
An Analysis of Multidimensional Representations in Qajar- Era Mihrab Carpets of Kashan

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Kashan, as a historic city and a center for cultural, economic, and artistic exchange, became a symbol of Shi'a piety after the advent of Islam and came to be known as the “Dar al-Mu'minin” (Abode of the Faithful). The art of carpet weaving in this region, particularly during the Qajar period, extended beyond a mere economic activity and reflected prevailing beliefs and social discourses. Among these artistic productions, prayer rugs (mihrab carpets), drawing upon Iranian-Islamic architectural forms, functioned as a medium for representing layers of identity, religion, and political authority. The present study seeks to elucidate the relationship between the social conditions of Kashan and the symbolic motifs embedded in these carpets, examining the ways in which messages were conveyed and signs of power and religion were represented through their designs. Through a structural and conceptual analysis of these prayer rugs, this research explores how identity-related components are articulated within this artistic context and how various discursive processes depict mythological, mystical, and governmental themes within Qajar society. Ultimately, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the indigenous artistic traditions and the social dimensions embedded in the carpet-weaving heritage of Kashan.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach and employs a descriptive–analytical method to examine the semantic and symbolic layers embedded in Qajar-era mihrab carpets from Kashan. Data collection was conducted through a systematic review of library resources, scholarly articles, and reputable academic databases. The statistical population of the study consists of 30 mihrab carpets whose visual documentation was available in published sources and the Iran Carpet Museum. From this corpus, eight samples were selected through purposive sampling based on their rich visual content and strong symbolic representational capacity, allowing for an in-depth analysis.

The classification and examination of these works were carried out according to the intersection of thematic content, design structure, and the relationship between motifs and the identity roots of Iran from antiquity through the Islamic and Qajar periods. In this research, the concept of “representation” served as the central analytical framework for explaining how social, political, religious, cultural, and identity-related elements were reflected and reproduced through human, animal, mythological, vegetal, and textual motifs. Representation was, thereby, understood not as a simple reflection of reality but rather as a process of meaning production and reinterpretation within specific cultural and discursive contexts.

From this perspective, the qualitative analysis of images based on representation enabled access to the hidden layers of these artworks and demonstrated how signifying

systems, such as images and symbols, were employed to convey both explicit and implicit meanings. Ultimately, this study illustrated that in mihrab carpets, the interplay between textual and visual expression functioned as a vehicle for the manifestation of messages and complex structures which, through multilayered visual language and discursive forms, contributed to the reproduction of historical events, religious beliefs, and national identity.

Research Findings

The findings of this study indicated that mihrab carpets produced in Kashan during the Qajar period functioned as more than artistic artifacts; they served as a complex and dynamic visual medium that reflected the social, cultural, political, and religious transformations of the time while representing the realities and aspirations of society. An analysis of these carpets revealed that Kashani artisans skillfully integrated religious beliefs, Iranian archetypes, and Islamic architectural forms to create a platform for the formation of diverse discourses.

These discourses were explained through four principal layers. First, religious and spiritual discourses were manifested through the representation of Qur'anic symbols, Hadiths, and the names of the Imams, thereby reinforcing religious identity and legitimizing collective beliefs. Second, historical and mythological discourses employed epic texts and ancient narratives to strengthen the connection between national identity and cultural heritage. Third, the naturalistic discourse reflected the regional ecosystem, local aesthetics, and tangible experiences derived from the surrounding environment. Fourth, the discourse of power operated through symbolic codes and written texts, mediating between different social strata and political structures, including the court and governing authorities, while simultaneously representing underlying cultural policies.

The analysis of structural components demonstrated that these carpets, grounded in the four pillars of “credibility,” “representation,” “discourse,” and “influence,” became the instruments of cultural hegemony through mental, visual, and textual forms of representation. By establishing a connection between “simplicity and popular needs” on the one hand and “luxury and the demands of the ruling elite” on the other, these works successfully institutionalized social aspirations and ritual requirements within a symbolic framework. In effect, the mihrab carpet, through its networked structure of signs and motifs, created a bridge between the objective realities of social life and the subjective, ritualistic world of the people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated that Qajar-era mihrab carpets of Kashan constituted a communicative system in which aesthetic values, symbolic power, and religious devotion were intricately intertwined. Through this synthesis, they legitimized existing power structures, reinforced local culture, and reconstructed Iranian-Islamic identity. These carpets should, therefore, be regarded not only as the masterpieces of traditional weaving but also as historical documents reflecting political developments, social transformations, and shifting discourses of the Qajar era. By exerting a dual influence on diverse audiences, they contributed to the reproduction and preservation of the community's cultural and identity consciousness within a symbolic and visually mediated context.

Keywords: representation, identity, prayer, Qajar period, Kashan.