

# Threads of Tradition and Global Expression: Persian Rugs Unraveled Through Paintings and Globalization

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**ABSTRACT: Unravelling Persian Rugs:  
Art, Tradition, and Globalization**

This study investigates the dynamic relationship between Persian rugs, art, and globalization, and follows their transformation from functional objects to powerful symbols of identity. This study examines representations in paintings from various historical periods, and highlights the nuanced interplay between these textiles and global influences. Persian rugs have served as conduits for cross-cultural communication throughout history, from luxury in the Renaissance to modernistic interpretations in the 20th century. Through case studies, this paper delves into narratives that connect tradition and transformation, and aims to contribute to a better understanding of art, culture, and our shared human journey.

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**KEYWORDS:** Persian Rugs, Globalization, Art History, Cross-cultural, Communication, Tradition, Identity, and Cultural Evolution.

In the intricate dance of Persian rugs, paintings, and globalization, a compelling narrative emerges: A tapestry woven with cultural heritage, artistic expression, and the currents of our interconnected world. This study delves into the complex interplay between Persian rug depictions in paintings and their engagement with globalization. This research aims to reveal the intertwined fabric of art history, trade routes, and cultural exchange through the illumination of how these representations reflect the deep connection between Persian carpets and global transformation. These meticulously crafted textiles, intertwined with the fabric of art history, bear witness to tales of trade routes, cultural amalgamation, and shifting perspectives. Within the intricate patterns of these rugs lies a journey through the nuanced narratives of human connection across epochs and canvases. This exploration celebrates the artistry of these textiles, while deciphering the messages they convey, the cultural dialogues they represent, and their role in bridging past and present, local and global. The inclusion of Persian rugs in paintings beckons viewers to explore narratives of cultural fusion, artistic expression, and the ongoing interplay between tradition and transformation. This investigation extends an invitation to unravel the connections that bind art, culture, and globalization, fostering contemplation of the dynamic interactions that continue to shape our shared global heritage.

Persian rugs have evolved beyond their functional origins, and embody cultural heritage, luxury, and craftsmanship, with intricate designs. These handcrafted treasures, which originated from various regions in Persia (*now modern Iran*), weave a narrative of societies across epochs. However, the allure of these rugs transcends the physical realm, particularly in the context of globalization. The expansion of trade routes during the late Middle Ages and beyond enabled carpets to traverse distant origins and forge connections between nations and cultures. Globalization reshaped trade dynamics, which fostered the exchange of ideas and elevated Persian rugs to coveted commodities among merchants and the elite. Mercedes Volait's study on commerce in late Ottoman Cairo and Damascus vividly illustrates this global impact. Her research illuminates how moving items like Persian carpets facilitated international

dialogue and trade and navigated the nuanced interplay of architecture and craftsmanship during transit and transformation. As an assistant professor of early modern art history at Boise State University, Tomasz Grusiecki's exploration delves into the vulnerability of traditional crafts, like Persian rugs, to the currents of globalization. His work questions the authenticity of regional styles, and accentuates the intricacies of cultural identity within a global context. As globalization erases geographical boundaries, it promotes the dissemination of knowledge, creative influences, and cultural discourse. Persian rugs, frequently featured in art, embody the intricate web of worldwide relationships. Often adorning lavish settings, these rugs accentuate the interconnectivity of civilizations, and symbolize "*local identities*" and global aspirations. This investigation delves into the fusion of Persian carpets with the forces of globalization, and casts an indelible impact on the tapestry of art history across pivotal eras, including the Renaissance, Baroque, and Orientalist movements.

During the 15th to 18th centuries, a dynamic interplay between paintings and Persian rugs unfolded, which revealed cross-cultural connections and exotic allure. As witnessed in the Renaissance, Persian carpets symbolized luxury and wealth, with their presence in artworks that convey social status. Notably, Volait's exploration of trade in late Ottoman Cairo and Damascus underscores the role of these rugs in intercultural interaction.<sup>1</sup> This theme continued into the Baroque era, where elaborate textures and patterns of Persian rugs complemented ornate settings, and Grusiecki's investigation questions the integrity of regional aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> The 19th-century Orientalist movement further elevated the connection between art and Persian rugs, as Daniel Pearl's research emphasizes their representation of foreign cultures.<sup>3</sup> These depictions also capture intricate global commerce networks that offer a unique lens to study the intersection of cultural heritage and globalization. Exploring these woven narratives reveals the enduring impact of Persian rugs on the canvas of art history.

Nineteenth-century paintings often feature Persian rugs and reflect socio-economic and cultural changes triggered by industrialization and globalization. These rugs reflect the re-evaluation of traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Volait, Mercedes. "Expanding Trades in Late Ottoman Cairo and Damascus." In *Antique Dealing and Creative Reuse in Cairo and Damascus 1850-1890: Intercultural Engagements with Architecture and Craft in the Age of Travel and Reform*, 87. Brill, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv1v7zbh3.7>.

<sup>2</sup> Grusiecki, Tomasz. 2023. "Rethinking the So-Called Polish Carpets." *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 28 (June): 1–16. <https://search-ebscohost-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aft&AN=164572085&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>3</sup> Pearl, Daniel. 1997. "Looming Large: This Persian Rug Should Set a Record. (Cover Story)." *Wall Street Journal - Eastern Edition*, June 30. <https://search-ebscohost-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9707010562&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

craftsmanship and the negotiation of luxury and artistic endeavour amidst mechanization. At the heart of this discourse lies Grusiecki's influential study, which prompts a reassessment of regional aesthetics against the backdrop of evolving global dynamics. Simultaneously, the surging tide of globalization, facilitated by rapid advancements in transportation and communication, wrought a transformative impact on artistic practices, characterized by what Safoora Maghsoodi and Ahmad Nadalian termed "artistic entanglement."<sup>4</sup> Their investigation into the "Interaction of 'Globalization' and Persian 'Handicrafts'" artfully weaves Persian craftsmanship into the broader global narrative.<sup>5</sup> To paraphrase Thomas Erdbrink,<sup>6</sup> it is through the lens of 19th-century artworks that the portrayal of Persian rugs embodies a nuanced interplay, which encapsulates responses to industrialization, while it delicately navigates the tension between tradition and progress. The 19th century depicts "cross-cultural," "cross-fertilization," and the convergence of civilizations within a globalized paradigm, with Persian carpets a symbol of the interconnectedness of diverse cultures.<sup>7</sup>

Persian rugs were interpreted modernistically in artworks during the 20th century, and broke with tradition to reflect the era's universal attitude. Artists embraced abstraction, geometric shapes, and vivid hues to portray the spirit of a quickly transforming environment, as discussed in the works of Reza Askarizad and Daniel Pearl. By connecting with the developing themes of cross-cultural interaction and connectivity, the inclusion of Persian rug motifs became a means to reconcile heritage and contemporary vision.

In my exploration of critical art history, I have selected paintings that vividly illustrate the interplay between Persian rugs, art, and globalization. These artworks

exemplify how Persian rugs have transcended mere decoration to become potent symbols, and channels for cross-cultural communication. I traverse different epochs and artistic movements, and begin with the luxury of the Renaissance in Emanuel de Witte's "Interior with a Woman Playing the Virginal."<sup>8</sup> Here, Persian rugs signify both visual opulence and markers of wealth and fascination. Transitioning to the era of industrialization, Jean-Léon Gérôme's "The Snake Charmer"<sup>9</sup> reflects the tension between traditional craftsmanship and 19th-century mechanization, and uses the Persian rug as a metaphor for shifting paradigms. In the modern age, Henri Matisse's "Odalisque with Red Culottes" seamlessly integrates Persian rug themes into modernist compositions, forging connections across cultures. In the 21st century, Farhad Moshiri's "Home Sweet Home"<sup>10</sup> expertly captures contemporary identity and highlights the "enduring relevance" of Persian rugs in a globalized world.<sup>11</sup> These case studies illustrate evolving perceptions and identities in our interconnected world, and invite us to explore the profound connections between art, culture, and globalization.

<sup>4</sup> Safoora Maghsoodi and Ahmad Nadalian. 2018. "The Interaction of 'Globalization' and Persian 'Handicrafts': An Analytical Investigation." *Tarih Kültür ve Sanat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 7 (5): 124. doi:10.7596/taksad.v7i5.1629.

<sup>5</sup> Safoora Maghsoodi and Ahmad Nadalian. 2018. "The Interaction of 'Globalization' and Persian 'Handicrafts': An Analytical Investigation." *Tarih Kültür ve Sanat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 7 (5): 125. doi:10.7596/taksad.v7i5.1629.

<sup>6</sup> Erdbrink, Thomas. "The Persian Rug May Not Be Long for This World." *New York Times*, 27 May 2016, p. A4(L). Gale In Context: World History, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A453475579/WHIC?u=edmo69826&sid=bookmark-WHIC&xid=0a671300. Accessed 15 Aug. 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Zār Spirit Possession in Iran and African Countries: Group Distress, Culture-Bound Syndrome or Cultural Concept of Distress? Authors: Fahimeh Mianji and Yousef Semnani. 2016. "Zār Spirit Possession in Iran and African Countries: Group Distress, Culture-Bound Syndrome or Cultural Concept of Distress?" *Iranian Journal of Psychiatry* 10 (4). <https://search-ebscohost-com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsdoj&AN=edsdoj.405f6fd9ae5e40528a73035237768dab&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>8</sup> Emanuel de Witte's "Interior with a Woman Playing a Virginal" 1660-1667

<sup>9</sup> Gérôme, Jean-Léon. "The Snake Charmer." 1879. Painting.

<sup>10</sup> Farhad Moshiri's "Home Sweet Home" 2003

<sup>11</sup> MORAL AND VALUABLE WORLD OF IRAN OF THE LATE 20th – EARLY 21st CENTURIES IN THE CONTEXT OF "CULTURAL HERITAGE" AND "DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS" CONCEPTS

Egnara G. Vartanyan. 2020. "Moral and Valuable World of Iran of the Late 20th – Early 21st Centuries in the Context of 'Cultural Heritage' and 'Dialogue of Civilizations' Concepts." *Vestnik Volgogradskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta. Seria 4. Istoriia, Regionovedenie, Meždunarodnye Otnošenii* 25 (5): 77–88. doi:10.15688/jvolsu4.2020.5.7.

Exploring Persian rugs within paintings weaves intricate narratives that transcend borders and epochs. As discussed through Maghsoodi, Askarizad, and Fahimeh Mianji lenses, these textiles encapsulate the interplay between tradition and innovation, heritage and adaptation, and local identity and global connectivity. This journey through art history, informed by the works of Erdbrink and Maghsoodi, reminds us that these representations are not static artifacts, but living symbols that bridge cultures and span eras. By analyzing the interaction of Persian rugs with art and globalization, and delving into specific eras and case studies, this paper underscores the shared aspirations, interwoven narratives, and constant negotiation between preservation and transformation that characterize our collective human experience. The representation of Persian rugs within paintings is a powerful testament to the enduring resonance of cultural exchange and the potent fusion of art and identity in a globalized world. By unravelling these narratives we profoundly understand the multifaceted relationship between art, culture, and the ever-evolving currents of our shared human journey.

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