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*Safavid carpets at MITA, Brescia*



# A SAFAVID QAJAR MIX

MITA, the new carpet museum in Brescia, Italy, intends to present the complete Tassara collection over coming years, with selections changing every six months. Michael Franses uses his particular interest in Safavid carpets to review its current display 'Persia Felix'



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**M**useum installations tend to remain relatively unchanged. Thus, we often return to our favourites to revisit much-loved works of art. New installations in major museums often take years of planning; one such has been completed recently in the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha (HALI 214, pp.92–99) and another is being prepared for the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, as is another for the Islamic rooms in the Louvre, Paris. These museums have large collections covering many different media and present only a small selection of their extensive collections of classical carpets. Others remain in deep storage, available by appointment only. On the other hand, MITA (Museo Internazionale del Tappeto Antico) in Brescia is one of a few institutions devoted entirely to the art of the carpet, and the first in western Europe. (The others are: Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum, Baku; Arkas Art Bornova, Mattheys Mansion, Izmir; Carpet Museum of Iran, Tehran; Vakıflar Museum, Ankara.)

The presentation space at MITA is not extensive. The main showing space is on two levels, and three other small rooms; between forty and fifty carpets can be presented at any one time. The plan is to change the entire installation every six months, each time offering a new selection. This will allow visitors to see the entire holdings over the next fifteen years and should encourage regular visits. To some degree this approach has also been adopted by The Textile Museum in Washington, DC—it too has a large collection and relatively small exhibition space.

The founder of MITA, the financier Romain Zaleski, was born in Paris in 1933. He is a kind and generous benefactor who is passionate about art and wants to share his his great love of antique handmade carpets. In 2008, he formed the Tassara Foundation, whose website informs us:

Zaleski received recognition from the Lombardy Regional Authority to provide funding and the Foundation will operate as a non-profit organisation with its main sphere of reference being culture, education and training. This will be achieved through the promotion of and participation in high-quality initiatives at school and university level. The Foundation also conducts charitable and social solidarity activities and those of public utility in the Valle Camonica area, promoting improvements in the quality of life within the community and stimulating its civil, cultural, social, environmental and economic development, while financing specific projects in collaboration with other public and private bodies.

These are indeed worthy aims; we are assured that the Foundation is exceedingly well endowed and has the means and ability to achieve its ambitions.

The first ‘museum’ presentation of the Zaleski collection, ‘Serenissima Trame’ at the Giorgio Franchetti Gallery at Ca’ d’Oro in

1 Previous pages: installation view of ‘Persia Felix. Tappeti, Metalli e Miniature dalla antiche città’, at MITA, Brescia. On the floor is the Parish-Watson medallion carpet, Tabriz, circa 1475–1514, first exhibited by Arthur Upham Pope at the Arts Club in Chicago in 1926; hanging from the ceiling is a Kerman ‘vase’ carpet, circa 1600–1650, that was on loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam between 1954–1978; on the wall is the James B. Duke palmette and cloud band carpet from Esfahan, circa 1585–1625

2-3 Installation views of ‘Persia Felix’ at MITA, Brescia showing 16th–17th-century Safavid carpets from the museum collection alongside 19th-century examples



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Venice in 2017, was outstanding in the choice of superb exhibits and the wonderful installation. Twenty-six ‘classical-period’ carpets were shown together with some old master paintings depicting historical carpets, attracting 43,700 visitors (HALI 190, p.67, HALI 192, pp.59–71). Over the intervening years, the Tassara Foundation’s energies have been devoted to locating, acquiring, designing and building a permanent home for the collection. Last year, Zaleski gave the Tassara Foundation 1,336 antique carpets. MITA is now set in a beautiful small building designed specifically to store the entire collection while having the space to present ever-changing selections, with no admission charge to the public.

The present team at MITA currently includes no carpet experts—those with deep experience in the field are rare—but it hopes to train some in the future. The team has other extraordinary skills rarely found in traditional museums, in particular in communication and marketing. An aim is to introduce new and younger audiences to these little-understood and remarkably beautiful works of art. This initiative has been spearheaded by Romain’s son, Wladimir Zaleski, a recognised expert in theatre design and video making. Giovanni Valagussa, the museum curator, comes from the world of Old Master paintings, and is known for a remarkable discovery in 2018 that led to two parts of an important Mantegna painting being reunited. The team also includes

Elena Barberi, who studied the ancient art of the Near East, and the conservator Irene Caputo.

Romain Zaleski’s collection embraces examples from Spain to China, from the 15th to the 19th centuries. Almost a hundred years ago, George Hewitt Myers founded The Textile Museum in Washington, DC, and it too developed from his outstanding collection of historical carpets and the textile arts, becoming the leading museum of its kind in the world. From this new beginning in Brescia, MITA and Romain Zaleski’s dream will hopefully bring to Europe an outstanding centre that will continue in perpetuity.

#### Forming the collection

For some forty years, Romain Zaleski has been an extraordinarily passionate collector with an eye beyond carpets alone. His wife is an art historian with a scholar’s eye for Renaissance paintings. Together, they have an outstanding collection of European tapestries, published in *Textile Art Masterpieces: Tapestries and Embroideries in the Zaleski Collection* by Nello Forti Grazzini, Chiara Buss and Gianluca Bovenzi (Moshe Tabibnia Research Centre, 2014). It is to be hoped that one day MITA will emulate these high standards of scholarship with regard to the carpet collection.

Like many others, in the early years Zaleski acquired 19th-century rugs. Initially advised by Davide Halevim, he later turned to Moshe



4 'PrinceAlbrecht' garden carpet fragment, Karadagh (?), northwest Persia, 1650–1700. Wool on cotton and wool, 2.08 x 2.42 m (6' 10" x 7' 11"). Tassara Foundation, MITA, 156809.1. Formerly: Private collection (USA?) to 1989; Barbara Zidell Sedlin James Burns, Seattle to 2009. Another field section once with Prince Albrecht of Prussia (1837–1906)

5 The Topkapi Paris imperial niche rug, probably Qazvin, central Persia, 1565–1575. Asymmetrically knotted wool on silk foundation, with flattened silver, 1.15 x 1.70 m (3' 9" x 5' 7"). Tassara Foundation, MITA, 174017-2. Formerly: Shah Tahmasp I (?) until 1567; Sultan Selim II from 1567 and by descent; sold by Sultan Abruilaziz circa 1875 (?); Private collection, Paris; The Textile Gallery, London; Private collection, Switzerland; Moshe Tabibnia, Milan; Romain Zaleski, Milan

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Tabibnia, who had access to many of the best examples of carpets from the classical period of the 15th–17th centuries, the result of a combination of foresight and timing. One of the foremost 'collector-dealers' of such carpets was Marino Dall'Oglia (1924–2013) who, between 1997 and 2002, began reducing his holdings. A few items were placed in auctions, while some important masterpieces were sold privately to the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha. Between 2004 and 2009 however, the policy in Doha was to buy mainly at auction. This created the opportunity for Tabibnia to acquire directly some of the very best that Dall'Oglia had owned. Several of these pieces were later sold to Zaleski, three of which are presented in this new installation. Zaleski purchased many other outstanding classical-period carpets from dealers and at public auctions.

The international trade in antique rugs relies predominantly on 19th and 20th-century examples, as these are not only accessible but also more affordable. There are quite a number of collectors of 16th- and 17th-century Turkish rugs because these are more readily available, many of them having been imported into Europe from the 15th century onwards. Remarkably few Persian carpets from that period come on to the market; several may be large, or worn, or parts of once-large carpets. Also, the very best Persian carpets tend to be costly—the current record price at auction is 33.8 million US dollars. Twenty-five other Persian examples sold in public auction have exceeded the current record price for a Turkish carpet, namely \$567,120, from twenty-two years ago.

However, this does not reflect the values of either Turkish or Persian carpets sold privately. Rarely do the great masterpieces change hands in the spotlight of public auctions. Around the world, there are many collectors of antique rugs with a value of between \$10,000 and \$300,000, in particular, of examples from tribal groups. One would be hard pressed to acquire a Safavid masterpiece at this price, although one may occasionally acquire a superb fragment. Two of the most significant and astute art connoisseurs of our times, David Sylvester and Howard Hodgkin, both acquired superb fragments of Safavid carpets.

*The aim is to introduce new and younger audiences to these remarkably beautiful works of art*

A century and a half ago, the industrialists of America purchased many of the remaining Safavid carpets from old European stately homes. Charles Tyson Yerkes (1837–1905) hung many of his like paintings, while John D. Rockefeller cut an important historical carpet to fit his library (10); others, for example Henry Osborne Havemeyer (1847–1907), simply placed them on their floors. Thus many were destroyed. When these wealthy Americans died, their mansions were





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pulled down and their carpets were bequeathed to museums. There they remain, rarely, if ever exhibited yet meticulously preserved, to be studied and hopefully enjoyed by future generations. Western museums have rarely formed collections of the best 19th-century rugs—that is, apart from The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, and the de Young Museum in San Francisco. While forming his collection, with regard to examples from Persia, Zaleski decided that he should have both Safavid-period (1501–1736) and Qajar-period (1789–1925) examples.

**The presentation**

The installation 'Persia Felix. Tappeti, Metalli e Miniature dalle antiche città' opened at MITA on 3 March and closed on 14 July. What was most unusual about it, was that the curator chose to present eleven Safavid-period carpets alongside twelve Qajar-period carpets. We have been informed that visitors are reasonably familiar with Qajar-period carpets; they can easily identify them with types they may own or will have seen in carpet shops and at auction over the years. They are less familiar with Safavid-period carpets. By presenting them in the same rooms, it was thought, people might discover the fabulous colours and superb designs that may be seen in the originals.

The idea is understandable, yet the numbers of later rugs presented in the installation were possibly more than was needed for this unusual plan. Even so, eleven of the Safavid-period carpets displayed were masterpieces, and to see so many together was an opportunity not to be missed. The Tassara collection has 261 Persian carpets, of

which twenty-seven are from the Safavid period and 234 from the Qajar period. The Safavid carpets are for the most part the 'originals', while the Qajar-period carpets could be considered as 'reproductions'. Many of the Safavid carpets are breath-taking, with fabulous colours made from natural dyes and the very finest materials. Most of all they have proportions of space and design that have never been revived.

The actual choice of Safavid carpets appeared on the face of it to be quite diverse. The caption cards gave the dimensions, the inventory numbers and their proposed place of making, although in several cases our opinion might differ. A concurrent display of historical carpets from the Bruschetti collection at MAO (Museum of Oriental Art) in Turin included a reciprocal loan from Tassara; each of the exhibits had 150-word caption labels, as well as there being full catalogue entries available through QR codes. One should expect and indeed demand this serious approach from a new museum devoted to the art of the carpet.

So, can we expect from MITA a revolutionary kind of curating? One might argue that placing Safavid carpets alongside Qajar-period examples might educate the viewers as to the enormous differences. Others might suggest that this presentation could be compared to presenting Clouet, Corot and Courbet paintings side by side, without any explanation and simply because they are all French. Perhaps the influence of popular rug books is present here, books in which the entire history of carpets is joined together regardless of age—an approach pursued to some degree in HALI when illustrating carpets from the very earliest right through to the 20th century in the same issue. This is not

6 Album page with zoomorphic calligraphy, Persia, late 16th century. Watercolour, gold and ink on paper. The Bruschetti Foundation for Islamic and Asian Art, P.04.43

7 Leaf from *The Gulistan* (The Rose Garden) of Sa'di, Tabriz, Persia, 1525–1540. Opaque

watercolour, gold and silver on coloured paper. The Bruschetti Foundation for Islamic and Asian Art, P.04.23

8 View of rugs on the first floor; 17th-century 'vase' carpet fragment in the foreground from the Bruschetti Foundation

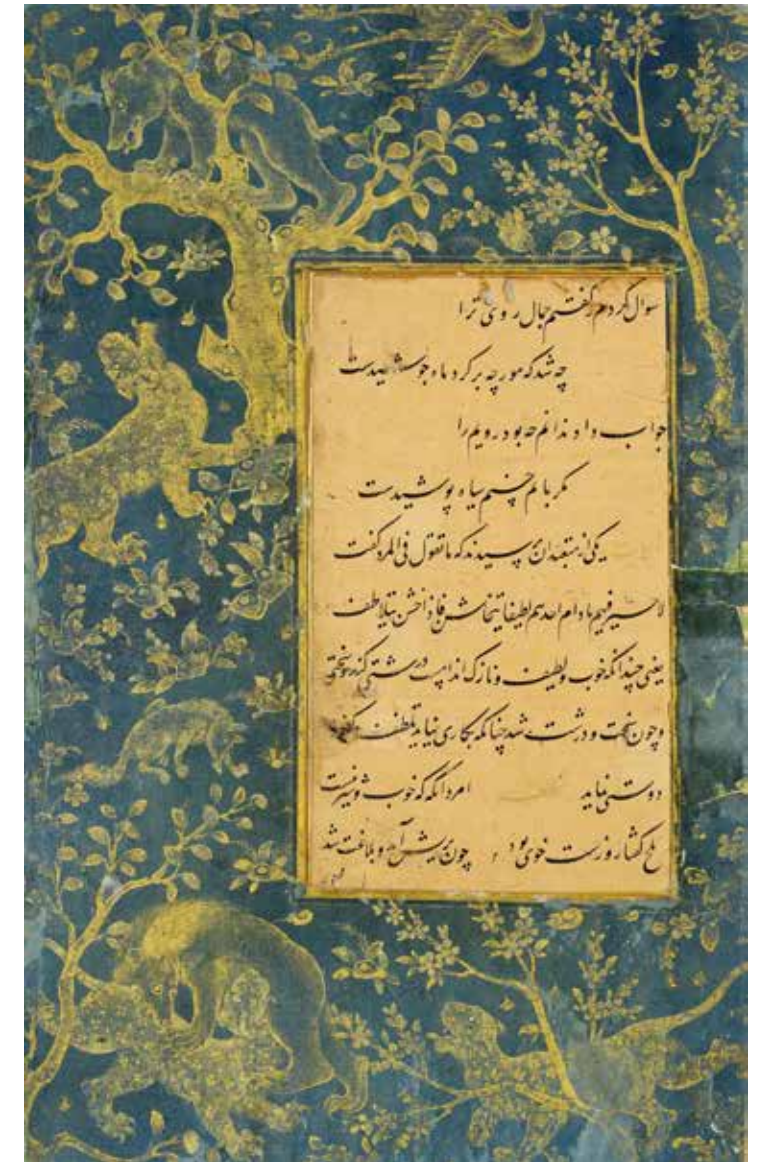
to say that a superb early 19th-century silk Heriz or Farahan rug cannot be beautiful, but that Qajar-period rugs are very different from those from the Safavid period.

Included in the MITA installation were pieces from two other collections: a small fragment of a Kerman 'vase' carpet and three Safavid paintings loaned from the Bruschetti Foundation, Genoa; and eight Islamic bronzes from the NUR Islamic Metalworks Collection (Milan) of Marco Galateri. Two of the three paintings could be related to Safavid carpets. One was an Octanium-green page with gilt-decorated margins framing a page of text from the *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden) of Sa'di, attributed to Tabriz, circa 1525–40 (7). Depicted in the margins are fighting animals among trees, such as one might see in examples of the 'Paradise Park' group of carpets, although none were presented.

The Bruschetti Foundation provided some excellent notes by Eleanor Sims. Some of her chosen words here could have put these major artworks into their historical perspective.

The famous Sultan Ali Mashhadi (1453–1520) has long been proposed as the scribe; Sa'di's text is recognised as *Gulistan* and the marginal drawings have been attributed to Sultan-Muhammad, the Turkmen painter Aq Aoyunlu with a particularly vivid artistic energy who also worked for the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmasp in Tabriz... The text was copied at the end of the 15th or the beginning of the 16th century and at a later stage, also uncertain, the text pages were re-margined and mounted on a coloured paper support on which beautiful animal and landscape drawings were painted in gold, with occasional touches of silver. On the sheet, bears, leopards and a smaller quadruped, possibly a fox, hunt in a dense forest; a majestic crane flies in the upper margin. Similar gilded landscapes are frequently used to adorn the margins of some of the most beautiful 16th-century manuscripts.

The other painting was from a late 16th-century Persian album page depicting a lion, with calligraphy (6); here the field pattern of flowers in yellow on ivory without outlines could be related to the background to the borders in the two Shah Tahmasp imperial prayer rugs on display where complimentary colours are juxtaposed without outlines (5). One more album page was included, and notes had been prepared for all these paintings as well as the beautiful fragment of a circa 1600–1650 Kerman 'vase' carpet that the Bruschetti Foundation had loaned to the current presentation (2, 8)—but they were not available to visitors.



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Photo Credit: Wladimir Zaleski

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A well-made video projected on a large screen drew extensively on the line-drawings that appear within the pages of *Journal du voyage du chevalier Chardin en Perse & aux Indes Orientales, par la Mer Noire & la Colchide* (1686). Produced by film-maker Wladimir Zaleski, it presented numerous fascinating glimpses of a few of the main cities in Persia in the 17th century, accompanied by music and poems. To see the original manuscript, visit: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1040006r/f1.item#>.

#### An introduction to the Safavid carpets

The founder of the Persian Safavid dynasty was Shah Ismail I (b. 1487, r. 1501–1524). Ismail made it his aim to impose Shi'i Islam as the national

religion; he believed that this gave him his authority. His eldest son Tahmasp (b. 1514, r. 1524–1576) was born to Tajlu Khanum, Ismail's principal consort, in Shāhābād, near Esfahan, in February 1514. In August 1514 at the Battle of Chaldiran, a site now in eastern Anatolia, Ismail's army were completely defeated by the Ottoman Sultan Selim I (b. 1470, r. 1512–1520). The Ottomans were armed with rifles; the Safavids, countering with bows and arrows, lost one third of their men.

The entire Persian court was in attendance at the battle. Ismail was seriously wounded and managed to escape to Qazvin. In the confusion, one of Ismail's wives, Tajlu Khanum, and her five-month-old Tahmasp became lost; eventually they were reportedly found by Mirza Shah

9 The Tereschenko-Khanenko rows of trees rug, Esfahan, central Persia, 1625–1650. Asymmetrically knotted wool on wool, 1.37 x 1.88 m (4' 6" x 6' 2"). Tassara Foundation, MITA, 129670.2. Formerly: Tereschenko-Khanenko Collection, Kiev; Dr. J. Goldschmidt, Berlin 1927–?; Private collection, Austria; Moshe Tabibnia, Milan; Romain Zaleski, Milan

10 The Harris-Rockefeller palmettes and cloudbands carpet fragment, Qazvin, central Persia, 1550–1560. Wool on silk, original size 2.96 x 5.80 m (9' 9" x 19"), now 1.83 x 1.93 m (6' 0" x 6' 4"). Tassara Foundation, MITA, 134458-2. Formerly: Lionel Harris (1862–1943), Spanish Art Galleries, London; Duveen Brothers, New York, purchased carpet in 1922; John D. Rockefeller Jr., New York (the carpet was then reduced in length); Nelson Rockefeller, New York; Margareta Large 'Happy' Rockefeller, New York; The Textile Gallery, London, and Herrmann, Munich; Marino Dall'Oglio, Milan; Moshe Tabibnia, Milan; Romain Zaleski, Milan. The lower part with borders is in the Carpet Museum of Iran, 238



Photo Credit: Wladimir Zaleski

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Khanum, and taken to Qazvin. At least one or more of Ismail's other wives were captured and taken to Constantinople.

Following Chaldiran, Selim I and the Ottoman army moved on to Tabriz, briefly occupying the city. Ismail gave up battles and died in 1524; Tahmasp, then just ten years old, became the new shah, initially relying upon others for advice. The Ottomans attacked Persia several times during and after the reign of Tahmasp; each time, the Persian army did not give battle but retreated. Throughout his life Tahmasp bestowed magnificent gifts to the Ottoman Sultans: first Suleiman (b. 1494, r. 1520–1566), then Selim II, and then successor Murad III. These gifts included many important carpets, including two silk-foundation wool prayer rugs embellished with precious metal thread that were included in this presentation (5).

It is often stated that the capital of Persia was moved to Qazvin in 1555 and that it remained there until 1598 when Shah Abbas I (b. 1571, r. 1588–1629) rebuilt the centre of Esfahan. However, practically speaking the capital of the Persians was always where the ruler resided—and, throughout the reigns of Ismail, Tahmasp and Abbas, the rulers travelled almost continuously around Persia, often staying

less than ten days before their enormous pitched tent cities moved on. These tent cities contained not only all the courtiers but many of the royal craftsmen.

The eleven Safavid carpets shown at MITA are a fabulous introduction to the subject, although a slightly different selection from Tassara's Persian carpets could have demonstrated this more effectively. Many of the carpets had potential to reveal fascinating stories about their provenance and special place in art history, as well as how they compared with other related examples. To my taste the presentation should have included more of the Safavid carpets and fewer from the Qajar period; certainly several important Safavid carpets from the Tassara Collection that were excluded could have served a useful purpose if they had been present. However, the opportunity for art lovers and carpet experts to see eleven Safavid carpets together is one that unfortunately rarely occurs, and for that reason it offers a valuable experience. ♣

MITA and 'Persia Felix' can be viewed by group special arrangement until 27 September. Full texts for some of the Safavid carpets presented at MITA will be available in the coming months at [hali.com](http://hali.com)