

# Persian Carpets

## Enduring Understandings:

- Iranian traditions and values come from centuries of life in Persia/Iran.
- Persian carpets have had many different uses and interpretations during the centuries.

## Essential Questions:

- How were Persian carpets used throughout Iran's history?
- In what ways do the carpet weavers communicate through their work?
- How are Persian carpets made?
- What symbols are used in the carpets? What types of ideas/values are communicated through the carpets and their designs?
- What kinds of human relationships have been depicted in the artistic expression of carpet making?
- Why are Persian carpets so highly valued?

## Notes to the Teacher:

Persian carpet-weaving tradition began over 2500 years ago. The tradition began with nomadic tribesmen, who needed the warmth of carpets to cover the floors of their tents and block the wind at the entrances. The techniques of carpet-weaving developed over the centuries, with fathers passing down their traditional methods to their sons over many generations. Soon rugs were not just functional; they were truly magnificent art works in their own right. Carpets were woven from wool yarn on looms; because looms were usually narrow, most early carpets were long and narrow.

Unlike weaving in the Western tradition, Persian carpets were knotted, sometimes with thousands of knots in a square foot of carpet. The Pazyrik rug, dated from the 5th century BCE and the oldest one yet found, has 184 knots per square inch. (You might ask your students to use square roots to calculate on how many knots per inch this means in each direction. Answer: approximately 13.5) Carpets from the 16th-century Safavid period were the most closely-woven, with 800 knots to the square inch!

Like the paradise depicted in the *Qu'ran*, Persian carpets are filled with shady trees, colorful flowers, flowing waters, fountains, fruits, and animals. Some art experts say that the carpets are actually a record of what early Persian gardens looked like. There are hundreds of photographs of Persian carpets available on the internet. Before the lesson, you may want to save some of these photos to a file on your computer to use as a slide show.



Several traditional methods of tying knots may be found at <http://www.bukhara-carpets.com/making/knots.html> or at [http://www.iranchamber.com/carpet/brief\\_history\\_persian\\_carpet.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/carpet/brief_history_persian_carpet.php). It would be wise for you to practice tying these knots yourself to become comfortable with the process before you try to teach it to your students.

While in the past men wove the carpets, today women and children often work in this industry; sometimes entire families work together on a carpet. A skilled worker can tie 10,000 to 14,000 knots per day, so it can take months or years to finish one highly-detailed Persian carpet at this pace. After the knots are tied, the knot-ends are clipped short to create the soft pile. This is the largest handicraft industry in Iran today. Iran produces more carpets than anywhere else in the world; millions of dollars worth of carpets are shipped to other countries annually and many in Iran invest in carpets as a form of wealth. Carpets are such a part of the Iranian culture that most homes have them. (Notice the small carpets in the home of Ali and Zahra, for example). An ancient proverb says, “Where thy carpet lies is thy home.”

Persian carpets usually depict natural forms with symbolic meaning. Some of these symbols are the Tree of Life (eternity); camel (wealth); dove (peace); heron (long life); pomegranate (abundance); carnation (happiness); dog (protection from sickness); cock (victory); parrot (love); rose bush (reminder that life is beautiful but still has thorns).

Carpets from the cities tend to be tightly woven, with very sophisticated floral designs. Carpets from rural areas are looser and the designs are more free-flowing.

Each tribe and village may have its own distinctive border pattern.

Carpets were so beautiful that they sometimes seemed magical, and stories grew up about them. Stories tell of King Solomon, who was supposed to have had a green silk carpet large enough for all his forces to stand upon. When he commanded the wind, the carpet would fly to his destination, with a canopy of birds overhead to protect the travelers from the hot sun. Magic carpets also appear in the story of Aladdin, a story your students might be familiar with from the Disney movies or books they have read.

In the lesson below, after an introduction to the carpet, students create a loom and attempt to weave their own carpets. If time is limited, you should use the alternate method, with pieces of burlap or canvas. If you have lots of time, you may wish to have students dye yarn. You may wish to use the extension lesson on reading and writing, or you could team up with your language arts teacher to do it.

**DURATION OF LESSON:**

Two-three days

**ASSESSMENT:**

Student-made carpet

Carpet designs on computer or graph paper

Descriptive essay (optional)

**VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS**

Indicators addressed by this lesson:

**STANDARD 2.** Knows how to use structures (e.g., sensory qualities, organizational principles, expressive features) and functions of art

**LEVEL III (GRADE 5-8)**

1. Knows some of the effects of various visual structures (e.g., design elements such as line, color, shape; principles such as repetition, rhythm, balance) and functions of art

**STANDARD 3.** Knows a range of subject matter, symbols, and potential ideas in the visual arts

**LEVEL III (GRADE 5-8)**

2. Knows different subjects, themes, and symbols (through context, value, and aesthetics) which convey intended meaning in artworks

**STANDARD 4:** Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

**LEVEL III (GRADE 5-8)**

1. Understands similarities and differences among the characteristics of artworks from various eras and cultures (e.g., materials; visual, spatial, and temporal structures)
2. Understands the historical and cultural contexts of a variety of art objects
7. Understands how factors of time and place (e.g., climate, resources, ideas, technology) influence visual, spatial, or temporal characteristics that give meaning or function to a work of art

**LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS (Extension Activity 3)**

Indicators addressed by this lesson:

**STANDARD 2.** Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing (Extension activity)

**LEVEL III (GRADES 6-8)**

1. Uses descriptive language that clarifies and enhances ideas (e.g., establishes tone and mood, uses figurative language, uses sensory images and comparisons, uses a thesaurus to choose effective wording)
2. Uses paragraph form in writing (e.g., arranges sentences in sequential order, uses supporting and follow-up sentences, establishes coherence within and among paragraphs)
3. Uses a variety of sentence structures to expand and embed ideas (e.g., simple, compound, and complex sentences; parallel structure, such as similar grammatical forms or juxtaposed items)
4. Uses explicit transitional devices

## Materials needed:

Photographs or slide show of images of Persian carpets

Rectangles of sturdy cardboard the size that you would like looms to be, stiff, but light enough for students to cut with scissors

Pencils and rulers

Scissors

A tapestry needle or safety pin for each student

White or off-white all-natural cotton yarn

Yarn in different colors

making their own. Show the students pictures of Persian carpets from books or from your slide show (see notes). Explain, using information from the notes, how old the tradition of carpet-making is, who the carpet makers were, how the carpets were made, etc. Ask the students to identify the elements of design they find in them such as:

- proportion
- rhythm
- balance
- dominance
- variety
- unity
- symmetry
- color
- line

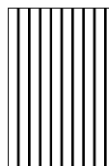
## Procedure:

### ACTIVITY 1: Introduction to Persian Carpets

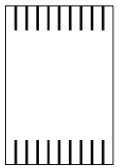
1. Write on the board, “Magic carpet.” Ask your students if they have ever heard of a magic carpet. Let them explain what they think this phrase means and tell of examples they are familiar with from films and books. Tell them about King Solomon’s carpet and other magic-carpet stories you know.
2. Show students a picture of a traditional Persian carpet from the internet. Ask students why they think a carpet might have been considered to be magical by people in earlier times. (Wishful thinking for quick travel, exceptionally detailed, “magical” symbols)
3. Explain that today they are going to learn about Persian carpets and have the opportunity to try

### ACTIVITY 2: Preparing the Loom

1. Give students squares of heavy cardboard and have them mark parallel rule lines  $1/4$ ” or  $1/8$ ” apart as in the illustration below. Start about 1 inch in on each side. The size of the cardboard and width of the line spacing will depend on the time you have available, the skill and patience of your class, and the thickness of the yarn you have (the thicker the yarn, the wider the spacing).



2. Have students cut 1/2" in at the ends of each rule line. The loom should look like this:



3. Using the cotton yarn, have students wrap the loom, catching the yarn into the slits of the loom and keeping the yarn straight on the front, with the slight diagonal on the back.
4. Have students use a tapestry needle or safety pin to weave weft threads over and under the warp threads, creating a canvas upon which to tie knots. End of the weft threads should be left several inches long.

**ACTIVITY 3: Knotting the Carpet**

1. Have students use various colored yarns to tie knots in a design that they like.
2. When finished, cut the pile and cut the carpet off the loom from the back. Trim the cotton ends to 1" as a fringe.

**ALTERNATIVE METHOD:**

If time does not permit you to have students make a loom and tie a rug, consider these alternates:

- Use a piece of burlap, needlepoint canvas, or plastic canvas instead of a loom.
- Have students create their own personal symbols for their carpets and design carpets on the computer or using graph paper. Ask them to write about the process of creating a carpet, including an explanation of the symbolism in the carpets they designed.

**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:**

1. Research activity – Have students research Navajo rugs or carpets from other cultures and compare the symbols and weaving methods to those in Persian carpets.
2. Natural dyes activity – Have student dye their own yarns for their carpets:

**Materials for optional yarn dyeing activity:**

- saffron, crocuses, daffodils or yellow onion skins for YELLOW
- young grass, broccoli, spinach, escarole, moss, rhubarb or birch leaves for GREEN
- blueberries for BLUE
- plums, coffee, tea or walnut shells for BROWN

**Procedure:**

- a. Wash and chop up the raw material.
- b. Place in a pot (enamel is best) and cover with water. The pot should be large enough for the yarn to move freely when stirred.
- c. Boil for at least 5 minutes or longer for darker colors, stirring frequently.
- d. Strain through a colander lined with cheesecloth or a clean rag and return to the pot.
- e. Wet the yarn; place into the dye bath and heat slowly until slightly darker than desired color. Stir gently to avoid felting.

- f. Let cool and then lift out, squeeze gently to remove excess dye, and rinse.
  - g. Hang up until dry
3. Reading/Writing activity – Have students read the story on **HANDOUT 1: EXCERPT FROM "CUTTING A RUG... AT SILKEN WOOL."** Tell your students to think about a special place they might have. Have each student write a description of his or her own special place, using the description on the handout as a model.
  4. Debate activity – Help your students to research the issue of child labor in countries such as Iran. Divide the class into two groups. Ask one group to defend the idea that having children at work making Persian carpets is acceptable in a country where many families are poor, and ask the other group to come up with reasons that this is not acceptable
  5. Art and Design activity – Research Middle Eastern mosaic designs in books or on the Internet. Have students copy or create mosaic designs on paper or cloth; to further appreciate the nature of this work, they could cut mosaic “tiles” from colored paper and assemble. To adhere a design to a rounded surface, the student would have to consider how to adapt a flat shape to the curves of the surface.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

### A. Print Materials (books, magazine articles, etc.)

DePaola, Tomie. *The Legend of the Persian Carpet* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1993)

Dowlatshahi, Ali. *Persian Designs and Motifs for Artists and Craftsmen* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1979)

Ford, P.R.J. *Oriental Carpet Design: A Guide to Traditional Motifs, Patterns and Symbols* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992)

Eiland, Murray L. *Oriental Carpets: A Complete Guide – The Classic Reference* (New York: Bulfinch, 1998)

### B. Internet Resources

<http://www.irib.ir/worldservice/carpet/carpet1.htm>

<http://www.persiancarpetartcentre.com.au/weaver.htm>

<http://www.superbherbs.net/design.htm>

<http://www.artarena.force9.co.uk/pcarpet.htm>

[http://www.iranchamber.com/carpet/brief\\_history\\_persian\\_carpet.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/carpet/brief_history_persian_carpet.php)

[http://www.iranembassy.or.id/news\\_detail.php?idne=174&idn=1&idsn=](http://www.iranembassy.or.id/news_detail.php?idne=174&idn=1&idsn=)

[http://persia.org/Images/Persian\\_Carpet/carpet\\_history.html](http://persia.org/Images/Persian_Carpet/carpet_history.html)

These websites all contain information about Persian carpets.

<http://www.iranian.com/NaderDavoodi/2004/September/Golestan/19.html>

A stunning collection of photographs of Iranian art and architecture.

### C. Media (film, television, etc.)

The New York Library Association has a list of outstanding Iranian films at their website at [http://www.nyla.org/index.php?page\\_id=185](http://www.nyla.org/index.php?page_id=185) and provides useful reviews of the films. Among the film is one called *Gabbeh*, a magical story about a beautiful woman who appears to an old couple as they are washing their rug, called a *gabbeh*.

*Shangoul and Mangoul* is an animated film starring a family of goats and a hungry wolf, reviewed at <http://www.citypages.com/movies/detail.asp?MID=5250>.

**HANDOUT 1 ▶ EXTENSION ACTIVITY** Excerpt from "Cutting a Rug  
... at Silken Wool" by Susan Piperato

**DIRECTIONS:** Read the following story carefully to see how Susan Piperato described a special place from her childhood. Then think of a special place that you liked when you were younger. Write a paragraph to describe this place, using clear details and complete sentences. Try to describe the place so vividly that your readers will be able to imagine it in their minds.

I first came upon the woven poetry of the Persian carpet when I was a child. There were plenty of magic carpets in the tales of the Arabian Nights—those captivating stories of luck, magic, romance, purity, and greed through which American children used to first encounter the Middle East. And then there was the Persian carpet that covered the floor of my great-grandmother’s dining room. I was as captivated by the stories of beautifully colored Persian carpets that flew as I was by the fringed carpet upon which stood my great-grandmother’s then-seemingly massive Victorian table with its heavy, claw-foot legs. When I was very young and inevitably became restless during holiday meals, I was allowed to disappear beneath the table to play on that Persian carpet while the adults finished eating. There I’d sit in the dark cavern created by all the long legs and the linen tablecloth, listening to the adult conversations overhead and tracing the carpet’s filigree patterns with my finger. The carpet was dark—blue and red, mostly—with black and white lines that interlaced and curled around each other like the barbs of peacock feathers. Whatever was going on above, it was always quiet under my great-grandmother’s table, and I was able to be transported into a state of reverie not unlike the one I’d fall into automatically when I was being read to, or later when I learned to read myself. My great-grandmother’s carpet was as mysterious, miraculous, and wonderful as the jewels that Ali Baba found in the cave of the Forty Thieves.

Reprinted by permission of Luminary Publishing. All rights reserved. PO Box 459 New Paltz NY 1256