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ALLEGORIES UNVEILED: EUROPEAN SOURCES FOR A SAFAVID VELVET

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Woven in Iran during the seventeenth century, the magnificent velvet that is the subject of this paper (figure 1) testifies to the splendor of the reign of the Safavid Shahs (1501-1722). A curious blending of Persian and European elements, it features four women holding various objects against the backdrop of a flowering landscape.

The figures stand along the west axis. The fragment in figure 1, from the collection of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, features a full technical repeat unit, measuring over seven feet in warp direction, and 28 inches, or the full loom width, in weft direction. For Safavid silk weaving, this is an enormous technical repeat unit. The velvet is woven of silk; the numerous colors of the pile are formed by the labor-intensive Persian technique of pile warp substitution. The background of the design is formed of gold wefts; the ponds along the lower selvage, of silver wefts; and selected details are embellished by silver loops. Despite the European elements in the pattern, the technical details of its weave structure leave no doubt that this velvet was woven in Iran. Its magnificence and extravagance suggest that it was a court, and probably a royal, commission.

This paper shall examine only one aspect of this velvet, the pattern, and discuss what might be its meaning. Even more narrowly, it will only examine those elements seeming to derive from European art. The Persian elements are of equal importance, but given the theme of this conference, textiles and trade, analysis will be limited to the European, hence alien, elements.

Due largely due to the ambition and vision of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629), a new era in Persia’s relations with the West began at the end of the sixteenth century. To bypass Ottoman control of overland routes to the West, Abbas I courted and rewarded the interests of the European trading companies, particularly the English and the Dutch. These commercial relationships were to have long-lasting repercussions for the Iranian economy and culture. Persian art was changed irrevocably. Due largely due to the ambition and vision of Shah Abbas I, the Persian art was changed irrevocably.

Abbas I’s xenophile tendencies, including relative tolerance towards Christians and a genuine interest in European art and culture, were to be characteristic of most of the later Safavid Shahs, particularly Abbas II (1642-1666).

Although starting out slightly later than their English rival, the Dutch East India Company quickly made up for lost time. A national institution with vast resources, the Dutch East India Company overwhelmed all European rivals from the 1640s through 1670s.

The Dutch factors were cunning propagandists. By the 1670s, Sir John Chardin, a Frenchman who traveled to Iran in the 1660s and 1670s, tells us that the Dutch were viewed as the kings of all Europe. Shrewdly recognizing Abbas II’s avid interest in European art, the Dutch factors cleverly supplied him with several Dutch artists. These artists produced paintings for the Shah, participated in palace decorations, gave the Shah drawing lessons, and undoubtedly found numerous opportunities with their patron to advance the Dutch cause.

The most obvious European influence in this velvet appears in the costumes of the figures: hats, belts, necklines, collars, sandals. Analysis of their costumes merits a paper in and of itself, but this discussion will concentrate on a different aspect of the European presence in this velvet: I believe that the pattern forms a coherent allegory of love based on European iconographic traditions.

Research to date has failed to unearth any single source from which this iconographic program was directly copied. To explicate the iconography of this velvet, a variety of Northern European art works will be drawn upon, primarily Netherlandish prints from title pages, allegorical series, iconological treatises and emblem books.

Emblem books are a form of moralizing literature. First devised in the mid-sixteenth century in Italy, emblem books became extremely popular throughout Europe during the seventeenth century, particularly in Holland, where they developed into a national literature. This paper shall refer to works by the major Netherlandish emblematists: Daniel Heinsius, Otto Vansijn, Pieter Hooft, and Jacob Cats. Their works first appeared in the first three decades of the seventeenth century and went through multiple editions in various languages thereafter.

The emblem consists of three parts: the Image, a brief inscription, and a longer text. The three parts in combination provide the clues to a moralizing puzzle that was meant to be deciphered by the reader.

Emblem literature is useful to this discussion for three reasons. First, the combination of image, inscription, and text allows us to be reasonably certain of the intended meaning. Second, emblem books represent a useful middle ground of the artistic and intellectual currents of seventeenth-century Europe. Third, this material was very widely owned and appreciated.

Few original ideas are to be found in emblem literature. Most of the imagery derives ultimately from classical authors, chiefly Ovid. Furthermore, the emblem authors copied back and forth from one another repeatedly. Redundancy characterizes this literature. Thus, the emblems and other European works of art referred to in this paper should be seen as representations of very generalized iconographic traditions, and not necessarily the precise source for the imagery of the velvet.

The pattern of the velvet suggests that its program should be discussed in two groups. The composition suggests the four women are meant to be viewed as pairs, and the iconography confirms it. Each pair is grouped around a pool, the two halves of the pair face one another, turning away from the other group. On the right stands the hunting pair, and on the left, for lack of a better term, stands the agricultural pair.
Two kinds of hunt are represented here, hunting with hounds and hunting with birds of prey, the latter known as hawking or falconry. The first woman at the right, holding a spear and a dog on a leash, is equipped for hunting with hounds. Hunting with hounds is the oldest form of hunting. It was a ritualized and specialized activity, often involving numerous men and different kinds of hounds. The leashed dog depicted in the velvet seems to be a greyhound. Greyhounds were used in the final stages of the hunt, for seizing the game.

According to Chardin, hunting with dogs was not entirely unknown in Iran, but it was uncommon for several reasons. First, falcons in Persia were trained to perform many of the functions that in Europe would have been reserved for dogs. Second, Persians executed dogs, considering them unclean. Probably then, the choice of subject matter here was inspired by European rather than Persian practice.

The practice of falconry, represented by the second figure in the velvet, was extremely popular in Persia. Chardin records that the Shah’s hunting establishment maintained 800 falcons.

A print of 1599 by Crispin de Passe the Elder depicts both kinds of hunting. A pair of lovers occupy the foreground. The hunt with dogs appears behind the man who holds two dogs on a leash; a falconry scene appears behind the woman who holds a falcon on her fist. Dogs and birds were often combined in one hunt. This print neatly summarizes a major iconographic tradition linking hunting with love. This ancient allegory, with many variations, traces back at least two millennia to Ovid. Commonly, the lover is cast as the hunter, pursuing the beloved, cast as the deer or hart.

The man and woman in de Passe’ print are engaged in a lovers’ dialogue, which appears below in the Latin text. The man holding the dogs asks, “Who smells so sweetly?” Dogs, of course follow the scent of their master.

Having remarked upon the general tradition linking love and hunting, we must examine more narrowly the iconography surrounding the two animals represented in the velvet: first the hound, and then the hawk.

The hunting hound is frequently used to represent the lover. Jacob Cats employs this symbolism in an emblem to illustrate the proverb “With unwilling hounds it’s hard to catch hare.” In the image a father pulls his reluctant son to court a young lady. In the background is a tiny scene of hunters unsuccessfully urging their dogs to the chase. The text compares the boy’s lack of interest in wooing the maid with the unenthusiastic dogs:

Could not the Love-chase just the same
As hunting any other game?

For hounds which hunt against their will. Were seldom known the game to kill.

In the Safavid velvet, the leashed dog is barking at a second dog. This is an image of the jealous lover who will tolerate no rival for his sweetheart’s affection. Another emblem by Cats presents a courting couple; the man points to two dogs fighting over a bone; in the background are two rivals in a duel. Cats’ inscription reads “Neither love nor sovereignty will suffer company.”

The text to a similar image by Crispin de Passe notes that the monarch and the lover never agree to a rival, and that the lover, like a dog with a bone, can barely stand the company of his own shadow.

A final theme suggested by the quarrelsome nature of the dog is that of appetite. Cats compares the insatiable appetite of a dog to fire, to a dry ground that drinks up water, and to the irresistible momentum of hunting. To accompany a depiction of a dog, a soldier, and a hunter, Cats writes:

You first desire to see your love, next wish’t you might come near
And thirdly ‘twas to speak to her, the fourth to touch your deare.
Th’ next was to give a kiss. What then? both standing in the dore;
To get a kiss again of her and yet you would have more.
A lover by his mistris, and a hunter in his chase,
A marchant by his wares, the soldier bolde and of good grace,
Goeth forward on from step to step, not shrinkings for a sore;
And though the dog hath gott one peace, yet still he looks for more.

Hawks also have long been a focus for erotic imagery. The hawk seizing prey can symbolize possession of the beloved or the sexual act.

The relationship between a falconer and his hawk had inevitable sexual overtones. The preferred practice in training a hawk was to capture a fully grown female. Through intricate training, the falconer binds to his will one of nature’s wildest and most ferocious animals. A medieval saying sums up the relationship: “Women and falcons are easily tamed. If you lure them the right way, they come to see their master.”

Falcon imagery was known and appreciated internationally in the seventeenth century, but particularly in Holland. From the late sixteenth through the nineteenth century, the Dutch were reputed to be the best falconers in all Europe. Dutch falconers were employed at
various European courts for the care and training of falcons. In southeastern Holland, many a Dutchman was employed capturing and training hawks. The terrain there is perfect for it.

Birds’ ability to fly away, their total freedom, is the basis for the most common imagery linking birds and love, and that is the bird as the victim or captive of love. Cupid is often depicted as a Fowler or bird-catcher, snaring birds.

A popular variant is the theme of voluntary captivity. This theme is often illustrated by a bird, the freest of animals, sitting in a cage, even though escape is possible through the open door. Sometimes the bird flies into the cage of its own free will. The idea is that the lover willingly puts himself in the bonds of love.

Heinsius turns this popular theme to the specific practice of falconry in an emblem of the hawk returning to its master’s glove. In the background of the print, Cupid is about to unleash his arrows from up in the sky; below, a man doffs his hat to his lady. The meaning is fairly evident, but is made explicit by the inscription “I return of my own free will to the sweet bonds that constrain me.” The verse below tells us that the lover hates his liberty and returns to his original prison to serve love, just as the falcon, thrown from the fist into the wide open sky returns to the glove.

Despite the millennia during which man has used birds of prey for hunting, they have never become domesticated, nor does an individual bird ever become truly tamed. No matter how long it has been used in hunting, there is always the possibility that it will escape into the wild. Training is based on moderating and manipulating the bird’s appetite and vision.

The training of a falcon involves temporary blinding. When the falcon is first captured, its eyelids are stitched closed in a practice called seeling. The stitches are progressively loosened as the trainer gains control over the bird and as it grows accustomed to the sight of men. The practice of hooting is a continuation of temporary blinding. Whenever a bird shows signs of restlessness or attempts to escape, the falconer slips the hood over its head to calm and subdue it. With its raised wings, the falcon in the Persian velvet is showing signs of restlessness and is about to be ‘blinded.’

To illustrate the proverb, “Who wins the eyes wins all,” Cupid blinds a lion, the king of beasts. The idea is that once your eyes are taken by the sight of your sweetheart, you are her captive: “If that thyne eyes be conquered, sure, / Then loves torments thou must endure.”

Finally, we should note that the representation of the falcon in the velvet is more European than Persian. It is a full-breasted bird that is depicted here, not the sleeker, shape preferred in Iran. The falcon in the velvet lacks a chain about his neck, standard equipment in Persian falconry.

To summarize the hunting group, the velvet presents a depiction of hunt imagery influenced by European practice. The metaphors suggest the purity of the beloved, the dangerous passions of love, quest for exquisite and jealous, and the captivity and subjugating power of love.

A more benevolent side of love is presented by the second group of women, the agrarian group. I have yet to find a convincing explanation for the bowl held by the third woman in the velvet. Her pitcher, however, presents a few possibilities.

One plausible comparison occurs in an emblem by Vasilius, which shows Cupid watering plants from a pitcher. The inscription reads “Watered I grow” or “Love grows by favour.” The text tells us that when love is watered or nourished by kindness and favors, it will flourish and the fruits of love may be enjoyed. In the Safavid velvet, the woman with the pitcher is facing the woman with the lapful of fruit.

The notion that the woman is pouring something nourishing from her pitcher calls to mind a love poem by Heinsius. The poet writes that love can nourish us on pleasure alone, with out any other food or drink. Love, he says, is a sweet beverage, an elite rain which waters our spirits.

Another idea that could be behind the woman with the pitcher is the female figure representing Benevolence towards one’s spouse and Matrimonial Union from Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia. The third woman in the velvet and Ripa’s figure strongly resemble one another in posture and arm gestures. Ripa’s text notes that the figure’s extended arm signifies an obliging action and that the bird she holds with marvelous tenderness, is the kingfisher, a symbol of love for spouse. While the kingfisher obviously does not transfer to the velvet, perhaps the concept of the obliging action is intended here, in the action of showering favor upon a growing love.

With the fourth woman in the velvet, we are back on iconographically firm ground. There is a fairly standard tradition presenting fruit as an emblem of fertility. Fruit is the harvest of the earth, and Ceres is the goddess of fertility. Fruit can also symbolize the reward or harvest of love, i.e. children in marriage. Vasilius, for example, warns those who shy away from love: “And he that yeilds no frute / warns those who shay away from love: “And he that yeilds no frute / The honor also wants which children parents give.”

On a more speculative level, the pose of the fourth woman suggests the action of sowing. The fruit in her lap is where the seed would go and her outstretched arm would sow the seed. The inscription reads “I grow” or “Love grows by favour.” The text tells us that when love is watered or nourished by kindness and favors, it will flourish and the fruits of love may be enjoyed. In the Safavid velvet, the woman with the pitcher is facing the woman with the lapful of fruit. The idea derives from Ovid’s story of Cadmus sowing the dragon’s teeth into “the womb of the pregnant earth.”

The final attribute in the velvet is the ewer of wine. Here again, we are on familiar ground. Wine, like love represents the sensual enjoyment of life’s pleasures. The theme of wine and love, proverbial
complements since antiquity, needs no elaboration. In Netherlandish
songbooks, we find the drinking of wine used as an euphemism for
lovemaking. In an emblem by Vaenius, Cupid is the proprietor in the
"tavern of love." 

Finally, the two butterflies that hover about these two woman must be noted. Cats employs butterflies to illustrate
the transforming power of love. Like the brilliant butterfly who has
emerged from the dark, dormant, worm-like state of the cocoon, so the
lover is revived and lifted into the skies by one favorable glance from
his lady's eye. 

To sum up the agriculture group, these two woman present a
benevolent side of love: the encouragement of love, showering favor and
kindness upon love so that it will grow and yield fruit, the harvest of
love, fertility, procreation, the sensual enjoyment of wine and love,
and the rejuvenating power of love.

Looking at the program of the entire velvet, various interpretations
are possible. What is the relationship between the two pairs? One
solution is suggested by Vaenius' emblem in referred to above: that
hunting, i.e., the first pair, goeth before the taking, i.e., the second
pair. Another possibility, in need of further research, is that the two
groups represent the Dutch dual conception of love: the first pair
stands for minne, the lower order of love (lust, passion, appetite), and
the second pair represents liefde, the higher order of love (marriage,
children, harmony between spouses).

A third possibility is to view the four woman as a series,
representing an allegory of love and the four elements, earth, water,
air and fire. Vaenius treats this theme twice in Amorum Emblemata.
First, in a full-page illustration of Venus and Cupid presiding over the
four elements, Cupid's arrows pierce the sun, the moon, men, women,
and animals representing the four elements. Vaenius' poem, "Cupid's
Epistle to the Yonger Sorte," follows immediately and repeats the
theme:

"What after nature lives, lives subject unto mee,
All yielding to my law must all my vassalles bee.
... My unrestrayned force to all that move and live,
A lust to procreate, moste liberally doth give.
In elements all fowre, all what appeers to bee,
By inclination shew accordance unto mee.

Parallels between this Safavid velvet and other representations of
love and the four elements are easy to find: a figure with fruit
often represents Earth; a figure pouring water commonly stands for
Water; a figure holding a bird is often used to represent Air. What is
not self-evident here is how the woman with the dog could represent
fire.

For this we turn first to Cats who compares the insatiable appetite
of dogs to fire, and second, to Ovid, who describes "the burning smart
which jealous lovers feel." It is curious that fire, the most common
symbol in love imagery is not used in the Safavid velvet.

It must be stressed that these images and the ideas associated with
them occur repeatedly. None of this imagery would have been obscure
in the Netherlands. This iconography is, however, quite exotic in a
Safavid velvet. The iconography proposed here is elaborate and it has
been handled selectively and idiosyncratically. Whatever designed this
velvet had a good grounding in these iconographic traditions, or had
access to someone who did.

The obvious channel for the transmission of these ideas into Persian
art is the handful of European artists active in Iran in the seventeenth
century. We know frustratingly little about any of them. However,
interesting facts have survived about Philips Angel, one of the artists
from the Dutch East India Company who was court painter Shah Abbas II
from 1652-1653.

Angel was a painter and printmaker in Leiden. In 1645, he gave up
painting to join the Dutch East India Company. He was a scurvy
character and in 1652, he was offered the choice of facing a court of
inquiry over his actions in the trading company, or becoming court
painter to Abbas II.

His artistic production is almost entirely unknown, but he is of
interest for a speech he gave in 1641 entitled "Praise of the Art of
Painting." This speech was published the following year, with an
intriguing woodcut on the title page.

The woodcut depicts a female figure who seems to be an allegory of
Dutch painting. The figure is a conflation of Picura and Minerva,
and she is surrounded by a wattle fence that identifies the ground she
stands on as Holland. This woodcut accurately expresses Angel's ideas
about the nature of painting and the appropriate education of a painter.

Angel recommends that a painter have a knowledge of biblical and
classical history. He condones artistic copying, as long as the painter
assimilates his sources well enough so that they are unrecognizable. He
compares painting to poetry, saying "What a painter draws is silent
poetry," an accurate characterization of our velvet. Angel seems to
have a knowledge of Ovid and he quotes extensively from Jacob Cats.

These few facts alone cannot link Angels directly to the design of
the velvet. He might, however have served as an indirect influence, for
armed with this knowledge, these ideas and attitudes, he was
artistically active in Isfahan and had the ear of the Shah for three
years.

The confidence and accuracy with which both the Persian and the
European elements appear in this velvet suggests that its design
represents collaboration between a Persian and a European artist. For
the production of this velvet, I am suggesting the timespan of the
1650s-70s, a period during which Philips Angel and a few other European
artists were active in Iran.
This time frame is appealing for several other reasons. Dutch influence in Iran was at its peak. The cultural and artistic atmosphere of the court favored the velvet’s subject matter. Abbas II was an avid fancier of European art, and his other passions were hunting, wine, and women. Finally, Chardin records that high-quality gold and silver velvets were still being produced in Isfahan at this time.48

It seems appropriate to allow Jacob Cats the last word in this paper. Describing the nature of emblems, he writes:““[They] are strangely pleasing in their dark and agreeable character and contain one thing in appearance and another in reality, giving the reader who finally discovers their purpose a strange pleasure which greatly resembles the sensation that one has upon finding, after a long search, a lovely bunch of grapes under thick leaves. The experience teaches us that many things are better when they are not seen in their entirety but appear to us more or less veiled...

I hope that this paper has at least partially lifted the veil on this allegory of love.


6. In addition to my own searches, I consulted Peter Parshall, Reed College, Timothy Riggs, Art Museum, University of North Carolina, H. Percy Chapman, University of Delaware.


8. See analysis by Praz, pp. 83-134.

9. Discussion of the pattern will proceed from right to left. This seems to be the direction in which it was intended to be read, and, perhaps not coincidentally, that is the direction in which the Persian language is read.


13. C. de Passe, Hortus Voluptatum, 1599, no. 10.

14. For translation of the Latin, I wish to thank Carl A. Anderson.


18. Cats, 1632, pp. 40-41. See also the figure of Burgerklick Opreer (Civil Sedition) in C. Ripa, Iconologia..., Amsterdam, 1644, pp. 22-23. Ripa’s Iconologia was a popular iconological treatise that went through many editions in many languages over the course of the late sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Ripa writes that the two dogs serve the picture of civil sedition, because “although they are both domestic animals and of the same species,” dogs will nevertheless fight one another over food or from jealousy over a sweetheart.


22. Cummins, p. 228.


25. D. Heinsius, _Emblemata Amatoria_. Tam denem emendata_. Amsterdam, 1612, no. 11.


27. Compare the falcon in figure 1 of this paper to that in another, slightly earlier Safavid velvet, illustrated in Bier, figure 10, pp. 154-55. I am grateful to Milad Doueihi, Johns Hopkins University, for discussions on the practice and symbolism of falconry in Europe and the Middle East.


30. Ripa, Amsterdam, 1644, pp. 208-209.


37. Vaenius, 1667, pp. 196-197.

38. Cats, 1627, pp. 308-309.

39. Vaenius, Antwerp, 1612, tenth page in volume. Below the print is a citation from Seneca describing Cupid’s power over the beasts of the air, water, and earth. Cupid, of course, represents fire, the flames of love being the commonest of love metaphors.

40. Vaenius, 1612, fol. 2r.

41. See, for example, the series by C. de Passe the Elder, nos. 1111-1133 in D. Franken, _L’Oeuvre gravé des Van de Passe_. Paris, 1881.

42. “Le chien, le jeu, l’amour le feu,/ Ne se contentent oncq de peu,” in J. Cats, _Emblemata of Zinnebeelden_. from _Alle de Werken. So Ouden als Nieuwen_. Amsterdam, 1658, p. 78.


47. An equally intriguing candidate is Ali Quli Jabbehdar, an artist about whom not much is known. He seems to have flourished in Iran during the 1660s and 1670s. A signed painting by Ali Quli is related to the figure in the velvet holding fruit, perhaps at one or two removes. See illustration and biographical information in A. Welch, 1973, pp. 148-69.


INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of Ottoman textile trade, the city of Bursa immediately comes to mind. As the Ottoman capital at the end of the fourteenth century, it was known for its flourishing silk industry which exported fine brocades and velvets to Europe and the East. As it expanded, it fostered a secondary market in which Persian merchants exchanged a large part of the raw silk they carried to supply local weavers for European woollens as well as the Bursa silk fabrics. By the end of the fifteenth century, its fabrics were being exported to northern Europe: both the Russian and Polish courts, for example, commissioned purchases on their behalf. But much of the production of Bursa was consumed at home: by the court which formed its own discrete demand in clothing the extensive personnel of the palace, now in Istanbul, and for distribution on ceremonial occasions; and by the wealthy residents who used large quantities of luxury fabrics for both domestic and personal furnishings. This internal dynamic was also true for the international cotton trade which originated in the Anatolian countryside.

The character of this internal market remains largely unexplored, particularly for Istanbul itself, the destination of textiles both imported and local, luxury and utilitarian, not commissioned for the court but to be used by the residents of the city. To gain an inside view of the market of Istanbul, the following paper presents a survey of the estate inventories of a group of individuals who lived in the imperial city during the sixteenth century. These individuals either died while travelling through the city or were residents whose property was brought to court for evaluation because no heirs were known to exist or as a result of disputes originating from creditors or fractious relatives.

Possessions to which they could lay claim were listed by the Islamic court and accompanied by a fair market value. From these we not only learn the intimate details of their households, their debts and business undertakings, but we can also ascertain their class and ethnic background, the area in which they lived, their occupation, or an occupational

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