

COLLECTORS' FOCUS



ISLAMIC CARPETS

A surge of interest from the Gulf States is reinvigorating this market traditionally dominated by German collectors, writes **Lucian Harris**.

Carpets have long been one of the most popular and visible aspects of Islamic art, prized in the west since Venetian merchants brought them from Persia in the 14th century. The rug and carpet trade exists at many levels, ranging from the ubiquitous high street 'carpet liquidation sale' to museum-quality pieces sold at Christie's and Sotheby's or through a tight network of private dealers. Even at an expensive level, carpets are most commonly bought as home decoration, and the collecting of rare and important historical pieces is restricted to museums and a few wealthy private individuals.

'Collectibles and historical carpets represent only about 5% of the trade', says Simon Franses of S Franses, the Jermyn Street gallery that has been at the top end of the London trade for three generations. 'There is no question that the strongest buyer of historical carpets has been the Museum for Islamic art

in Doha, Qatar', he adds. 'Over the past 10 years they have gone after the best pieces with gusto.'

Qatar has bought at auction and through the trade using a range of intermediaries, most notably Michael Franses, cousin of Simon, director of the Textile Gallery in London and one of the two or three leading international dealers in antique carpets. He became involved in the building of the Qatar collection when it was in the hands of Sheikh Saud al Thani, nephew of the Emir of Qatar, whose vision and ambition was a key factor in making Qatar the pre-eminent force in the market for Islamic art. In an interview with *The Art Newspaper* in 2005, Franses described how the Sheikh had asked him for a list of the greatest carpets in private collections and subsequently attempted to convince each owner to sell theirs to him. Qatar was the buyer of the carpet that still holds the record for a price paid at auction for an Oriental carpet, a 16th-century Tabriz medallion rug from the collections of Barons Nathaniel and Albert von Rothschild that sold at Christie's in London in July 1999 for £1.596m, five times its high estimate (Fig. 2).

Observers in the trade believe that Sheikh Saud may now be concentrating on building his own personal collection. Inevitably, his name is often linked to the top lots at auction, such as the large late-16th-century Isfahan that sold for £770,400 at Christie's, London, last April, and, at the same auction, a silk and metal-thread 'Polonaise' rug, also from Isfahan, which made £568,800. However, when a fabulous Safavid rug decorated with animals and flowers from the collection of Lily and Edmund Safra sold for \$2.032m at Sotheby's, New York in November 2005, Sheikh Saud was out of the market, having been charged with embezzling funds from his uncle.

Recent Islamic art auctions have suggested that new buyers are emerging, both private and institutional. Gulf States, notably Abu Dhabi and Dubai, have announced cultural initiatives to rival those of Qatar, Kuwait's Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah is said to be buying again after a lull and rumours of new museums abound. 'There's nothing like a bit of local competition to get collectors back into the market', says Danny Shaffer, executive editor of *Hali*, the specialist textile magazine. 'I think we are just seeing the beginning of a new era of the market, as Iran is starting to emerge as a major player in buying back important historical carpets', says Samand Setareh, director of Setareh and Söhne, one of Germany's oldest carpet dealers, with galleries in Düsseldorf and Essen. At the moment however, he believes that the main market is still with the European collectors. 'There is a long-standing tradition of carpet collecting in Europe which will be re-invigorated by the interest

1 Mughal Millefiori carpet, north India, c. 1700. Pashmina wool on silk foundation, 142 x 101 cm. Rippon Boswell & Co., Wiesbaden (1 December, 2007), sold to Milan dealer Moshe Tabibnia for €456,000

2 A Tabriz medallion carpet, north west Persia, c. 1550-75. 658 x 356 cm. Christie's, London, the Collection of Barons Nathaniel and Albert von Rothschild (8 July 2008), sold to the Museum for Islamic Art, Qatar, for £1.596m



3 An Isfahan rug, central Persia, c. 1600. Silk, 231 x 170 cm. Christie's, New York, Property from the Doris Duke Collection and the Newport Restoration Foundation (3 June, 2008), estimate: \$1m-\$1.5m

4 Tabris carpet, Iran, mid-19th century. Silk, 178 x 140 cm. With dealers Setareh and Söhne, Germany



that is coming from the Middle East', he says.

'Germany used to be the strongest market in Europe, and German scholars have also been responsible for much of the writing on antique carpets over the past 100 years', says Swedish dealer Peter Willborg of Stockholm gallery JP Willborg. However, according to Shaffer, the German carpet market has seen better days. Dr Setareh acknowledges this recession: 'In 1980 we had 20-25 major dealers of antique carpets in Germany but now it is down to three or four', he says. 'At Setareh and Söhne we have always kept a large inventory, which has turned out to be the right approach' (Fig. 4).

With a large number of family collections, German auctions also continue to produce important pieces. Rippon Boswell & Co in Wiesbaden, run by Detlef and Christa Maltzahn, has specialised in Oriental carpets for over 30 years. On 1 December 2007 they sold a small and rare Mughal Millefiori from around 1700 for €456,000 (Fig. 1). From an old European collection and previously unpublished, it was bought by Moshe Tabibnia, the Milan dealer who is one of the pre-eminent figures in the world of historical Islamic carpets. 'Moshe is really the only dealer who has the clout to compete with the major private collectors', says Shaffer. Tabibnia is involved with a carpet museum due to open in Milan in 2011. His ability to secure for it some of the great treasures of the carpet world was revealed in the exhibition 'Milestones' that was held at his Milan gallery two years ago. According to Ben Evans, editor of *Hali*, it was the best private commercial exhibition that has been seen for years.

Shaffer sees separate markets developing on either side of the Atlantic. 'The decorative market is still based around the strength of the Sotheby's New York sales. Christie's, London, come a close second,

although for important pieces they are at the forefront. This is partly because expert William Robinson is highly regarded and known to be a good judge of what the market will bear and closer to reality than Sotheby's, which has always been more ambitious in their pricing.' All eyes in the market are currently trained on New York, where on 3 June Christie's is selling the Grace Rainey-Rodgers carpet, a silk Safavid rug that by general consensus is one of the best pieces to appear at auction in recent years (Fig. 3). The estimate is \$1m-\$1.5m, but, says Shaffer, 'If conditions are right a record-breaking price is possible.' It is being consigned by the estate of Doris Duke, who bought it at auction from an anonymous vendor in 1990.

Clearly the buzz around the Grace Rainey-Rodgers carpet proves that there is considerable interest in really great Persian carpets. 'At the top of the market it has never been better. Prices have increased exponentially since about 1995, when the world record price at auction was still under \$1m', says Shaffer. 'Now it is up to \$2.5m and looking to go higher, with considerably larger sums being paid privately.'

Although private sales account for the highest prices paid for classical carpets, information about them is rarely made public. 'We've sold a carpet for a multiple of the auction record in a private transaction', says William Robinson. For him, the Holy Grail would be the appearance of a Seljuk carpet on the market. 'The number known about is only just in double figures, and all but one are in institutions in Turkey. For one to appear would be incredibly exciting', he says.

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