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Field of Flowers: Mughal Carpets and Treasures

Michael Schuster

<http://arts.EastWestCenter.org>

In mid-seventeenth century South Asia, the taste for naturalistic floral sprays reached an apogee of artistic expression. During the reign of the Mughal dynasty (1526-1857), the aesthetic style pervaded the arts of South Asia. Its influence has been strong ever since; it continues to be prevalent in South Asian design today and has had an impact on aesthetic traditions of the West and China. The current exhibition illustrates this distinctive Mughal idiom and reveals the continuity of the artistic tradition in contemporary India and Pakistan. For many, the arts developed during the Mughal Empire are synonymous with taste, luxury, and power.

Two 17th century Mughal carpets from the Doris Duke Collection beautifully illustrate the Mughal floral aesthetic, and are the focal point of the exhibition. These Duke carpets have rarely been available for public viewing. Legend says that they once graced the tomb of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan at the Taj Mahal. Over the centuries they have passed through the hands of private collectors in India and the West before being purchased by Doris Duke for her Honolulu home—Shangri La—in 1990. When Doris Duke died in 1993 it was her intention that her collection of Islamic artifacts would become available to the wider public. What was once an exclusive pleasure of the elite is now available for the enjoyment of many.

In addition to being historically significant markers of an aesthetic tradition, the carpets stand alone as important works of art due to their unusual shape and pairing. Each carpet has an arched interior with pointed ends. When paired, the carpets form a bold field of flowers with an interior void wherein a person, most likely of royal personage, could have sat in splendor. Imagine the feeling of wealth and luxury felt by those in the Mughal courts as they sat surrounded by effervescent flowers on carpets, textiles, architecture, and precious objects while ruling over a vast empire (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. *Pair of 17th Century Mughal Carpets, Photographed in Doris Duke's Bedroom at Shangri La. Cotton, Silk, and Wool. Photo: Ann Svenson Perlman, 2008. Courtesy of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art.*

The Mughal Dynasty and its Global Impact

In 1526, Babur, an emigrant prince from Central Asia, established the Mughal dynasty in South Asia. By 1600, the dynasty was both economically and politically prosperous, ruling a large geographic area divided today into Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Northern India. During their 330-year reign, the Mughals gained an international reputation for their wealth, tolerance, and intellectual and artistic pursuits. Their influence survives to the present in the word “mogul,” which denotes a lifestyle of power and luxury.



Figure 2. *Pair of Embroidered Portraits, Northern India (Delhi,) CA.1850, cotton fabric with cotton embroidery.*

Photo: Courtesy of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, © David Franzen.

As a prince in Central Asia, Babur was accustomed to a semi-nomadic lifestyle. It was the practice of his ancestors to move their courts around the empire, and in particular to set up tents in gardens from which they would rule and entertain. One of Babur’s first acts in South Asia was to establish a garden, a practice his successors continued with increasing grandeur. Among the most visited Mughal gardens is that of the Taj Mahal, a mausoleum built in a garden complex by the fifth Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in 1635.



Figure 3. *Tent Hanging, Northern India, 18th Century, cotton with textile prints.*
Photo: Courtesy of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, © David Franzen.

The Mughals had several capitals around their empire, to which their court traveled at various times of the year. In each capital, gardens were built from which they could rule and relax. Pavilions within the garden would be furnished with textiles such as hangings, spreads and carpets—textiles which in turn featured floral imagery to further enrich the setting (Fig. 3). Further, carpets and textiles served as portable architecture. Through niche shapes and arch designs, textiles could be suspended to suggest a built environment, but they could be easily de-installed for travel as the Mughal court moved around its empire. Through floral imagery and flowers themselves, vibrant colors and robust patterns provided a beautiful courtly setting.

This great love for gardens and floral imagery pervades the art and architecture of the Mughal dynasty (Fig. 4). But the appeal of their floral motifs was by no means limited to the Mughal court alone. The taste for Mughal flowers spread throughout India and beyond, and indeed, its popularity remains strong in the present day. Designers continue to be inspired by the luxury the aesthetic symbolizes and its beauty, adapting patterns to commercial wares that are readily available to today's consumers.

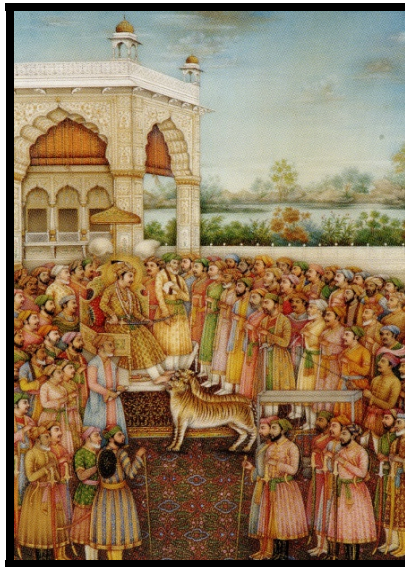


Figure 4. Jahangir Enthroned, Northern India (Delhi), CA. 1850, gouache and gold on ivory or bone. Photo: Courtesy of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, © David Franzen.

The Aesthetic of Mughal flowers

In the sixteenth century, Mughal design drew heavily on south Asian and Persian designs. In India, forms from nature have been carved in stone and wood, and represented in other media for millennia. From Persian design came the taste for circuitous, interwoven arabesque spirals on carpets, textiles, and other artistic wares. Likewise, the idealized natural world of Persian manuscripts also influenced Mughal arts; each flower and blade of grass was painted with perfection, every petal abloom and positioned to please the viewer to the best of the artist's ability. Iran, Afghanistan, and much of Pakistan and Northern India are arid—water is a precious resource. Thus, gardens and—by extension—garden imagery were an extravagance and a favorite subject of artists and poets.

In the early seventeenth century, Mughal design shifted away from idealized Persian floral motifs to naturalistic ones, most likely as a result of traveling European merchants, emissaries,

and Jesuit missionaries. These visitors brought with them books, tapestries, and paintings which were of great curiosity to the Mughal court. In particular, botanical books featuring highly detailed, block-printed images of plants are thought to have intrigued Mughal artists. The naturalism articulated in the European botanical studies was adapted by Mughal designers to suit local tastes, and from this blending of cultures a brilliant artistic tradition developed.

During the reign of the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan (1628-58), flowers became a primary design element. Flowers moved out of the border and into the central field of paintings, carpets and textiles. The magnificent marble inlay at the Taj Mahal, built in 1635, shows Shah Jahan's preference for flowers as a primary subject. Two types of floral compositions predominated during his reign: floral sprays, readily identifiable as iris, roses, lilies, and peonies among other varieties; and trellis patterns, within which a blossom is featured. Both design styles are visible in this exhibition (Fig. 5).



*Figure 5. Carpet, Northern India, Early 20th Century, cotton ground with wool pile.
Photo: Ann Svenson Perlman, 2008. Courtesy of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art.*

The Production of Mughal Designed Carpets

The Mughal rulers established ateliers (workshops) in the 16th century in what is now India and Pakistan. They brought carpet weavers from Central Asia to teach local weavers the designs and techniques of carpet weaving, and soon thereafter a unique indigenous style developed. Oriental rugs are still made today in Pakistan and India, but most of the designs are based on Persian and Central Asian prototypes. Today in Agra and its surrounding villages (the Taj Mahal is located in Agra) there are more than 30,000 people involved in the making of rugs. Many of these carpets continue to emphasize motifs developed for the Mughal courts.

At one time an atelier might have been under the actual domain of a ruler, but today family-run enterprises control the carpet manufacturing and distribution. Carpet production is a complex art involving many constituents. Because of the expense in time and materials, carpet weaving begins with the total design conceived in advance. Previously the master weaver would keep the design in his head, giving instructions to his subordinates as the rug progressed. Today designers

take inspiration from prototypes, often looking at examples found in books with photographs of famous carpets found in museum collections.



Figure 6. Painting the design. Photo: Courtesy of Cottage Industry, Agra India.

Designers then transfer the design to graph paper, painting each tiny square to indicate which color thread is to be knotted (Fig. 6). These detailed paintings are then sent to contracted village families with the appropriate dyed woolen yarns in order to construct the carpet. Usually a family keeps a working loom in the house or courtyard. Thus several family members can work throughout the day on the carpet. Two people working on a six foot wide carpet for a day can knot and weave approximately an inch of the total pattern. The contracted family is paid incrementally for the amount of carpet completed.



Figure 7 (left). Ayob Khan, master weaver, Agra India. Photo: Ann Svenson Perlman.

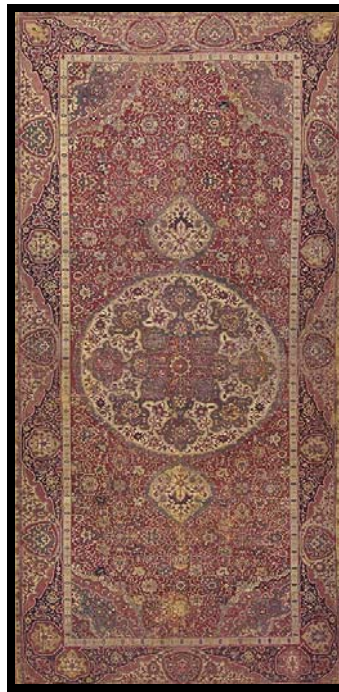
Figure 8 (right). Clipping the knots. Photo: Courtesy of Cottage Industry, Agra India.

The Process of Carpet Making

The warp or vertical threads are stretched over the loom and back again, keeping the threads taut and parallel. A weft thread or crosswise yarn is woven through the warp threads. To begin a carpet several rows of weft are woven at the bottom. The design of the carpet is made in knots, called the pile. Knots are tied by hand around two warp threads. After a row of knots is tied, a few rows of weft are added to stabilize the knotted row. Then a new row is knotted. This process is repeated, with the weavers using a comb or beater to pack the knots and weft firmly into the warp (Fig. 7).

The weaving and knotting can take from six months to several years, depending on the fineness or coarseness of the carpet. The more knots per inch and the finer the materials, the finer the carpet. Carpets are most often made of wool and cotton, but silk is sometimes used as well.

When the carpet is completely knotted and woven the carpet is cut from the loom and sent to be washed, after which the knots are clipped with scissors to form the dense pile surface (Fig. 8). The knots are then aligned with a wood stylus to sharpen the appearance of the design. The edges are sewn and the carpet is evaluated and sold to a dealer or brought directly to the manufacturer's carpet store.



*Figure 9. Carpet, Northern India, 19th Century, wool pile.
Photo: Courtesy of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, © David Franzen.*

Acknowledgments

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