

Reading Kashan Zoomorphic Carpets of the Safavid Era through Gestalt Principles

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Introduction

Zoomorphic (animal-design) carpets from the Safavid period are significant in terms of their convergence of visual elements and diverse cultural layers. Their importance stems from the manifestation of manuscript-painting traditions on woven textiles and from the prominent role of hunting iconography for Safavid Kings. The adept utilization of visual components, structured upon sound organizational principles, has resulted in masterpieces throughout art history. As prime examples of the fusion between painting and traditional weaving in the Safavid era, zoomorphic carpets hold special importance. Their acclamation among connoisseurs reflects the artist's observance of organizational principles in deploying visual elements and, ultimately, the viewer's perception of Gestalt principles. The diversity, symmetry, harmony, and coherence among the compositional elements of these carpets facilitate the viewer's comprehension of Gestalt principles. Kashan, recognized as one of the foremost carpet-weaving centers in the Safavid era, produced significant zoomorphic carpets now housed in the Carpet Museum of Tehran, the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Louvre Museum in Paris.

Methodology

This research adopts a descriptive-analytical method and conducted through library research, direct observations, and virtual visits to Safavid zoomorphic carpets in museums. It is qualitative in nature and aims at developmental objectives. To fulfill the research goals, this study has employed the visual principles of the Gestalt

school. Non-probability sampling was applied, and from among extant Safavid zoomorphic carpets, woven in Kashan, four examples were selected. Consequently, this study evaluates and analyzes Safavid zoomorphic carpets based on Gestalt principles. These carpets demonstrate interrelationships in terms of similarity, proximity, continuity, closure, figure–ground, common fate, overlapping, symmetry.

Findings

Assessing Gestalt principles in Safavid zoomorphic carpets of Kashan indicates a clear perception of the figure–ground principle across all four samples as common in many exquisite carpets. The principle of similarity was not just limited to the piece in the Carpet Museum of Iran; it can also be observed in the carpet kept in the Calouste Gulbenkian, where color and form enhance the perception of similarity. Except for the carpet housed in the Louvre Museum, the principle of closure applies to all other three cases. Perceptual illusions are distinctly identifiable only in the specimen in the Carpet Museum of Tehran. Symmetry is readily perceivable in the three carpets held in the Carpet Museum of Tehran, the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, and the Louvre Museum. Proximity, common region, and connected elements are recognized solely in the carpets in the Metropolitan Museum and the Louvre Museum. Finally, the principle of overlapping is exclusive to the specimen held in the Metropolitan Museum.

Conclusion

According to the findings, all four Kashani zoomorphic carpets from the Safavid era—like many other notable carpets—exhibit the figure–ground principle. Additionally, the principles of similarity, closure, and symmetry are perceived most frequently (in three samples). Next, the principles of proximity, parallelism, common region, and connected elements appear equally. In the end, perceptual illusion and overlapping display the lowest incidence among the studied samples. Symmetry in the borders of these carpets is prominently employed due to the type of modular (repeating) design used. Similarity is a salient principle in the depiction of Khitai spirals (Arabesque scrolls) and other ornamental motifs in the selected samples. Overall, the artist endeavored to maintain balance among the motifs so that diverse floral and ornamental elements of various sizes are distributed evenly and at equidistant intervals. This method is likewise mirrored in the coloring of surfaces and outlines. A design demonstrating a stronger prägnanz appears more correct and aesthetically superior and, thereby, gaining a higher value. Hence, in certain sections, the elements that are similar but smaller obey the principle of proximity and are arranged in such a way as to be perceived as a single whole. Order, harmony, equilibrium, and balance among differently sized components are achieved through this method. Such organization in compositions, including elements varying in size, design, color, and contrast, facilitates the viewer’s visual navigation across the entire piece.

In examining these works—particularly in larger-scale carpets—the observer’s focal distance and field of view can influence the presence or quality of the Gestalt cues. Certain Gestalt principles, when viewed at close range (due to increased detail and thus stepping away from a unified whole), become more pronounced, sometimes

manifested as overlapping. This is readily perceptible in the specimen preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Paying simultaneous attention to both overall layout and minute details in Safavid zoomorphic carpets from Kashan enables different Gestalt perceptions at varying viewing distances. It can be inferred that, within the framework of Persian carpet design, a higher degree of detail can generate a richer array of Gestalt effects. In smaller-size carpets, there is often greater consistency in the spacing of motifs on the one hand, and a more cohesive integration of the carpet's background design on the other.

Keywords: Kashan zoomorphic carpets, Safavid carpet, catch and take motifs, Gestalt principles.