

**ZARAH
HUSSAIN**

**PARADISE
CARPET**

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15 November 2024–22 February 2025

Carpets and Me

The carpet or prayer rug, laid in the direction of Mecca, was a part of my daily life as a child. Sitting and praying on beautiful textured and patterned carpets, we would hear stories about faraway places and relatives we had never met. As the child of immigrant parents, I lived in a home filled with carpets, reminding them of their house in Pakistan. Following the tradition of nomadic peoples, my parents laid down carpets to recreate a version of home within another country, and another culture. The carpet symbolised a different way of life.

I remember tracing my fingers around the beautiful floral designs for hours, always trying to figure out the complex symmetries and designs. From these patterns, I imagined flowers and gardens in the place my parents had come from. Fuelled by my reading of **The Arabian Nights** tales, I dreamed up stories of flying carpets and Djinn, and wonderful faraway places, full of magic and exotic intrigue.

In our home, the carpet was a place of safety and sanctuary – an escape from the wet, grey North of England. We could come home, safe from racist taunts and bullying received at school, into a house decorated with the colours and patterns of what seemed to my childish imagination, an exotic land full of colour: Pakistan. At home, I didn't need to be ashamed of my skin colour, my smell, my oiled hair, or my food. I was safe. I could speak another language and be comfortable in my skin. For me, sitting close to my mum or grandad was to be transported to another time and place. When my parents prayed on their rugs, they would become different, calmer, slower. The rug was a place of meditation and reflection.

Carpets in the West

Rugs became sacred objects in our household, folded away for most of the day and handled with respect. I thought them to be unique to our Pakistani culture, not something that my English classmates would understand or have in their homes. I knew my school friends did not sit on the floor, they did not remove their shoes at the door. They did not have special sacred 'clean' prayer places in their homes. Their houses were laid in wall-to-wall carpets with no patterns, or wooden floors.



Only later did I learn how much the same carpets were loved and valued in England. They were first introduced into Europe by 11th century Crusaders who brought them back from the Middle East. Written records of this are unclear, however through painting, we see that oriental rugs were commonly used. By the late 14th century, Italian artists were using rugs in paintings, and in the 15th century Jan Van Eyck, Hans Memling and other Flemish artists used rugs to give interest and colour to the backgrounds of their works. From the artists' realistic and detailed style, it is possible to recognise the rugs, mainly Turkish, that they chose to paint.

Due to their perceived preciousness, rarity, and strangeness, oriental carpets were depicted as a background for saints and holy scenes. Later on, religious iconography was taken over by politically powerful people in order to assert their status and authority. Painter Hans Holbein the Younger featured rugs in the backgrounds of his works so much that the vibrant red Turkish Bergama rugs he used have become known as 'Holbein rugs'.

King Henry VIII commissioned several portraits in which these luxurious "princely" rugs are prominently featured. Their inclusion not only symbolised wealth and status but also highlighted the monarch's early role in bringing these exquisite textiles to England, some of which exist today in the Royal Collection.



(Above) Workshop of Hans Holbein the Younger, Henry VIII standing on a star Ushak carpet, c.1530. (Bottom) Hans Memling, Still Life with a Jug with Flowers, late 15th century

Their use within the paintings depict ideas of the exotic and precious, or are used to frame an “important” figure, or an action. However, they overlook the original cultural significance of the rug. Many European artists borrowed or appropriated elements from other cultures in which they, essentially, did not understand.

By the end of the 16th century oriental rugs and carpets were rare and very expensive in Europe, and became enormously popular among the richest and most powerful families who were the only people able to afford them. It is interesting to me that oriental carpets have a history of being associated with the wealthy and powerful. In my culture, rugs are an essential item: every household would have handmade prayer rugs. Today, carpets are found everywhere, in the tents of desert nomads and the palaces of kings, valued for their practical use by some, and as a symbol of wealth for others.

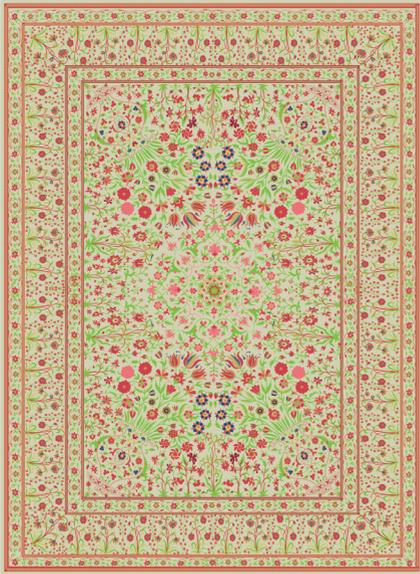
Carpets Throughout History

The making of carpets is probably one of the most ancient crafts in the world. It is mentioned in the Old Testament and in the ancient Greek poem *Iliad* by Homer. The earliest records of rug-weaving and knotting can be found in Mongolia, China and Tibet. The Mongols were nomads who needed both the warmth and portability that carpets provide. They mastered the art of weaving wool from their livestock into an essential household item. It is believed that their craft and designs were found across Asia following the Mongol conquests in the early 13th century.

Throughout history, carpet weaving has been an art form primarily practiced by women, as shown by the Greek legend of Arachne – a mortal woman who dares to compare her extraordinary weaving skills with the goddess Athena. Arachne is turned into a spider by the jealous goddess, but her name endures, becoming the origin of the word for arachnid, and the spider as the ultimate symbol of weaving.

It takes considerable skill and finesse to knot a carpet. All traditional oriental carpets are handmade: the greater the number of knots per square inch, the finer it is. A handmade carpet of average size can take four people a year to produce. Most carpets are made using spun and dyed wool with a cotton warp and weft backing. Weaving a carpet is a magical alchemical process, which turns basic organic materials into a valuable object of desire.

Carpets are often woven with floral designs. Christian, Muslim and Jewish people associate the idea of beautiful gardens with Paradise. The Persian poet Sa'di described a garden as "a carpet spread by the night winds in the shadow of trees". For a nomadic desert dweller, it made sense that gardens filled with flowers and streams would seem like paradise. Unable to plant or create real gardens in the desert, carpets were created to make people feel like they were in a garden, whatever the weather, wherever they were.



Creating Paradise Carpet

To create my carpet animations I first became inspired by a rug with a historic Mughal design, originally from Lahore in Pakistan.

I began by digitising and converting the image, giving it lines of symmetry and using more vibrant colours, before starting the task to separate the carpet's very complex design into over 1000 layers to create the animation.

The beauty of bringing this carpet to life is that I could see its complexity, and in awe at the fact that it was originally woven by human hands!

I animated a carpet design by William Morris, whose artistic practice was stimulated by his deep familiarity with artwork from the Islamic world. Evidence for this is found in his lectures for design students, personal letters, and with his role as an art advisor for the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A).

Morris played an instrumental role in purchasing one of the most famous Persian carpets in the world, the Ardabil rug, for the V&A. This carpet has inspired endless copies, including a version in the office of the British Prime Minister. The original Ardabil was first displayed in 1892 in a dealer's showroom in London. Morris described it as "a remarkable work of art. The design is of singular perfection...its size and splendour as a piece of workmanship do full justice to the beauty and intellectual qualities of the design."

Morris's home was adorned with carpets from Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan, spread across the floors, walls and even tables of his residences. By using carpets in this way, Morris aligned himself with a tradition seen in those earlier historical paintings.

For me, the most compelling aspects of Morris's legacy is his belief in living crafts and non-industrialised processes. He valued traditional craftsmanship and its makers. This resonates today, as we continue to advocate for fair wages, sustainability and ecological responsibility – making Morris ahead of his time.



Although Morris is regarded as an ‘English’ designer, it is obvious to see that he is influenced by Islamic Art. His famous statement “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful” echoes the concept of beauty in Islam. There is a famous saying by the Prophet Muhammed: “God is beautiful and loves beauty”. This statement is not one of superficial beauty, but an essential concept rooted in Sufism about spiritual beauty. If you follow its path, it will lead you to appreciate the visual wonder of the world, the beauty of the universe. The world was created to be loved and enjoyed by humans.

In Islamic art, harmony and balance is expressed by mathematical proportion and geometric design. However, it is not only perfection that creates beauty: it is the emotional reaction to art, the feeling it evokes in you. For the artist, the making of art creates a ‘flow’ state, a feeling of connectedness, of meditation and peace. For the viewer, usefulness, a lift to the spirits and the enjoyment of pleasure and beauty. Nothing is random and chaotic, everything is covered by the rules of geometry. Morris understood this. His designs show the inter-connectedness of global artistic tradition. To me, it shows the way that design and craft shares cultures and evolves throughout time.

I also animated a Moghan rug design from the Kazak region in South Caucasus, woven by nomadic tribes. The design is geometric and reminiscent of patterns found in Turkish and Afghan Kilim carpets. Although Moghan patterns are geometric they are not perfect, revealing a real handmade quality to them.

The installation's final design is inspired by a floral carpet from Bijar, Iran. Knotted in wool and silk, these rugs are usually created by the Kurdish community, a minority in Iran. Bijar rugs are heavy and thick and the Herati pattern is what most comes to mind when thinking of oriental carpets. Variations in this family of patterns are some of the oldest designs in Persian rugs, with the floral motifs symbolising abundance and growth.



Creating Paradise

So what do I mean by the idea of a Paradise Carpet? Why am I creating a carpet as an installation? There is a long history of beautiful objects from the Islamic world being a part of the cultural fabric of European life. Like me, rugs represent movement and migration. I ask: can we come together on the **Paradise Carpet** to share solace with each other? A place where all humans, from all backgrounds can find nourishment and connection in a shared spirituality?

I like to think we can use the concept of 'Paradise' not as something that happens when we die, but as a concept rooted in now. A symbolic idea where all humans appreciate the deep beauty of nature and the pursuit of a harmonious existence between all cultures, creeds and races. Perhaps Earth is already a Paradise, but yet under threat by humankind. The ecological threat to this planet is the biggest challenge that humanity is facing right now. We need to come together on the carpet to acknowledge our differences, but also to celebrate movement and the migration of peoples onto this Island. We need to work together as humans to save the Paradise we already live on.

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