

# THE GARDEN IN THE CARPET AND THE CARPET IN THE GARDEN\*

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In Persian the word carpet is “farsh” and it comes from the Zoroastrian word “farash kard” which in the Avesta means “renewal.” The verb “farsh kardan” is also derived from this word and means “to cover a surface.” But the word “farsh” also has the same root as the Latin “fresco” from which derive the French “frais” and “fraiche” and the English “fresh.” In all these words, there is a connotation of coolness, newness, and to a certain degree, also joyfulness. Arthur Upham Pope says that the theme of all Persian carpets is the Persian Garden, whether it is an abstract floral pattern (fig 1), the depiction of real flowers, plants and animals (fig 2), or whether it is the actual plan of a garden like the Wagner carpet.(fig 3).

## The Garden in the Carpet

All Persian carpets literally or symbolically refer to the Persian Garden. The Wagner carpet is one of the most beautiful Persian Garden carpets in the world and is original because it does not represent a typical chahar-bagh plan. There are many chahar-bagh garden carpets scattered in museums around the world, in the V&A, the Musee des Arts Decoratifs, the Carpet Museum of Tehran..., but the Wagner Carpet is unique. It shows a 3-axis garden plan in the shape of H. There are two actual gardens where parts of the plan come close to this H shape: first the Southern part of the Farahabad garden, (fig 4), dating from the Safavid period and built on the outskirts of Isfahan, and the Northern part of the Dowlatabad garden (fig5), which is a Zandieh garden in Yazd, and certainly could not have been a source of inspiration for the Wagner Carpet’s designer.

In such cases where the carpet shows the structure or the plan of a Persian Garden, it is actually a bird’s eye view of the garden in one glance. (Fig 6) The carpet is a 2D image of the garden, but the Persian Garden itself, with its water basins and canals, certainly when it is laid out on a flat piece of land, also gives the impression of looking at a surface. Mentally we do perceive a 2D map of the Persian Garden when we are walking in it. Literally the Persian Garden was never meant to be seen from the sky, but mentally, every visitor sees it that way. In this aerial photograph of the Dowlatabad Garden (fig 7), we can really feel the velvety quality of the trees when seen from the sky. There really is more in



(fig 3) Kerman, 17<sup>th</sup> c courtesy of the Burrell Collection Museum.

(fig 4) Farahabad Garden drawn by Persian gardener, 18<sup>th</sup> c, Gardens of Iran, Ancient Wisdom, New Visions, ed by Faryar Javaherian, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004.

(fig 5) Dowlatabad Garden, 19<sup>th</sup> c, Gardens of Iran, Ancient Wisdom, New Visions, ed by Faryar Javaherian, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004.

(fig 6) Chahar-bagh carpet, 19<sup>th</sup> c, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d’Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan 2005.

common between the Persian Garden and the Persian Carpet than meets the eye.

I have been able to find seven different types of garden carpets, but there could be more and any one is welcome to establish a more extensive typology:

-1- The real plans of gardens, like the Wagner Carpet or all the chahar-bagh carpets (fig8)

-2-The chessboard type carpets which have one kind of image in each frame: various trees, various flowers, and the overall squares refer to the parterres or subdivisions in the Persian Garden. Here the flowers, plants, trees and animals are depicted in vertical elevation. (fig9)



(fig 1) Farahan, 17 or 18<sup>th</sup> c, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d’Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 2) Tehran, 1901, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d’Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 8) Azarbaijan, 18<sup>th</sup> c, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d’Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 7) Dowlatabad Garden, photo by Jassem Ghazbanpour, Gardens of Iran, Ancient Wisdom, New Visions, ed by Faryar Javaherian, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004.



(fig 9) Farahan, 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> c, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d’Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.

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-3-The medallion carpet or what we call “toranj” or “lachak toranj” in Persian. We can say that 80% of Persian carpets have this medallion design. (fig 10) Symbolically the medallion represents the central water basin of the garden. In fact in Azari Turkish, “gol” means “estakhr” or a very large “pool” as in the Ilgoli Garden in Tabriz.

-4- The “golafshan” or “mille fleurs” carpets, where real flowers are scattered all over the carpet or come out from one big vase. (fig11&12)

-5- Then there are the hunting scene carpets which refer to the “Bagh shakargah” or hunting domain gardens. (fig13)

-6-There are the gate to Paradise carpets. Usually these are much smaller and used as prayer rugs since the gate often has the shape of a “mihrab.” In a mosque the mihrab indicates the direction of Mecca towards which all prayers are addressed. In this extraordinary example from the Carpet Museum of Tehran (fig14), what we see beyond the gate is the cypress, which is the symbol of eternity in our antic as well as Islamic heritage, so that it is the perfect image of Heaven. The carpet itself becomes a window into infinity. Usually there is no perspective in the Persian carpet, and no up and down. It is symmetric in all directions and can be looked at from any angle and always gives an ideal image of the garden. It is mostly in the mihrab prayer rugs that we have a definite up and down.

-7- Finally there are the “tree of life” carpets or “derakhte jan” which also have an up and down and depict a single tree in a vertical elevation. The cypress is very common in this type of design, but alternately other abstract trees are also depicted, as in this Bakhtiari carpet which is my favorite carpet in the world.(fig15)



(fig 10) Tabriz, 17<sup>e</sup> c., Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 11) Isfahan, 20<sup>e</sup> c., Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 12) Bakhtiari, 20<sup>e</sup> c., Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 13) Azarbaijan, 16<sup>e</sup> or 17<sup>e</sup> c., Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 14) Bakhtiari, 19<sup>e</sup> c., Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 15) Bakhtiari, 19<sup>e</sup> or 20<sup>e</sup> c., Private collection. Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



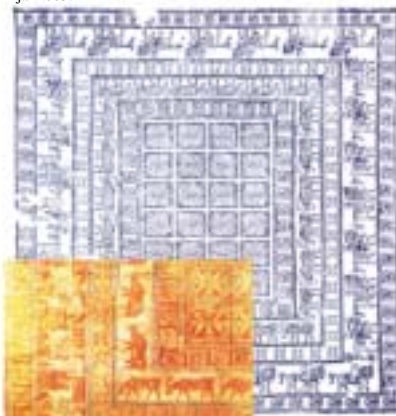
The first thing we perceive in the carpet is the central design, and the last thing we see are the margins. The margins represent the enclosing walls of the garden. Zoroastrians believed that the garden should be protected by seven rings of walls so that Ahriman, evil, would not be able to penetrate into the garden. Among these seven walls, one was the thickest or main enclosing wall. In most Persian carpets we also have seven margins, one is always broader, bordered by two medium ones, in turn bordered by two smaller ones. If you count the margins in authentic Persian carpets, you will always find seven margins. (fig16)

The Pazyryk carpet is most interesting because it seems to be made of margins only. The subdivisions of a garden into square plots are depicted in the center and it only has five margins. (fig17). In this carpet which dates from the Achaemenid period and is the oldest known Persian carpet, we see an incredible talent for abstraction.

Compared to the Greeks, the Persians knew how to create abstract forms from the elements of nature, and were thus able to bring a metaphorical dimension to the motifs they were showing. So it is this ability for abstraction which we inherited from pre-Islamic times and which continued during the Islamic period, which differentiates all Iranian arts from the rest of the Islamic world and is most visible in the art of carpet design. (fig118) Sometimes the whole carpet represents an abstract motif, as in the case of this Bakhtiari rug which depicts a single tree. (fig19)



(fig 16) Isfahan, 18<sup>e</sup> c, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 17) Pazyryk, 500BC, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 18) Abstract ed patterns, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 19) Bakhtiari, 20<sup>e</sup> c, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.

## The Carpet in the Garden

We enter a garden with awe and respect, and so it is when we step onto a carpet: we Iranians always take off our shoes. We sit on carpets, we eat on them, we lie down and sleep on them, we pray on them...in short we live on our carpets. But most of all, we gaze at them. I always thought that an Iranian is not really Iranian unless he or she owns a Persian rug, no matter how small and humble. The Persian carpet is one of those artifacts which gives meaning to our life and connects us to our glorious past.

There is no picnic without laying out a carpet first. In all the Persian miniatures, when there is a scene in the garden, there is always a carpet or sometimes several ones. Whether it is a royal gathering or a commoners' feast makes no difference, the presence of the carpet is assured. (fig 20& 21) But in the case of Princes and Kings, the carpet is laid out on a "korsi" or sort of a wide and low wooden bench which tries to simulate a royal throne. (fig22)

Two of the main activities which usually take place in the Persian Garden are playing music – and of course listening to it – and reciting poetry, and of course listening to it. Smoking opium is also a favorite pastime finding its ideal setting in a Persian Garden. The first two activities have been



(fig 20) Behzad miniature, 16<sup>e</sup> c, from the catalog: Masterpieces of Iranian Painting, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005.



(fig 21) Behzad miniature, 16<sup>e</sup> c, from the catalog: Masterpieces of Iranian Painting, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005.



(fig 22) Kerman, 19<sup>e</sup> c, the coronation of Nasser al Din Shah, Tisser le Paradis: Tapis-Jardins Persans, Musee du Tapis d'Iran, Musee du Tapis et des Arts Textiles de Clermont Ferrand, Oct 2004-jan2005.



(fig 23) from the catalog: Masterpieces of Iranian Painting, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005.



memorably depicted in miniatures (fig 23&24) and the last one recorded in this old photograph taken in the Dowlatabad Garden. (fig 25)

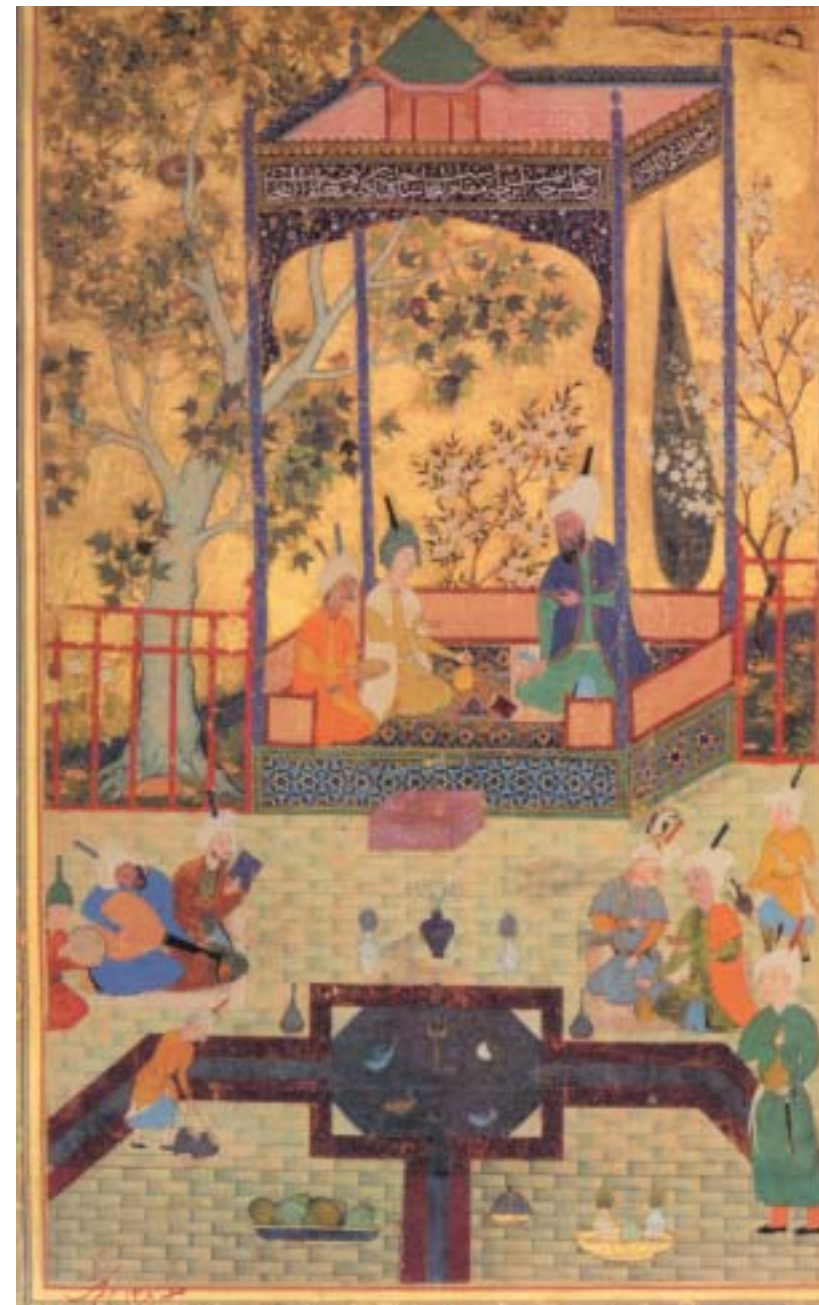
I have always thought that in order to be creative, one has to be happy, or at least be at peace with oneself and the world. The Persian Garden gives us an image of the world which brings us peace of mind and is thus conducive to creativity. It is the same imaginal world we perceive when we gaze at a Persian carpet.

But the Persian Garden is also conducive to hedonism and in general I believe the Persians are a hedonistic race of people. The Persian Garden is the ideal place for deriving pleasures, so it provides the best scenery for eating, and therefore also for cooking. This kind of activities is best represented by the miniature where the Moghuls are celebrating the birth of Homayoon. (fig 26)

The Persian garden is also the ideal place for picking up fruit and eating them, and in fact for many of these fruit we have special rituals:

-we lay down watermelons in the garden water canals and let them get cold before slicing them and eating them

-we are the only country which has white mulberry trees, "toot", and it is impossible to pick up these mulberries which are so small and fragile, so we lay down a huge piece of clean canvas material under the tree and several children



(fig 24) Herat School, from the catalog: Masterpieces of Iranian Painting, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005.

climb up on it to shake the branches and make the berries fall on the cloth. Then we gather the berries in large plates and eat them in great quantities, before swallowing "dough", watered down yogurt

-the picking up of pistachios is most interesting, because they have to be rid of the small leafy skin and then the shells have to be opened before we can eat them, and this is done by plunging the pistachios in boiling water for just one minute. Imagine the pistachio garden of Kerman at the time of picking with the huge pans of boiling water!

Once the pistachio shells have been slightly opened, we call them "khandan" or "smiling" pistachios!

-Iraj Afshar once told me about Nasser al Din's habits when it came to eating sour cherries: his cook would prepare a boiling pan of caramel and walk around the garden behind the King who would pick sour cherries from the tree, dip them in the hot caramel and then eat them! I think this is the pinnacle of hedonism!

Although the Persian carpet is ubiquitous in the Persian garden, once it is laid out on the floor, its importance wanes compared to the garden itself, and the most important activity in the Persian Garden is contemplation. We lay on the carpet and we watch the water flow in the canals, and listen to the music of the water flowing. Water is the subject of the Persian Garden. The display of the water is important, and there are many technical feasts for making it look more voluminous than it really is, but its movement is even more important. There is a mystic dimension to flowing water which is compared to the passage of life, whereas stagnant water is supposed to be dirty and not appropriate for ablutions. Stagnant water is depressing, and has a connotation of death, and that it is why even in the large basins, the water always circulates, coming in from one canal and going into another one. What differentiates metaphysically the Persian Garden from other types of Oriental or European gardens, is that water has to be flowing: a mystic contemplation of life which goes by and is never the same in two instants, or as Hafez says:

بنشین بر لب جوی و گذر عمر ببین

Sit by the stream and see life pass by.

The Persian Garden is the gift of a small stream, either above or under the ground, which on its way to irrigate arable lands, lingers for a while in a garden for a moment of human enchantment.



(fig 25) Center for Contemporary History Document, Gardens of Iran, Ancient Wisdom, New Visions, ed by Faryar Javaherian, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004.



**Faryar Javaherian** is an Iranian architect and curator, born in Mashhad, Khorassan, raised in France and educated in the United States. She studied at the University of Texas at Austin, MIT and Harvard and founded Gamma Consultants recognized as the leading office in Museum and Persian Garden design in Iran. Her buildings have been widely published in Iranian architectural magazines and established her as having a recognizable Iranian-Modern style. Most recently she has won the competition to build the new French School in Tehran, and is working on five museum projects. The exhibitions she has curated cover the fields of architecture, landscape, photography and cinema. She has been Art Director and set decorator for ten films including Hamoon and the Pear Tree, which are cult-films in Iranian cinema. She is the author of GARDENS OF IRAN: Ancient Wisdom, New Visions (Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art Publication, 2004), THIRTY YEARS OF SOLITUDE (Cambridge University Publication, 2007), and numerous articles in MEMAR to which she contributed as an editor. She has served as jury member on Memar Grand Prize and other international competitions. She has widely lectured in Iranian universities, as well as Oxford and Cambridge universities. She is one of the members of the Master Jury of the Aga Khan Award in Architecture this year.



(fig 26) Moghul, 1590, from the catalog: Masterpieces of Iranian Painting, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005.