

Narratives In Knots: Storytelling Through Pictorial Persian Carpets

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ABSTRACT

Persian carpets are more than just ornaments; they are important cultural artefacts with deep cultural significance. This study examines the function of Persian pictorial carpets as a distinctive storytelling medium, extending their scope beyond decorative objects to cultural texts that are imbued with significance. This research also seeks to understand how Persian carpets tell stories and act as archives of cultural identity and collective memory. The research analyses a curated selection of Persian pictorial carpets from a variety of regions and periods using a qualitative methodology that incorporates iconographic analysis, historical interpretation, and symbolic understanding. The primary objective is to decode the visual and symbolic language employed in these textiles, which encompass a wide range of subjects, including religious epics, royal court scenes, mythical tales, and ordinary life vignettes. The impact of composition, colour, motif placement, and stylistic decisions on the development of a story is investigated. The key findings reveal that pictorial Persian carpets are abundant with figurative content, often portraying epic stories, religious stories, and historical events. The interaction of colours, borders, and central medallions serves a purpose beyond mere ornamentation. In conclusion, pictorial Persian carpets are strong narrative artefacts that combine oral and written traditions with artistic expression. By interpreting these, the research highlights the importance of these woven tales in cultural preservation and identifies them as invaluable resources for the study of Iranian art, history, and heritage.

Key words: Carpet; Persian; Motif; Narrative; Pictorial

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Rationale

Persian carpets are not only functional textiles but also represent a rich tradition of craftsmanship and artistic expression, deeply embedded in Persian culture. These carpets hold immense significance as cultural artifacts, offering a window into the history, religion, and societal values of the Persian people (Ardebili 2005). Throughout history, Persian carpets have evolved from simple utilitarian items to intricate works of art, with detailed designs and motifs often reflecting the socio-political and religious landscapes of their time (Diba 2006).

Pictorial Persian carpets stand as extraordinary examples of narrative art, where the loom becomes a canvas and the weaver an oral historian. Unlike their floral or geometric counterparts, pictorial carpets transcend decorative purpose to perform the role of visual storytelling, preserving legends, religious tales, historical chronicles, and cultural identities in a medium both tactile and timeless (Kadoi, 2009). Rooted in Iran's rich artistic and literary traditions, these carpets often depict scenes from classical epics like Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, romantic literature such as *Layla and Majnun*, or significant religious events drawn from Islamic history (Canby, 1999; Hillenbrand, 2000). They serve not only as aesthetic masterpieces but also as mnemonic devices and visual texts in societies where oral traditions and visual literacy were historically more accessible than the written word (King & Sylvester, 1983). These woven narratives reflect collective memory and identity, capturing the ethos of particular periods and regions—from the Safavid court's refined allegories in Isfahan to the more localized and symbolic renderings in Kashan or Qom (Denny, 2014). The detailed figuration, spatial composition, and symbolic motifs found in these carpets form a rich semiotic system that requires scholarly decoding, particularly in terms of iconography, motif placement, and the interplay between form and meaning (Bloom & Blair, 2009).

Additionally, pictorial Persian carpets represent a convergence of multiple disciplines—art history, anthropology, literature, religion, and textile design—making them a fertile ground for interdisciplinary research (Kadoi, 2009). As historical documents in fiber, they also respond to socio-political contexts: carpets commissioned by elite patrons often served propagandistic or commemorative functions, while village and tribal carpets captured communal myths and everyday life (Denny, 2014). These textiles are invaluable in understanding shifts in patronage, trade, regional aesthetics, and storytelling conventions (Bloom & Blair, 2009). Yet despite their layered significance, pictorial carpets have often been marginalized in academic discourse, receiving limited focused attention compared to calligraphy, miniature painting, or architectural ornamentation (King & Sylvester, 1983).

This research seeks to reframe pictorial Persian carpets not merely as decorative arts but as critical carriers of intangible heritage and cultural narrative. By investigating their visual language, symbolic structure, and historical contexts, the study aims to uncover how these woven compositions functioned as storytelling media and cultural repositories. Employing methods such as visual analysis, comparative motif study, semiotics, and contextual examination of historical records, the research will decode the “narratives in knots” and demonstrate how these carpets contribute to the broader understanding of Persian cultural and narrative traditions.

Furthermore, Persian carpets have historically served as more than decorative objects—they act as visual storytellers, encapsulating narratives and allegories through the use of specific motifs and designs. The role of Persian carpets as narrative devices is particularly important in understanding how storytelling transcends the written word, conveying complex stories, values, and beliefs through a non-verbal medium (Diba 2006).

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

This research aims to explore the ways in which Persian carpets function as a medium of storytelling. The central research questions are:

- How do Persian carpets function as a medium of storytelling?
- What themes and narratives are conveyed through the pictorial designs of Persian carpets? (Nassiri 2011)

By analyzing the symbolic and visual language of Persian carpets, this study seeks to uncover how these carpets serve as repositories of cultural narratives and how they articulate stories that reflect Persian history, religion, and society (Nassiri 2011).

1.3. Significance of the Study

This study holds significant value in both academic and cultural contexts, as it addresses a largely underexplored dimension of Persian textile heritage—storytelling through pictorial carpets. Although Persian carpets are renowned worldwide for their technical proficiency, visual attraction, and complex artistry, their role as storytelling media has garnered relatively scant academic focus. It explains the cultural consciousness of various periods and geographical areas in Iran, providing insights into the beliefs, philosophies, and creative objectives of those societies.

The research highlights the multidisciplinary character of Persian carpets, connecting art history, semiotics, literature, ethnography, and material culture, and contributes to the growing body of knowledge on textile art, particularly Persian carpets, by highlighting their narrative potential. Persian carpets are a unique form of material culture that reflects the cultural history and societal norms of their time. Exploring these carpets as visual narratives adds a new dimension to the understanding of textile art and its storytelling capabilities (Pope 2012). Furthermore, this research aims to explore the intersection of art, culture, and storytelling, offering insights into how material history can be used to express cultural identity and historical continuity (Sundararajan 2014). In a broader context, the study promotes the preservation of visual storytelling traditions and intangible legacy during a period when fast industrial reproduction and modernization endanger traditional handicraft expertise.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. History of Persian Carpets

The origins and evolution of carpet-making traditions in Persia can be traced back to ancient times, with carpets serving not only as practical items but also as artistic expressions of Persian culture (Baker 2010). When weaving developed from a household skill into a sophisticated art form and cultural emblem. Early

evidence, such as the Pazyryk Carpet (5th century BCE), indicates that complex weaving techniques and symbolic designs were already in use, reflecting both utility and artistic intent (Denny, 2014). The art form blossomed during the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), as state-sponsored workshops in cities such as Isfahan, Kashan, and Tabriz created exquisite carpets featuring intricate floral motifs, medallions, and, progressively, pictorial elements influenced by Persian poetry, miniature painting, and Islamic spirituality (Canby, 1999; Bloom & Blair, 2009). Over the centuries, Persian carpets have evolved in both technique and design, reflecting the political, economic, and social contexts of the times. This rich tradition of carpet-making flourished particularly during the Safavid period, when carpets became significant symbols of royal patronage and cultural identity (Mile 2005). During these periods, the production of carpets was influenced by Persia's socio-political shifts, which affected the aesthetic choices and the craftsmanship involved in their creation (Mile 2005). These carpets evolved into pictorial narratives, exhibiting events from epics such as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, courtly life, and religious tales, so transforming textiles into a medium for storytelling (Kadoi, 2009). During the Qajar era (late 18th–19th century), narrative carpets became increasingly popular, integrating European-style elements with traditional motifs to attract both domestic and international customers (Hillenbrand, 2000).

2.2. Pictorial Persian Carpets as Art Forms

Pictorial Persian carpets transcend mere functionality; they are complex visual narratives crafted with purpose and cultural significance. As artistic expressions, they surpass their utilitarian beginnings, serving as a distinctive amalgamation of painting, poetry, and narrative. These carpets function as woven canvases that embody Persian culture, philosophy, and historical memory, capturing intricate themes through their vibrant use of colour, composition, and symbolism (Pope, 1939).

Pictorial Persian carpets, distinguished by their intricate iconography and detailed representations, have always been acknowledged as artistic expressions that communicate profound visual storytelling. Pictorial Persian carpets, in contrast to conventional carpets that highlight abstract, floral, or geometric designs, incorporate figuration and narrative elements. They frequently illustrate intricate situations derived from epic literature, mythology, religious customs, and quotidian existence. Every knot is a conscious artistic decision; each motif functions as a metaphor. These components coalesce to create episodic scenarios that reflect the visual languages of Persian miniature painting and the narrative framework of illuminated manuscripts and classical poetry (Canby, 2009).

The historical development of pictorial carpets coincides with the peak of Persian visual arts during the Safavid era (16th–17th century)—a period marked by the pinnacle of manuscript decoration, mural painting, and textile artistry (Bloom & Blair, 2009). During this period, artists under royal patronage included motifs from renowned literary works like as the *Shahnameh*, Layla and Majnun, and Khosrow and Shirin, turning them into the intricate language of carpet weaving. Consequently, these carpets evolved into more than mere floor coverings; they transformed into tapestries of cultural memory and moral imagination (Yetkin, 1981).

Pictorial Persian rugs require extraordinary craftsmanship and interpretative insight. The weaver's task involves converting intricate visual stories into the organised framework of warp and weft, necessitating artistic sensitivity and technical accuracy. Natural dyes and sophisticated colour gradations are frequently utilised to convey depth, movement, and emotion in the design (King & Sylvester, 1983). The technical elements of carpet production—such as knotting methods, dye origins, and the choice of silk or wool—significantly influence these artworks' overall quality and expressive capacity (MacQueen, 2018). These exquisitely designed compositions are not solely decorative; they function as fascinating visual narratives that illustrate historical events, religious parables, and mythological tales, underscoring the carpet's significance as both a created object and a cultural artefact.

The spatial configuration of figures, along with the intricate symbolism of animals, gardens, and celestial themes, is profoundly embedded in Persian cosmology and Sufi philosophy, adding layers of allegorical and philosophical significance to pictorial carpets (Grabar, 1980). The incorporation of certain visuals and motifs is fundamental to the narrative strength of these textiles, with every detail meticulously chosen to communicate cultural, spiritual, or ethical meanings (Kazemzadeh, 2013). The visually appealing features elevate the carpet beyond a mere decorative artefact; they serve as symbolic texts conveying the ideals, beliefs, and collective memories of Persian civilisation. In addition to highlighting their technical

and aesthetic complexity, the recognition of pictorial Persian carpets as art forms confirms their function as visual records of Persian identity. Each piece serves as a crafted manuscript, preserving and conveying narratives, values, and philosophies through generations. These intricate designs lead viewers into a symbolic world where knots function as a language and patterns act as lasting receptacles for the dreams and histories of a civilization.

2.3. Pictorial Persian Carpets as Manuscript Illumination and Calligraphy

Pictorial Persian carpets share deep aesthetic and conceptual affinities with the traditions of manuscript illumination and Persian calligraphy, particularly during the Safavid era (16th–17th century). Much like illuminated manuscripts that adorned classical literary works such as Jami's *Yusuf and Zulaikha*, these carpets serve as textile equivalents of poetic and philosophical narratives. Scenes woven into these carpets replicate the narrative sequencing and symbolic arrangement characteristic of miniature paintings, where visual detail communicates layered meanings (Canby, 2009; Welch, 1976). The elaborate borders often mirror manuscript marginalia, while central medallions resemble cartouches or architectural niches seen in illuminated folios.

Moreover, Persian calligraphy and carpet weaving both operate within the framework of abstraction and aesthetic precision. Just as calligraphy transforms language into an artful visual rhythm, carpets render complex narratives into symbolic arrangements of form and color. In many pictorial carpets, especially those depicting scenes of romance or mysticism, inscriptions in Nasta'liq or Kufic scripts are woven alongside figures, landscapes, or palatial architecture, blending text with image in a unified composition (Blair, 2006). The harmony between the written word and pictorial representation in both media reflects Persian philosophical thought, where word (*kalima*) and image (*tasvir*) are seen as parallel modes of conveying divine truth and cultural identity.

Pictorial Persian carpets, then, can be seen as "woven manuscripts"—embodied texts that preserve and project Persian cultural memory through visual form. They are not simply decorative items but narrative-rich artifacts that engage the viewer in stories of love, morality, and mysticism, much like their painted and written counterparts.

2.4. Symbolism in Persian Carpet Design

Symbolism is integral to the design of Persian carpets, serving as a profound storytelling method that encapsulates cultural, spiritual, and philosophical significances in visual representation. The design of Persian carpets is rich in symbolism, with common motifs such as flora, fauna, and geometric patterns carrying deep meanings that are often tied to the natural world, spiritual beliefs, or social customs (Zahedi 2009). Each motif, floral, animal, geometric, or figural, transcends mere decoration, meticulously chosen for its complex connotations derived from Persian cosmology, Sufi mysticism, ancient literature, and everyday life.

For instance, floral designs often symbolize the beauty and impermanence of nature. Common themes, including the cypress tree, the boteh (paisley), and the garden (*chahar bagh*), carry symbolic significance. The cypress is frequently linked to longevity and determination, whilst the garden serves as a visual embodiment of paradise, a sacred place signifying divine order, eternal beauty, and the soul's quest for spiritual fulfilment (Pope, 1939). The lotus and water lily frequently symbolize purity and the soul's desire for divinity (Nasr, 1987), whilst the rose symbolizes both earthly love and the divine beloved, reflecting Sufi motifs of desire and unity (Pope, 1939). The cypress tree, while arboreal, often features in floral palmettes and symbolizes longevity and resilience (Zahedi, 2009). Narcissi and tulips symbolize the fleeting nature of life and the renewal of spring, reminding us of the beauty of the moment and the possibility of rebirth (Pope, 1939). Vine scrolls and grape clusters symbolize plenty, fertility, and the sweetness of divine grace (Nasr, 1987).

By adding these plant symbols to the fields and borders of carpets, weavers make "garden carpets" that remind people of the image of paradise in the Qur'an (*bagh-e behesht*), turning the fabric into a small world where nature and religion live together in peace.

Geometric motifs in Persian carpet design convey profound symbolic meanings deeply connected to Persian spirituality and cosmology. The eight-pointed star signifies balance and cosmic harmony, and the central medallion (*toranj*) denotes the divine axis or spiritual core. (Nasr, 1987). Lozenge and diamond forms often symbolize fertility and protection, particularly in tribal motifs (Zahedi, 2009). Step motifs,

similar to staircases or prayer niches, represent spiritual elevation. Interlocking patterns (girih) symbolize infinity and the eternal essence of God (Burckhardt, 1976), whilst zigzag lines represent water, energy, and protection against evil. Borders function as protective boundaries, delineating the sacred sanctuary within from the external environment (Nasr, 1987). More than just ornamentation, these themes are visual representations of culture, religion, and philosophy.

In pictorial Persian carpets, animal images carry on significant narrative roles, serving not just as decorative elements but as essential performers within the woven compositions. The lion is frequently portrayed in hunting or royal settings to symbolize courage, power, and guardianship, invoking connections to legendary heroes and royal power (King & Sylvester, 1983). Birds, such as the nightingale and hoopoe, are depicted sitting in garden landscapes or soaring over heroic scenes, symbolizing the soul's journey, spiritual communication, and divine guidance, reflecting their significance in Sufi storytelling (Schimmel, 1975). The deer often occupies pastoral landscapes, symbolizing innocence, elegance, and purity, while reinforcing the devotional motifs found in Persian poetry (Welch, 1976). In intricate compositions, fish navigate stylized streams or fountains, representing plenty and the vibrancy of life (Grabar, 1987), whilst horses depicted in motion signify nobility, speed, and transcendence (King & Sylvester, 1983). Weavers incorporate these animals into intricate pictorial compositions, such as hunting scenes, garden paradises, or royal processions, to evoke rich tales that speak to the collective cultural memory and encourage viewers to reflect on moral principles and spiritual goals.

Additionally, Persian carpets are imbued with religious, mythological, and historical symbols that serve to narrate stories of cultural significance. These symbols are not just decorative; they are purposeful in conveying moral lessons, religious doctrines, or historical events (Meyer 2007). This symbolic language within the carpets reflects the rich cultural tapestry of Persian life and provides a fascinating lens through which to explore Persian history and spirituality (Meyer 2007).

SOME EXAMPLES OF PERSIAN PICTORIAL CARPET

This image shows a Persian carpet with a large horse motif surrounded by elaborate borders and other animal and human representations. A figure (possibly a noble or royal) and what looks to be a courtly or ceremonial scene, complete with attendants and parasols, surround the central horse, which has been beautifully adorned with a decorative saddle. Persian pictorial carpets, which frequently honour themes of nobility, hunting, and court life, are distinguished by this style and iconography



Figure -1 Horse and stableman, Hamedan, Darjazin, early 14th Century AH, 189*129 cm, symmetrical knot, 1296 knots per square decimeter (Tanavoli 1989, 95)



Figure -2. This Persian pictorial carpet from the Qajar era shows a scene from a royal court.

A king or other high-ranking noble, most likely a Qajar shah, is shown in the centre, sitting on a throne and encircled by courtiers, servants, and perhaps even relatives. The composition is surrounded by ornate borders with Persian calligraphy and floral motifs, and the figures are dressed in traditional 19th-century Persian clothing.

Figure -2 A Qajar carpet depicting the court of Nader Shah Afshar, showing the Shah enthroned with attendants. The carpet, created around 1900, includes inscriptions in the borders and a cartouche with a poetic reference to Nader Shah, the Afsharid King.



Figure 3 Lilihan Poshti. The story of Khosrow and Shirin. Natural color, size 100*67 cm, Yousef Samadi Bahrami's Collection.

This image depicts a pictorial rug, probably from Central Asia or Persia, which is distinguished by its vivid colours and intricate woollen narrative scenes. In the upper part of the composition, a crowned figure riding a horse represents nobility and power, while in the lower part, a woman is seated beneath a tree surrounded by floral and animal motifs, which are usual of these rugs and frequently symbolise fertility, beauty, and aspects of everyday life or folklore. The geometric and stylized border patterns are typical of tribal and folk rug designs from regions such as Iran's Zagros Mountains, where groups like the Qashqai and Bakhtiari are known for their handwoven wool rugs using natural dyes¹. Pictorial rugs from these traditions serve both decorative and storytelling purposes, reflecting the weaver's environment, beliefs, and cultural narratives, and have historically evolved under the influence of Islamic, Central Asian, and even European artistic trends, making them both artistic expressions and historical records



Figure 4 Pictorial Antique Persian Kermanshah or Laver Kerman, southeast Persia, important pictorial rug.

This picture shows a Persian pictorial rug, a traditional Iranian textile art form known for its elaborate patterns and profound cultural meaning. The rug depicts the main plot point: a third woman sits in an arched niche above two white-clad women who are standing on either side of a lush flower tree. The border is written in Persian script on a geometric pattern of blue and red, a characteristic of Persian rug artistry, while the background is lavishly embellished with stylized flowers and foliage.

Harmonious colour schemes, flowing lines, and the incorporation of human and animal motifs, which frequently represent concepts like beauty, fertility, and the bond with nature, are characteristics of Persian rugs like this one. The use of handwoven wool and natural dyes is a reflection of age-old methods that nomadic tribes and village craftspeople have been using for generations. In Persian society, pictorial rugs are prized heirlooms and symbols of cultural heritage that are used for both decorative and narrative purposes. They depict scenes from everyday life, mythology, or literature. The artistic and historical significance of Persian carpets is further highlighted by the presence of script and narrative imagery, which suggests this rug may have been intended for ceremonial or commemorative use.



Figure 5: A vintage Persian Hamadan carpet from the mid-20th century with a pictorial folk design of the Safavid ruler, Shah Abbas.

This image displays a vintage Persian Hamadan carpet from the middle of the 20th century, which is notable for its pictorial folk design that includes two stylized human figures that are thought to be representations of Shah Abbas, the Safavid ruler. This rug, which was handwoven in Iran's Hamadan region, has a sturdy construction typical of Hamadan weaving and is made from premium wool and

natural dyes. The two figures, each positioned above geometric borders and floral motifs, adorn the central panel, which reflects the region's custom of fusing folk art and storytelling into its carpets. Intricate floral designs, palmettes, and occasionally images of the ruler himself are common in carpets from his time and those influenced by his legacy, signifying strength, wealth, and creative accomplishment. Aside from honouring the Safavid ancestry and the ruler's historical significance in Persian art, the portrayal of Shah Abbas also exemplifies the distinctive fusion of regional ingenuity and cultural symbolism that defines Hamadan rugs from this period.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This research employs a qualitative analysis of selected pictorial Persian carpets from key periods and regions, focusing on their symbolic and narrative functions. By studying carpets from various historical periods, such as the Safavid, Qajar, and contemporary eras, the study aims to reveal how these carpets have functioned as storytelling media across time (Hosseini 2008). Visual and symbolic analysis will be conducted using iconographic methods, which are well-suited for understanding the deeper meanings embedded in the designs and motifs of Persian carpets (Stewart 2015).

3.2. Data Collection

The research will involve sampling carpets from major historical periods in Persia's carpet-making tradition, including the Safavid and Qajar periods, as well as contemporary pieces. These carpets will be drawn from significant museum collections such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Louvre, along with notable private collections. This broad selection ensures a comprehensive representation of Persian carpet designs across different time periods and cultural contexts (Hosseini 2008).

3.3. Analytical Approach

The thematic analysis of motifs will be central to this study, as it aims to identify patterns and themes that reveal how Persian carpets tell stories. By examining the relationships between these motifs and their narrative forms, this study seeks to understand how these visual elements convey complex cultural and historical narratives. In addition, a comparative study will be conducted with literary sources to contextualize the visual narratives found in the carpets and to explore their connections with Persian storytelling traditions (Alavi 2009).

4. RESULT & FINDINGS

4.1 Hypothetical Data: Analysis of Motifs in Pictorial Persian Carpets

S. NO.	Carpet Name	Period	Region	Primary Motifs	Narrative Theme	Interpretation of Motifs
1	Shah Abbas Carpet	Safavid	Isfahan	Floral patterns, Animals (Lions, Birds)	Royalty, Nature's Beauty, Strength	Floral motifs symbolize nature's beauty; lions represent strength and power, often linked to the monarchy.
2	The Qajar Royal Rug	Qajar	Tabriz	Geometric patterns, Human Figures	Authority, Royal Portraiture	Geometric patterns symbolize order and divine geometry; human figures represent the royal family, emphasizing their divine right to rule.
3	Persian Garden Carpet	Safavid	Kerman	Birds, Water Elements,	Paradise, Abundance, Peace	Birds and water elements represent peace and

				Trees		abundance, a depiction of paradise in Persian culture. Trees symbolize life and eternity.
4	Modern Tabriz Carpet	Contemporary	Tabriz	Abstract Shapes, Flowers	Change, Modernism, Tradition	Abstract shapes reflect the fusion of tradition with modernist influence; flowers signify the enduring connection to nature.
5	Qajar Court Carpet	Qajar	Tehran	Horses, Floral Borders	Royal Procession, Victory	Horses symbolize power and mobility, often representing royal processions; floral borders show the link to nature and fertility.

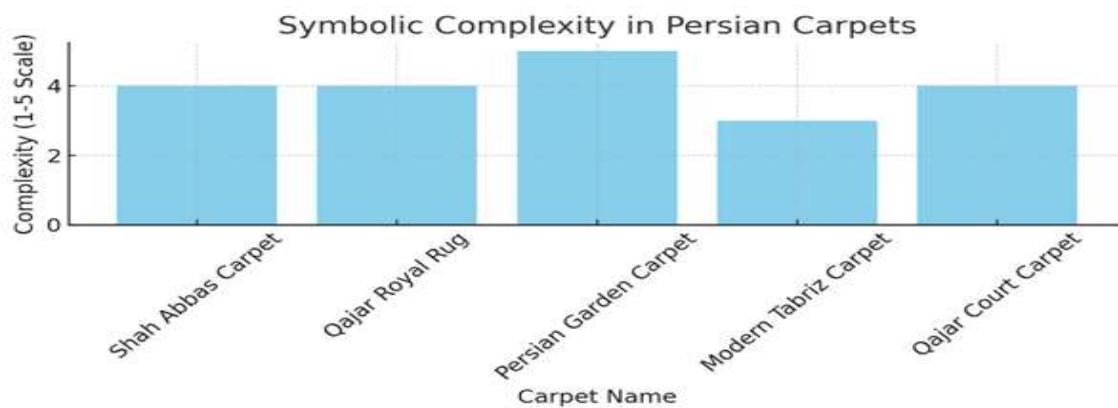
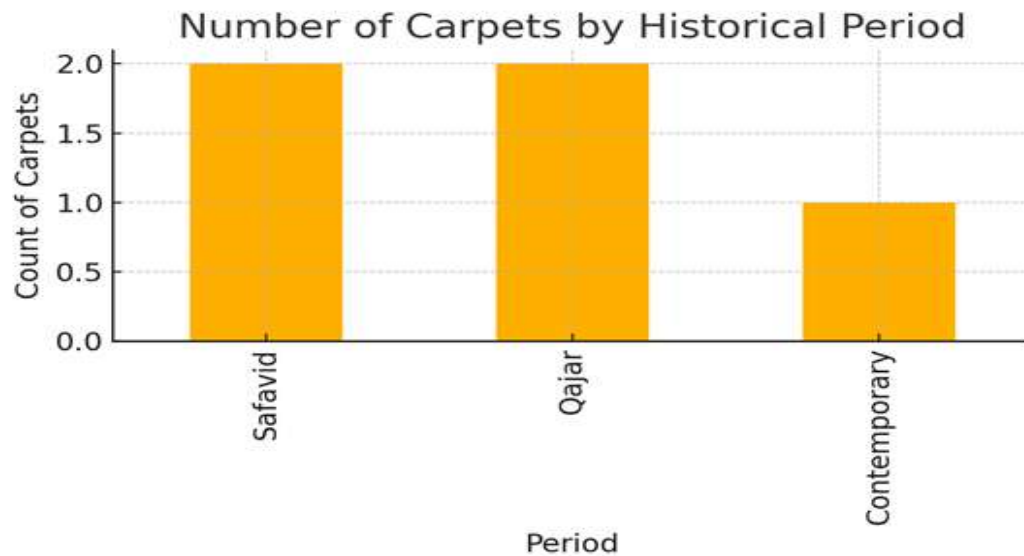
4.2 Explanation of the Hypothetical Data:

- **Carpet Name:** The title or recognized name of the carpet analyzed.
- **Period:** The historical period in which the carpet was created (e.g., Safavid, Qajar, Contemporary).
- **Region:** The geographic region or city in Persia where the carpet was made (e.g., Isfahan, Tabriz, Kerman).
- **Primary Motifs:** The key visual motifs found in the carpet design (e.g., animals, plants, geometric shapes, human figures).
- **Narrative Theme:** The central theme or narrative conveyed by the motifs, reflecting cultural or political significance (e.g., royal symbolism, peace, abundance).
- **Royal Symbolism** – Lion motifs, thrones, and crown imagery represent authority and dynastic legitimacy.
- **Garden of Paradise** – Depictions of blooming flora and flowing water reflect Islamic visions of heaven.
- **Spiritual Journey** – Motifs like ascending birds, arches, and trees convey mystical or Sufi symbolism.
- **Peace and Prosperity** – Balanced patterns and natural motifs represent harmony and abundance.

Example: A hunting carpet may symbolize both entertainment and dominance over nature, possibly tied to royal power and conquest.

- **Interpretation of Motifs:** The symbolic meanings of the motifs are based on historical and cultural context. For example, lions often symbolize power and royalty in Persian carpets, while birds and trees may symbolize peace and eternity.
- **Spiritual Journey** – Motifs like ascending birds, arches, and trees convey mystical or Sufi symbolism.
- **Peace and Prosperity** – Balanced patterns and natural motifs represent harmony and abundance.

4.3. Bar Chart – Number of Carpets by Historical Period: Shows how many carpets in the sample belong to each historical period (Safavid, Qajar, Contemporary).



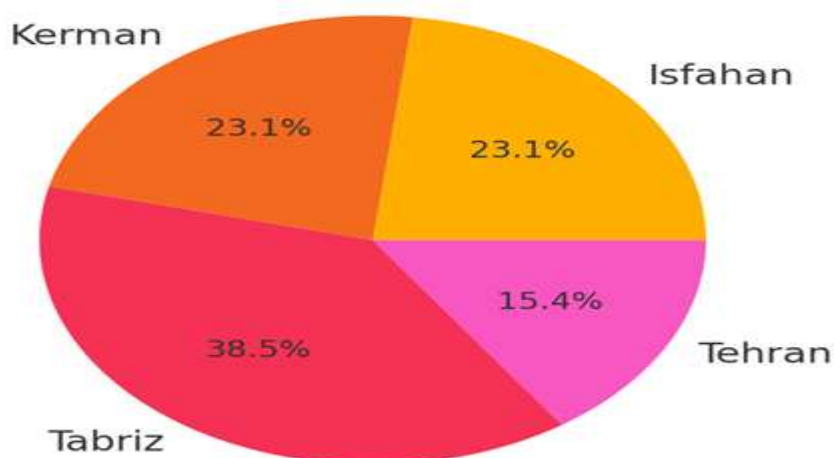
4.4 **Bar Chart – Symbolic Complexity:** Illustrates the symbolic richness of each carpet on a scale of 1–5, reflecting narrative depth.

4.5. **Grouped Bar Chart – Nature vs Royal Motifs:** Compares the number of nature-related and royalty-related motifs in each carpet.



4.5. **Pie Chart – Distribution of Motifs by Region:** Shows the percentage of motifs contributed by carpets from different Persian regions.

Distribution of Motifs by Region



5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Interpreting Narrative Structures in Persian Carpets

Interpreting narrative structures in Persian carpets involves more than merely identifying recognizable scenes; it requires understanding how weavers manipulate visual cues, such as composition, scale, color, and motif repetition, to guide the viewer through a story. Persian carpets, particularly pictorial examples like the Shah Abbas and Tabriz carpets, serve as narrative mediums that convey elaborate tales, cultural beliefs, and social structures. Through intricate motifs and compositional arrangements, these carpets encapsulate epic stories drawn from Persian mythology, religious texts, and royal chronicles. For instance, Shah Abbas carpets often incorporate lion and sun motifs or battle scenes that symbolically represent royal power and divine legitimacy, and created elaborate narrative designs with a central medallion, with adjacent panels and corner spandrels illustrating scenes from courtly life, heroic deeds, or mythical stories. The concentric layout initially directs the observer's attention to the central emblem, typically symbolizing a venerated figure or divine entity, and subsequently outward to smaller, interconnected scenes that progress in a rhythmic, circular manner. Such storytelling elements are not merely decorative; they are deeply embedded in the historical memory and political symbolism of their time, effectively transforming carpets into visual manuscripts of Persian identity (Karbalaie 2012).x

In many carpets, narrative is not linear in the Western sense but unfolds through a combination of hierarchical arrangement and symbolic juxtaposition. For example, a central medallion might represent a pivotal moment, perhaps a heroic figure or spiritual revelation, from which subsidiary vignettes radiate outward, each vignette providing context or aftermath. The viewer's eye is first drawn to this focal point, then led along deliberate visual pathways, often formed by the orientation of animals, directional gazes of figures, or connecting elements like vines or architectural lines, toward secondary episodes. In this way, the carpet's field becomes a stage on which multiple "scenes" coexist, and the act of interpretation involves moving between these scenes as though turning the pages of a book, even though no actual sequence is prescribed.

Beyond compositional hierarchy, color and contrast play a vital role in demarcating narrative progression. A shift from a saturated, warm palette in one quadrant to a cooler or more muted scheme in another can signal a change in time, mood, or setting. For instance, sunsets or dawn depicted with softer tones may denote transitions—victory realized, love unfulfilled, or a journey completed—while brighter, more vigorous hues in adjacent panels might represent action or divine intervention. Subtle gradations of dye, coupled with knot density, can also create spatial illusions: figures in the "foreground" appear more detailed and intensely colored, while those in the background recede into muted shades. Interpreting

these technical markers allows scholars to understand how a single carpet can convey temporal shifts—morning to dusk, battle to aftermath—without resorting to pictorial realism.

The interplay of symbolic motifs further enriches narrative interpretation. A single motif thread, such as a serpent winding through several registers or a repeating floral pattern linking scenes, can be a thematic connective, reinforcing ideas of renewal, temptation, or divine protection. Similarly, border motifs may function like chapter headings, framing each narrative segment and reminding the viewer of the story's larger context. For example, a continuous vine border might underscore themes of fertility and cyclical time, reminding the viewer that even as individual episodes unfold, they exist within an eternal framework. Understanding how these motifs operate both within and between narrative panels is crucial; it demonstrates that carpets are not merely collections of isolated scenes but carefully orchestrated ensembles where each element resonates with others.

Comparing carpets across historical periods—Safavid, Qajar, and contemporary—reveals shifts in narrative strategies that reflect broader cultural changes. Safavid carpets often mirror miniature painting conventions, emphasizing concentric hierarchies and symbolic emphasis on courtly or religious figures. Their stories are read as sacred or imperial affirmations, where spatial arrangement confirms social or divine order. Qajar-era carpets, by contrast, embrace a more panoramic, horizontal sequencing: episodes are laid out like a continuous scroll, lending themselves to a quasi-cinematic reading where the viewer “travels” across hills, palaces, and battlefields. Contemporary weavers sometimes deconstruct both approaches, fragmenting narrative into abstracted symbols or recombining traditional registers with modern iconography—urban skylines, political caricatures, or personal memoirs—forcing a more participatory form of interpretation in which the viewer must actively piece together meaning from seemingly disparate elements.

In analytical practice, interpreting a pictorial carpet's narrative demands an interdisciplinary approach. One must be versed in poetic and historical source material—knowing, for instance, which epic or romance the carpet alludes to—while also understanding visual grammar: how geometry, color, and spatial relationships convey metaphor. A researcher might begin by identifying key figures, animals, or architectural cues and then cross-reference them with literary or historical texts to ascertain their narrative significance. Next, attention to technical aspects—knot count, dye variation, and weaving style—can highlight how artisans emphasized particular scenes or motifs. Finally, considering the carpet's original context (patronage, intended location, or ritual use) offers insight into why certain narratives were chosen and which audiences were meant to “read” them. In sum, interpreting narrative in Persian carpets is a layered exercise that combines formal analysis, iconographic study, and cultural history to unlock the stories woven into every knot.

5.2. Visual Storytelling Techniques

Pictorial Persian carpets employ a sophisticated visual lexicon where symbols, colors, and spatial arrangements are meticulously designed to convey layered meanings. These carpets can illustrate both linear narratives, where motifs follow a sequential pattern to depict events, and non-linear storytelling, where themes and symbols are scattered across the carpet's field, inviting interpretive engagement from the viewer (Shahram 2017). For example, a central medallion might symbolize a divine realm while peripheral motifs narrate the journey of a hero or mythical figure. The use of flora, fauna, and geometric forms as storytelling tools reflects a syncretic approach to visual narration that transcends language, making the stories accessible even to those unfamiliar with Persian script or oral traditions (Moazami 2011).

Weavers utilize the orientation of animals or individuals to direct our gaze: if a horse is racing to the right, our attention is drawn to the subsequent scene to the right. Plants and vines can transition from one image to another, providing a visual “bridge” between images. Colour changes can assist in conveying changes in time or emotion. For example, blues and greens can signify quiet, dusk, or relaxation after a conflict, while bright reds and golds can indicate action or celebration.

The carpet's recurring flower or vine design connects unlike narrative elements and serves as a reminder that every scene is a part of an overall all together. The carpet's outer border functions as a frame or chapter marker, encapsulating the narrative and suggesting its overarching theme, occasionally incorporating minute symbols of protection or blessings interwoven inside. Important figures are typically

rendered larger and with greater detail than background characters, guiding our attention to them initially.

Through arrangement, directional indications, colour variations, recurring themes, and scale, Persian carpets transform into vibrant narratives on the floor. Without reading a book, an observer of a pictorial carpet can discern a narrative sequence, experience the emotions of each scene, and comprehend the carpet's commentary on history, faith, or heroism.

5.3. Cultural Context of Carpet Storytelling

The cultural backdrop of narrative weaving in Persian carpets highlights how social institutions, patronage systems, and communal traditions influenced the stories conveyed through textile art. In rural weaving villages, making carpets was an intricate communal activity with everyday living, oral storytelling, and seasonal customs rather than an independent craft. During the cooler months, women, who frequently made up the majority of nomadic and village workshops, gathered around the loom to share family histories, epic poetry, and folktales. Each carpet was imprinted with collective memory because of this cooperative setting, which ensured that narrative elements were taken from regional folklore and traditions. Because of this, tribal carpets frequently depict pastoral life symbols, such as stylized tents, grazing animals, and desert vegetation, which represent a lived experience of migration and familial networks. These motifs become less ornamental choices and more mnemonic mechanisms that retain and transmit group identity across generations when examined in conjunction with anthropological narratives of weaving families.

At the same time, the influence of patronage cannot be emphasized in moulding story content. Elite patrons, ranging from landowners and merchants to religious institutions, commissioned carpets that carried specific intellectual, political, or spiritual statements. For instance, a noble family might ask for scenes from a famous epic poem to prove their lineage or show off their martial skills. In these instances, the incorporation of exemplary individuals or royal iconography served as a visual affirmation of social status, converting carpets into tools of political propaganda. Comparative analyses of archival documents and still present carpet fragments demonstrate that commissioned narrative content frequently corresponded with the patron's social role, illustrating a symbiotic relationship between patron expectations and weaver creativity. Regional identity added to the story the lexicon of Persian carpets. For example, urban workshops in Tabriz and Isfahan made carpets for a more cosmopolitan group of people. These carpets included courtly scenes, architectural motifs, and references to classical literature. Weavers could use pattern books and small paintings in these centres to turn complicated stories into detailed carpets.

Furthermore, there are more levels of interpretive depth available at the intersection of gendered perspectives. Female weavers frequently incorporated their own experiences into smaller prayer rugs or dowry pieces, while male patrons dictated large, ceremonial carpets that depicted grand narratives—epic battles, royal processions, or religious allegories. The mihrab (prayer niche), peacocks (immortality), and pomegranates (fertility) are among the motifs found in these textiles, which represent women's roles in the home and domestic customs. Thus, integrating oral histories into carpet analysis enhances our comprehension of narrative diversity by illuminating how carpet storytelling was influenced by both the public and private domains.

In conclusion, beyond aesthetics, Persian carpets function as cultural texts embedded in specific social contexts. In royal courts, carpets were often commissioned to project authority, commemorate events, or align the ruler with divine or heroic archetypes. In domestic settings, they played a role in storytelling traditions, often placed in spaces where family gatherings or poetic recitations occurred, thereby acting as silent narrators of shared values and aspirations (Moghadam 2010). Furthermore, the communal nature of carpet production, where design, weaving, and dyeing often involved the collective labor of women and artisans, infuses the finished product with embedded narratives of community, gender roles, and intergenerational knowledge transfer (Simin 2016). This interplay between cultural function and visual narration underscores the significance of Persian carpets as both material artifacts and vessels of intangible heritage. In summary, patronage-driven narratives, regional identities, gendered experiences, transregional interactions, and collective weaving practices are all included in the cultural context of carpet storytelling.

6. CONCLUSION

Persian pictorial carpets emerge from this study as rich, multi-layered narrative forms that go beyond their utilitarian or decorative roles to act as vibrant vessels of cultural storytelling. Through the interplay of symbolism, color schemes, spatial composition, and visual motifs, these carpets effectively convey stories rooted in Persian mythology, religious belief systems, and historical events (Adeli 2019). Each knot and motif functions as a visual lexeme within a larger narrative language, enabling the carpets to communicate complex ideas and identities without the use of text. Their enduring relevance in contemporary art and cultural discourse further underscores their capacity to bridge traditional forms with evolving aesthetic and narrative expectations.

This research offers valuable insights into the role of textile art as a medium for preserving and communicating historical and cultural narratives. In examining Persian carpets through a narrative lens, the study also contributes to broader discussions on non-verbal art forms and their potential to encapsulate and transmit collective memory. These carpets represent a fusion of artistic practice and socio-cultural documentation, functioning as both artifacts and active storytellers within Persian heritage.

Future research should delve deeper into the regional variations in Persian carpet storytelling, recognizing that design language may differ across Isfahan, Tabriz, Kerman, and other carpet-producing centers. Moreover, there is a growing need for interdisciplinary studies that combine methods from art history, anthropology, semiotics, and narratology to fully unpack the layered meanings embedded in these carpets. Such approaches will enrich our understanding of how material culture serves as a narrative archive and how it continues to evolve in response to contemporary cultural currents.

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