

A border cartouche from one of the pair of Ardabil Medallion Carpets

Central Persia, Probably Qazvin
c. 1539–1540

67 × 43.1 cm at widest points, mounted on a stretcher measuring 83.2 × 59.2 cm; Fragment from the side border of the Ardabil carpet; wool pile on silk foundation, undyed silk warp, 2S piled; undyed silk weft, Z spun, 3 shoot; asymmetric wool knotting, Z spun, open to the left; knot count: V/H cm: 8–9/10–11; the wefts running across the narrower dimension of the fragment. Dyes including ivory, saffron, pale rose crimson, crimson, orange madder, sky blue, apple green (abrash in upper and lower cloudbands), very dark indigo, very pale walnut, dark blackish walnut (partially corroded).

Provenance

The Ardabil Shrine, c. 1539–1540

Ziegler & Co., London, purchased from the shrine via local agents in Ardabil, c. 1886

Vincent Robinson and Co., London, by late December 1891

Removed from the border of the Ardabil carpet now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art c. 1900

Collection of Victor Afia (1908–1992), who purchased it locally in Oxford, where he had an antique carpet and textiles shop at 58 Oxford High St, by 1940
Thence by descent

This carpet fragment features a near-complete cartouche from the border of the Ardabil Medallion Carpet – perhaps the most famous carpet in the world. The pair of Ardabil carpets are significant for a number of reasons: the extremely fine quality of the carpets' weave and design, their historical significance in Safavid Persia and related dated inscription that reads: "Except for thy threshold, there is no refuge for me in all the world. Except for this door there is no resting-place for my head. The work of the slave of the portal, Maqsud Kashani." The history of the Ardabil's reception and restoration in Europe in the nineteenth century is well published. Though the Ardabil was woven for a Safavid context and did not make its way to Europe until the nineteenth century, finely woven Persian 'spiral arabesque' carpets like the Ardabil arrived in Europe in the sixteenth century as diplomatic gifts from Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–1576). These carpets appear in European portraiture and inventories from the middle of the sixteenth century. A related example of a Safavid 'spiral arabesque' carpet is also published in this catalogue (cat. 58).

The pair of dated and inscribed Ardabil carpets were probably commissioned by Shah Tahmasp in 1539–1540 for the shrine of his ancestor Shaikh Safi al-Din (1252–1334), the founder of the Safavid dynasty, in Ardabil in northwest Persia. Our fragment, which constitutes a border cartouche, features elegantly drawn interlacing arabesques, cloud bands and naturalistic lotus motifs against a rich and densely woven red ground, probably was once part of the carpets missing its borders in the Los Angeles Museum of Art, although we cannot be certain of this as the complete

Ardabil medallion carpet in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London has numerous insertions. The use of silk in the foundation weave, as well as the high quality of the tightly spun pile wool, reflects a refined use of materials reserved for the most prestigious Safavid commissions. If the Los Angeles carpet were complete, based upon the example in London it would have measured 535 x 1044 cm, the carpet would have had a remarkable 35,721,660 knots in total. Reportedly, the Los Angeles carpet with some 6080 knots to the sq. dm is marginally finer in weave than the London carpet at 5300 knots to sq. dm. In addition to the technical feat of setting up looms and completing a carpet of this size, the variety and richness of the colours within its coherent and seamless design make the Ardabil a superlative example. The carpet must have been completed under the auspices of a master weaver of the Safavid court workshops. The excellence of the carpet is further exemplified by the inclusion of remarkably bright dye pigments mostly made from local plants, such as madder orange, pale blue and a vivid, pulsating green, in addition to rich indigo blue and magenta dyes from India. Small remaining fragments of the ivory-hued border can be seen around the edges of the cartouche. The virtuoso sophistication of the Ardabil Carpet reflects the highest quality of weaving produced during the reign of Shah Tahmasp.

The arrival of the Ardabil Carpet(s) in Europe

In 1892, William Morris saw the Ardabil Carpet, now held in the Victoria and Albert Museum, in a special two-week



Fig. 57.1
The Ardabil Carpet
Iran
1539–1540
1,044 cm × 535.5 cm; Wool pile on silk foundation
London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. 272-1893

exhibition at the Wigmore Street Gallery. Along with a group of other museum patrons, Morris helped the Victoria and Albert Museum acquire it the following year. Morris described the carpet as “a remarkable work of art ... the design is of singular perfection ... and its size and splendour as a piece of workmanship do full justice to the beauty and intellectual qualities of the design”. Held in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum thenceforth (fig. 57.1), it has since been discovered that there were two Ardabil carpets, and that portions of the second one, acquired by J. Paul Getty and given in 1953 to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, were used to repair and restore the version now in London.

In 1926, Alfred Brown, chairman of the company that had imported the Ardabil carpets to England, signed a document stating that the version in the Victoria and Albert Museum was imported along with its pair. Both of the nearly four-hundred-year-old carpets had arrived in London in dilapidated condition, and the version in the Victoria and Albert Museum was restored to its current state using portions of the second

carpet. Thus, to enable the presentation of a single ‘complete’ carpet rather than two damaged ones, some of the pieces of the Los Angeles carpet had been used to repair its London twin. It was largely through these restoration efforts that the LACMA carpet was reduced in length and lost its main border. Our cartouche is one of the pieces separated from the original carpets as a result of these interventions. Eighteen small fragments from the pair survive and are now held in global museum collections, including in the Rietberg Museum in Zurich, the Burrell Collection, Glasgow (inv. 9.120) and the Teppichhaus Carl Hopf in Stuttgart (Erdmann 1970, p. 32). Others are in the Textile Museum in Washington, D. C. (Ellis 1964, pp. 18–20), a Genoese private collection (Hali 189, p. 36), the Asia Institute in Shiraz and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (inv. 03.701). Our fragment, referred to as the ‘Afia Fragment,’ was in the collection of the antiquarian carpet dealer Victor Afia, in Oxfordshire, by 1940.

Blair 2019; Franses 2014; Wearden 1995; Stead 1974; Erdmann 1960



