



Rachel Bucci
Director of Marketing and Communications
202-667-0441, ext. 42

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FLORAL PERSPECTIVES IN CARPET DESIGN

August 27, 2004 – February 6, 2005

April 23, 2004, Washington, DC — Floral motifs are represented in the arts of many cultures and are ubiquitous in carpet design. Floral Perspectives in Carpet Design examines this phenomenon from three perspectives – spiritual, cultural, and artistic – as rendered in the designs of 17th- to 19th-century Indian, Chinese, Central Asian, Persian, and Turkish carpets. The exhibition explores cultural preferences for the representation of flowers, the variety of floral motifs, and their transfer from culture to culture.

Included in the exhibition are 12 carpets drawn from The Textile Museum's collections, many of which were collected by the Museum's founder, George Hewitt Myers. Most of the carpets were produced for the court, and represent some of the oldest and finest examples of their tradition.

Floral Perspectives in Carpet Design will be on view at The Textile Museum August 27, 2004 – February 6, 2005.



Cross-Cultural Influences on the Representation of Floral Motifs

While certain treatments of floral motifs are often associated with specific cultures, Floral Perspectives in Carpet Design explores the cross-cultural influences that are also at work. For example, the lotus scroll is a motif commonly associated with Chinese art, but it is actually

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Floral Perspectives – 2

the culmination of influences from outside sources. The leaf or vine scroll was well-known and used in the Greco-Roman world, and in the first millennium, some Chinese artists saw this undulating leaf scroll as an effective framework for placing a floral motif. It eventually became the foundation for the lotus and the peony, both popular flowers in Chinese art. Islamic artists and weavers used a similar leaf form, but arranged it differently – giving rise to the *arabesque*, a form of vegetal ornament unique to Islamic art.

From the mid-17th century onwards, flowers permeated Mughal art in India. The Mughal floral style is unique and born from an amalgamation of Mughal/Persian and European designs, most notably botanical drawings. European drawings often depict the full life cycle of a plant in a single page, from buds to fully-formed flowers. Close inspection of floral motifs in the Mughal carpet tradition reveals a similar treatment of individual flowers. While this particular device was incorporated into the Mughal artistic tradition, artists took much license in small embellishments of flowers, leading to detailed images that did not always translate to botanically correct representations.

The passion for flowers and floral compositions in Ottoman art was also very strong, but where Mughal art displayed a preference for naturalistic floral representations, Ottoman artists showed a strong preference for more stylized, geometric compositions of common Ottoman floral motifs – the tulip, rose, hyacinth, and carnation. For easy recognition of any stylized motif, artists tend to focus on the most distinguishing attributes of any object. Similarly, for weavers, the exact replication of flowers as seen in nature is not necessarily the ultimate goal. In Ottoman carpets flowers with distinct profiles, such as tulips and carnations, are typically presented in profile, while a fully-formed rose is usually depicted from above from a “bird’s eye view.”

Symbolism of Floral Motifs

Depending on the context, a specific flower as a symbol in a given culture might carry a whole succession of secular as well as religious meanings. Within an Islamic context, the key elements of flowers in perpetual bloom, flowing water, shade of trees, and copious leaves convey ideas of both spiritual and physical refreshment and imply Heaven – considered a celestial garden in the Islamic tradition. The basic design elements seen on many prayer rugs are floral motifs and a niche. Even if stylized beyond recognition, the flowers in these carpets convey abundance and imply an ever-blooming garden that a person might enter after death.

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Symbolic interpretation can also depend on the context in which a floral motif is used. The lotus, when first introduced into the Chinese artistic repertoire, symbolized the Buddhist notion of purity. In response to Taoist influence, it also gradually took on a meaning of summer, fruitfulness, and offspring. When combined with other symbols, the lotus can convey wishes of happiness and long life.

Related Symposium

27th Annual Rug Convention

"Indian Textile Traditions: Exchange & Transformation"

October 15-17, 2004

Complementing and expanding ideas from the exhibitions *Floral Perspectives in Carpet Design* (August 27, 2004 – February 6, 2005) and *A Garden of Shawls: The Buta and Its Seeds* (October 1, 2004 – March 6, 2005), this two-day conference will explore the enduring influence of Mughal art as expressed in textiles and carpets. Participants will enjoy a rich program of presentations by scholars and researchers, receptions, exhibition tours, and a "Show-and-Tell" of related textiles.

Speakers include: **Dr. Joseph M. Dye III**, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; **Steven Cohen**, independent textile historian, London; **Jeff Spurr**, Cataloguer for Islamic Art, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University; **Dr. Eunice Dauterman Maguire**, Curator, Johns Hopkins University Archaeological Collection; **Arlene Cooper**, independent scholar, New York; **Carol Bier**, Research Associate for Islamic Textiles, The Textile Museum.

Fee: \$215 for Textile Museum members; \$260 for non-members (includes a one-year membership to The Textile Museum). Optional Saturday lunch: \$20. Advance registration required. Registration forms and additional information can be obtained by calling (202) 667-0441, or visiting www.textilemuseum.org/rugconvention.htm

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Founded in 1925 by George Hewitt Myers, The Textile Museum is an international center for the exhibition, study, collection and preservation of the textile arts. The Museum explores the role that textiles play in the daily and ceremonial life of individuals the world over. Special attention is given to textiles of the Near East, Asia, Africa and the indigenous cultures of the Americas. The Museum also presents exhibitions of historical and contemporary quilts, and fiber art. With a collection of more than 17,000 textiles and rugs and an unparalleled library, The Textile Museum is a unique and valuable resource for people locally, nationally and internationally.

The Textile Museum is located at 2320 'S' Street, NW in Washington, DC. The Museum is open Monday - Saturday 10 am to 5:00 pm and Sunday 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm. Admission is free; suggested donation is \$5.00. For further information, call 202-667-0441.

For more information or images, please contact Cyndi Spain at 202-667-0441, ext. 17, or by email at info@textilemuseum.org or visit www.textilemuseum.org/about/pressroom.htm