused exhibitions to become not only more organized but also more systematic; scientific research methods became the criterion for evaluating the works including Safavid carpets. The three exhibitions, held in Paris 1903, Munich 1910, and New York 1910, played a significant role both in defining and revising the proper research methods for Safavid carpets and in correcting the previous data about them.

Research Method

The purpose of this research is to analyze the role of the exhibitions, held in Paris 1903, Munich 1910, and New York 1910, in introducing the Safavid carpets to the Western Academies. Also, the methods by which the Western carpet scholars collected, dated, categorized, gathered, and displayed the Safavid carpets to have a more detailed understanding of them were analyzed. The questions that were also addressed in that direction included: a) what was the role of the mentioned exhibitions in the recognition of the Safavid carpets in the Western academy? b) What methods were used by the western carpet scholars to collect, date, categorize, and gather the Safavid carpets? This is a fundamental documentary research, and its method is descriptive and analytical. Its statistical population included the documents, photos, and catalogs of the above-mentioned exhibitions. The sampling method was total enumeration, and the data was analyzed qualitatively.

Research Findings

The findings of the paper showed that the processes of collecting, dating, categorizing, and displaying the Safavid carpets were a chain of events, taking place in the West to identify them. They had tight connections with the expansion of the aesthetical, technical, and historical knowledge about Safavid

carpets as well as their classification. The maturity of the identification Safavid carpets, as a sub-discipline of Islamic art studies, was also resulted from this route. In other words, collecting carpets in the West created a reciprocal relation with the more profound knowledge of Safavid carpets; what was collected determined and dictated what to be studied, and what was studied led to the correction of collecting and identifying models. Thus, carpet scholars and curators created a chain of identifying actions that shaped further categories and ideas about Safavid carpets in the West. Moreover, the findings and the results of this paper showed that the three exhibitions of the first decade of the 20th century corrected the mistakes of the preceding exhibitions about the identification of Safavid carpets'. This point can be seen especially in the groups of Polonaise, Salting, Sanguszko, and Heraticarpets, notably in the way of their former dating and classification. Additionally, the researchers used comparative study as their most important method in analyzing the Safavid carpets in order to reach a more accurate knowledge. They even studied the decorations of other arts such as architectural ornaments and book designs or the arts of other lands to date and to compare with Safavid carpets. It is worth mentioning that incorrect dating occurred mostly in the case of carpets woven in the first decades of the Safavid rule. Generally, the carpets of this era were wrongly speculated to be Ilkhanid or Timurid. There were other identification failures in this course such as misattributing some carpets to certain areas, wrong dating resulted from the lack of enlightenment about Iranian art history, ignoring carpet production bases, and consequently separating carpets from their local and cultural origins. Nevertheless, each exhibition, in which a collection of new carpets was presented, led to the correction of the research methods and the eventual expansion of identification models. In other words, with the expansion of knowledge obtained from each exhibition, the asymmetric comparative method, in which there is little information on both sides of the equation, little by little achieved the balance and changed into a symmetric comparison. However, the mere use of comparative method was not sufficient for some groups, such as the Salting. It was the scientific development of the late 20th century in laboratory methods and fiber and dye analyses that enabled researchers to reach certainty.

Conclusion

The results of this paper show that the process of collecting Safavid carpets has been precisely connected with the classification of these carpets in the West and the resultant expansion of the aesthetic, technical, and historical knowledge about them. In other words, what was collected determined what was studied, and what was studied led to the correction of the collecting and recognizing models. The results also show that the main method used by the researchers in analyzing Safavid carpets was comparative; with a comparison, based on elemental similarities, the researchers placed those carpets that were not apparently related to a certain group or structure in a genealogical category. Anyhow, the identification of Safavid carpets, with all of its advancement in the last century, needs more local research to conform to the Iranian comprehension of carpets. In this direction, the works of Western researchers should be critically analyzed; Thus, examining the path they have taken and reviewing their methods and approaches will lead to a deeper understanding.

Keywords: Islamic Art Exhibitions, Safavid carpets, Paris 1903 Exhibition, Munich 1910 Exhibition, New York 1910 Exhibition.