

Ayineh: The Mirror in Persian Carpet Designs

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Persian carpets have been recognized for their great variety of intricate patterns achieved with technical and aesthetic sophistication. At the same time, their intellectual motivations and symbolic role as carriers of personal and social meanings have been relatively neglected. The mirror *ayineh* is a theme with strong resonances in many dimensions of Iranian culture from metaphysical philosophy to religion and folk beliefs. Close friends are commonly said to be mirrors of each other. On the spiritual journey, the dervish polishes his heart to become a flawless mirror that perfectly reflects the divine pattern. In the practices of Sufism, the mirror leads naturally to speculations about the dualities of substance and essence, appearance and reality, sight and vision. We explore this theme as it appears in many Persian carpet designs of the modern period. Joining beautiful outer forms and profound inner meanings, these mirror designs embody and communicate a common vision uniting aesthetic values with ethical concerns. With sources in Greek philosophy and Islamic mysticism, they seek to transcend material form and reveal the concealed essence of the external world.

Western understandings of Persian carpet designs in the twentieth century emphasized decorative and aesthetic qualities. Research and curatorial concerns focused on technical questions of materials, weaving methods, precise origins and dating. While recognizing historical and ethnological interest, the possibility that many designs communicate personal motivations and social values was rarely considered. Objective identification of carpet patterns has been more valued than subjectively identifying with them. This dominant approach was set by J.K.Mumford in the pioneering work *Oriental Rugs* (1901): “In their maze of designs is a symbol language, the key of which, in its ceaseless transmission through the centuries, has been unhappily all but lost.” In *The Persian Carpet* (1953), A.C.Edwards concludes that contemporary designers were motivated by “delight in symmetry and beauty, but no more.” He writes that during his years in Iran he never heard any reference to symbolism in carpet designs. In the monumental *A Survey of Persian Art* (1937-38), A.U.Pope characterizes the genius of Iranian visual art throughout history as a non-representational art of decoration. He described current carpet production as more industry than art and dismissed it from aesthetic or intellectual evaluation. For P.R.J.Ford in *The Oriental Carpet* (1981) what matters is whether a carpet design works as a design and “the whole principle of attaching ‘meaning’ or ‘symbolism’ to the motifs is highly suspect.” These authors and many others failed to recognize different conventions of art and communication in Iranian culture. As T.S.Eliot would say, “We had the experience but we missed the meaning.” With a more sympathetic and comprehensive understanding, Persian carpet designs will be found to express an ethical vision originating in metaphysical philosophy, folk beliefs and religion. They provide strong evidence for Wittgenstein’s challenging claim that aesthetics and ethics are the same. They deserve to have a prominent place in world culture as agents of the moral imagination.

The mirror *ayineh* has been a resonant image and theme in the long history of Iranian culture. A well-known *hadith*, a traditional saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammed, accounts for the mystery of the creation of the universe. Allah says, “I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known.” The word *khoda* for Allah in Farsi has the original meaning “comes from self” or even “created from nothing.” It follows that all of creation should be viewed as a way for the divine to be revealed.

In the philosophy of neo-Platonism, a key concept is the mirrored universe: “As above, so here below.” At least ideally, the world was to be seen and experienced as a mirror image of the divine pattern. Influenced by this tradition, Augustine wrote in *Confessions*: “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless, until they find rest in you.”

Going back further in time to prehistory, the mythical Shah Jamshid ruled with the help of a magical bowl, the *jam-e Jam*, in which he could see everything in his kingdom reflected. We should recall that to “reflect” on a problem is to examine it closely and consider other possibilities. To “consider” has the root meaning of bringing our thoughts into alignment with the stars and the divine pattern they reveal.

At a different imaginative level, close friends are commonly said in Iranian popular culture to be mirrors of each other. Our true selves are revealed or reflected in our interactions with others. Inspired by his profound friendship with Shams-e Tabrizi, the thirteenth-century metaphysical poet Rumi wrote, “I see my beauty in you.” For unexplained but somehow related reasons, fine Persian carpets have often been made in identical pairs. A prime historical example is the impressive Safavid-era Ardabil carpet in the Victoria and Albert Museum whose pair is in the Los Angeles County Museum.

For more than eight centuries, the mystical legend *The Conference of the Birds* by Attar (d.1221) has played a major role in the Iranian imagination. Its central image is the most famous mirror in Persian literature. The story describes the arduous physical, mental and spiritual journey of thirty birds (*si morgh*). At a time of social dislocations and constant dangers, they nervously embark on an uncertain quest to discover their true king, the *Simorgh*.

One bird, the *hudhud* (crested hoopoe), plays a special role as their messenger and guide. He encourages the other birds to overcome all challenges and complete the journey. The legend culminates in a transforming revelation: their king is a mirror, an *ayineh* in which the thirty birds see themselves reflected. By persevering, they reach the final understanding that their seven-staged pilgrimage has been a journey to a new self-awareness.

The Bakhtiari carpet (c.1920) has an intriguing design frequently seen in the first decades of the twentieth century. In carpet designs, the *hudhud* is easily recognisable by its crest, the tuft of feathers on its head. This symbolic crown suggests another duality with great significance in Iranian culture. It brings to mind the modest *taj* (crown) worn by the Sufi dervish and the more outwardly impressive *taj* of the king.



The Bakhtiari design displays the *hudhud* completely at rest after the many trials of the long journey. In a clear reference to Attar's story, the spiritual guide is shown peacefully viewing its reflection. In metaphysical terms, the messenger bird contemplates its double nature of material form and spiritual essence. We may reasonably conclude that the creators of this design intended to convey a barely concealed message. Viewers are being encouraged to look into the same mirror. Following the wise rule and guidance of the *hudhud*, they will learn to contemplate their dual nature of matter and spirit.

The Ferdows carpet (c.1970) like the *hudhud* is woven entirely with undyed white, brown, grey and black wool. This communicates an immediate message of simplicity. At first glance, the Ferdows design is an unremarkable interpretation of the familiar "medallion and corners" design. Looking more closely at the field in white wool, it gradually becomes apparent to most viewers that it is a realistic representation of a *pustin*, an animal skin. These perceptive viewers are then led to ask a basic question. Why is it there?



Together with the *kashkul* and *tabar*, the begging bowl and the ritual axe, the *pustin* (usually a sheepskin) was one of the few possessions of Sufi dervishes who were on the spiritual journey to union with the One. A proverbial saying indicates the symbolic importance of the *pustin*. A dervish who owned more than could be covered by his animal skin was forgetful of Allah.

The most common spiritual exercise of the wandering dervishes was the repetition of a short phrase such as *ya hu* (Oh He!), *ya Ali* (Oh Ali!) or *ya haqq* (Oh Truth!). This was his *zikr Allah* or “remembrance of God.” Repeated countless times, it produced a state of mind where only Allah was present to his consciousness. A dervish endlessly repeating his *zikr* was said to be polishing his heart. This should be understood as poetic metaphor and not as biology. The dervish constantly polished his inner essence until it became a flawless mirror, an *ayineh* that perfectly reflected the divine pattern.

We should remember that the root meaning of the word Islam is submission. The polished heart of the dervish visibly displays his forgetfulness of self and complete submission to Allah. In the modest Ferdows design, the animal skin is a symbolic representation of the dervish and his materially impoverished way of life. With this understanding, the central medallion acquires a transcendent spiritual meaning. It represents the heart or inner essence of the dervish that has been polished to become a mirror that reflects the divine without any distortion. The medallion is an *ayineh*. This metaphysical interpretation accounts for the great beauty and intricacy of the medallions seen in many Persian carpet designs. The form of the medallion in the Ferdows carpet expresses this spiritual meaning in a simple way. Its pattern is based on

the double square formed from two overlapping squares. This primary visual symbol of Sufi philosophy models the interpenetration of matter and spirit. The double square medallion symbolizes the possible union of all dualities in the divine essence.

The Sabzavar carpet (c.1970) displays an imaginative abstract vision of a Persian garden. The most prominent feature of the design is the central *hoz mahi*. This is the fish pool that should be present in the ideal garden. It silently indicates the presence of a concealed source of water, the essential element for the continuance of life. The pool here is large enough to have a small island with a meaningful double square at its center. This tranquil resting place welcomes all visitors. It serves as a physical and mental refuge where they may peacefully contemplate the beauty of the surrounding garden.



In Iranian culture, gardens are understood to have a dual nature that brings to mind the fundamental duality of matter and spirit. When visited during the day, the garden is a *golestan*, a place of flowers. At night, it is experienced differently as a *bustan*, a place of scents. In this suggestive way, every Persian garden leads visitors to contemplate the dualities of light and dark, sight and vision, substance and essence.

When the garden is visited in the dark stillness of a cloudless night, the *hoz mahi* is magically transformed into an *ayineh*. When completely motionless, it becomes a perfect mirror that reflects the divine pattern revealed in the planets and the stars. The fish pool plays the same role as the central medallion in the classic medallion and corners design. By ordinary means, the garden design succeeds in bringing the cosmic pattern to earth. Like the heart or inner essence of the dervish, the *hoz mahi* of the ideal Persian garden becomes a polished mirror that reflects divine truth.

The finely woven Nain carpet (c.1970) by the master designer Fatollah Habibian represents the dome of a mosque. In symbolic terms, any dome design is to be conceived as an idealised image of the sky or heaven descended to earth. Adopting the language of neo-Platonism, we may say of the Habibian design that ideal form has entered a material thing. In this ancient metaphysical philosophy that has been a major influence on Sufism, a material object becomes beautiful to the extent it participates in and embodies the divine thought. That is the fundamental reason why the visible beauty of material things may be used to contemplate the invisible divine beauty.



Within the imaginative framework of these concepts, the elaborate dome design has a definite philosophical meaning and psychological purpose. In the minds of receptive viewers, it creates the sensation of a constant oscillation between the realms of earth and heaven. They begin to experience an involuntary oscillation in conscious awareness between matter and spirit. This repeated reversal of perceptions and meanings continues until viewers learn to see and experience the two realms as a unity. For those who persevere in this dynamic process, ordinary sight will become moral vision. In this way, the Habibian design communicates so much more than its evident refined aesthetic qualities. It is best seen as an eloquent expression of a core idea from Sufism and Greek philosophy. All dome designs have a transcendent purpose comparable to the aim of the spiritual travellers. They attempt to remake the material earth and themselves into *ayineh*, polished mirrors that perfectly reflect the divine harmonies of the cosmos.



The complex design of the Kashmar carpet (c.1890) requires considerable cultural knowledge for its interpretation. Kashmar (formerly called Turshiz) is located in Khorasan province not far from the ruins of Nishapur, the medieval city destroyed during the Mongol invasion in the early thirteenth century. The writer Attar is believed to have lost his life during the ruthless devastation of his native city.

The cultural wealth and unequalled beauty of Nishapur are recalled in Persian literature as symbols of the limits of human knowledge and achievement. In the Iranian imagination, the fabled city is remembered with longing as the physical embodiment on earth of the divine pattern. The central column and two smaller pillars seen in the carpet's medallion are intended to recall this lost paradise. They are a representation of the astronomical observatory of Nishapur that was world-renowned in its time.

The purpose of astronomical studies in the ancient and medieval worlds was to comprehend the secrets of the celestial pattern. It was believed that the concealed meanings of the created world were to be revealed in the ever-moving display of lights in the night sky. The study of the stars was intended to bring this divine pattern to earth. The four panels surrounding the observatory represent the four seasons that respond each year to the regular movements of the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars.

As everyone knows, these celestial harmonies drive the rhythmic earth-based patterns of human life. The unusual medallion of the design is once again an *ayineh*, a mirror that reflects divine truth. The central column is the *gotb*, the pole in Sufism that joins earth and heaven. In a significant parallelism, the *gotb* is a common term for the head of a dervish order. By all these means, the Kashmar design displays an image of the ideal subordination of the annual cycle of life and all human activities to the cosmic pattern.

The majestic design of the Meshed carpet (c.1910) was created in the workshop of the eminent designer Ahmad Emogli. To state the obvious, it is a brilliant interpretation of the conventional medallion and corners design. On first impression, it is not difficult to imagine this carpet functioning very well as an opulent display of great wealth and power. Reza Shah Pahlavi seems to have agreed. He acquired the production of the Emogli workshop for his palaces after consolidating power in the 1920s.

However, in view of the ideas developed here, we may begin to experience an almost complete reversal from this immediate superficial interpretation of the meanings of this design. This reversal will come when we have reached some understanding of its deeper motivations. Perhaps we should be reminded of Hamlet's words of advice to the players: "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

By now, we recognize that the red field of the design is an idealised vision of a *pustin*, the animal skin of the wandering dervish. The most beautiful medallion is a sublime representation of the inner essence of the dervish. After endless polishing during the many trials of the spiritual journey, his heart becomes a flawless mirror that reflects only the divine pattern. The inner medallion is the familiar double square symbolizing the ideal union of all dualities in a comprehensive awareness. The full medallion is shaped in a dynamic way by a doubling of the double square. By this elementary method, its form more closely approaches a perfect circle which is a primary symbol of the divine unity.



In the timeless metaphysical philosophy that led to the creation of this design and many others, the entire Persian carpet functions most meaningfully as a mirror held up to nature. It encourages all viewers to examine critically the conditions of their existence and seek to live within human limits. By its material form and spiritual meaning, it expresses the fundamental cultural duality of the different roles of the king and the dervish. More than a symbol of power for the king, the Emogli design is a symbol of powerlessness and submission before the divine majesty.

This Meshed carpet design attempts to transcend the limitations of its transient material form to physically embody and visibly display the eternal essence of the world. The design has been revealed as an *ayineh*, a mirror that allows us to see ourselves as we truly are. It will eventually communicate this unmistakable message to those who have remained spiritually aware.

Responsive viewers and possibly even the king will listen to the promptings of conscience that the design inspires. Through the many difficulties of life's seven-staged pilgrimage, they will continue to polish their restless hearts. Like the ever-wandering dervish, sincere travelers will seek to discover in themselves the receptive emptiness and creative simplicity needed to embody and display divine truth.

The Emogli design's great beauty acts on our imaginations to overcome unessential distractions. If only briefly, we may have glimpsed the timeless Platonic world of pure relations and ideal forms. We learn to see and experience some part of our own truth and beauty, our essence, reflected in the carpet design. In another reversal of meaning, we may reach the imaginative understanding that Persian carpet designs are observing us. They invite all viewers to an active participation in a living tradition and a vital culture.

The designs presented here have forcefully compelled us to pay full attention for some interval of time, but too soon we must reluctantly turn away. How do we then hold them in memory and continue to respond meaningfully to the transformation of consciousness we have experienced? How will we come to accept an unwilling exile from the temporary paradise created from nothing by contemplating a few fragile art objects? In turning away, what do we turn toward?

When we begin to understand their symbolic communication of meaning, the designs will have achieved their primary intended purpose. Together, they may then combine to impose some unavoidable ethical obligations. Our necessary task, our participating response, will be to find considered ways to share the new self-awareness, the renewed access to meaning and the larger vision of human possibility we have gained.

Note: Carpets illustrated are from *The Persian Carpet: The Vision of a Whole People*, James Turner and Iraj Nouraie (Tabar 2007, www.tabar.ca). The field of the Bakhtiari *hudhud* carpet represents the *pustin*, the animal skin of the dervish that was commonly used for prayer. The entire field design is an *ayineh*, a mirror that displays divine truth. The undyed Ferdows carpet is *khod rang* ("self-colored"), a subtle reminder of *khoda* ("self-created"). In several places, the spirals in the field of the Meshed Emogli design form the rounded shape of the *kashkul*, the begging bowl of the dervish.