

THE FABLED RUGS OF ISFAHAN



C.O.I.C





A scene from *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* by Shahab Pour

THE FABLED RUGS OF ISFAHAN

Continuing our historic and legendary journey into the world of precious carpets and those who make them, this week Jalil and Dawood Hossein Zadeh take us into the fabled city of Isfahan.

In the 16th century, during the reign of Shah Abbas, Isfahan was the heart of the Renaissance of Persian art and carpet weaving, and that influence still remains today...

by Joan van der Merwe



The Bridge at the Marketplace by Shahab Pour

Today Isfahan is part of the of the larger rug trade of Iran making sought-after silk and wool carpets of extreme beauty and excellent workmanship and still, surprisingly, in fierce competition with their 16th century rivals, Tabriz.

Located in the central part of Iran, south of Tehran and Ghoum, Isfahan is another of the great "Stations" created in the 16th century by Shah Abbas for travellers on his legendary route through Persia.

Isfahan has always been considered one of the most important cities of Iran. In fact, During the Safavid Dynasty, Isfahan was made the capital of Persia because the previous capitals, in the north, Tabriz and Qazvin, were considered to be too vulnerable to attacks from the Turks and the Uzbeks.

Although it was in the 16th century when it was the centre of the arts renaissance fostered by Shah Abbas, Isfahan enjoyed prosperity and fame long before this. Because of the abundance of rivers in the area, it was an important agricultural region, and travellers as far back as the 11th century wrote about the beauty of Isfahan.

But it was Shah Abbas who built the palaces, mosques and magnificent gardens, and who gave architects, artists and weavers the patronage that made it possible for them to create the works ➔



The vase of flowers, one of the most popular Isfahan designs

The largest square in Iran today, known for hundred of years as the Maiden Shah Square, is in Isfahan, and it was built by Shah Abbas in the 16th century as a polo ground. A sport of kings even then, Polo originated in Persia and was called Chogan.



A beautiful example of an Isfahan medallion carpet with corners

There are many weavers in Isfahan at this time producing pictorial carpets. The Rubaiyaat of Omar Khayyam is an endless source of inspiration to the designers of pictorial carpets...

◆ the world still reveres today.

For a while Isfahan lost its importance, when, in 1722, Iran was invaded and conquered by the Afghanistan Uzbeks and although the conquerors were there for just seven years, they effectively stopped all creative work, including carpet weaving in Isfahan.

During the Ghager dynasty, Tehran became the capital of Iran. Rugs were still made by families in the villages and small towns around Isfahan, but no one made the wonderful Isfahan carpets which are museum pieces today.

It was not until the turn of this century, the time of the European industrial revolution and the great Victorian and Edwardian traveller, that Isfahan began again to produce carpets of any special quality. The travellers who had read about the legendary city of Isfahan, came as tourists, and like tourists of any era, they wanted to

shop, and what they wanted to buy were carpets.

Carpet dealers scoured the villages and small towns trying to meet the demand and it was not too long before the weavers came closer to the market and settled again in Isfahan to meet the market demand.

But these carpets were not particularly good or fine. It was the second generation of the weavers, those who were not set in their ways, who began to make fine carpets, and from this second generation emerged a new breed of master weavers who would, once more, make the precious carpets which today are collectors' pieces.

So a word of warning here; you may, when you start serious collecting, be offered a genuine antique Isfahan at what seems a bargain price. Just remember a large number of these antiques in their day were considered to be shoddy work and are of no intrinsic value.

Like all Iranian carpets, the prime identify-

ing feature of an Isfahan is colour. Each region, because of the terrain and its effect on the sheep and the vegetables available for dyes, is quite different.

Every Isfahan will contain a touch of pomegranate red, a deep sky blue and a dark, almost navy blue. Very clear and distinct, unlike the misty gentle colours of Naevin, which we look at next week.

Isfahan weavers still use many of the traditional designs.

The vase of flowers, the medallion with corners and, of course, the famous pictorial carpets of Isfahan; made from pictures, portraits and legendary stories.

There are many weavers in Isfahan at this time producing pictorial carpets. The *Rubaiyaat* of Omar Khayyam is an endless source of inspiration to the designers of pictorial carpets and one of the most popular with buyers.

The architectural designs are perhaps the



The Jam'e mosque carpets woven by Haghghi

most famous modern carpets, and the weavers who make them are today's artists. It is in the pictorials of Isfahan you will see all the factors of Iran through the centuries. The art, religion, philosophy, history and legends.

There are two distinct sources of carpets in Isfahan today; there are the famous weavers who today are still making the precious carpets. These weavers are known by name and can command great prices for their work.

Some of these masters have specialised in architectural designs. Like landscape painters, they have captured some of the great architecture of Isfahan. Haghghi's view of the Jam'e mosque in Isfahan is world famous and held in a private collection.

Shahab Pour is another weaver whose work will certainly be sought after for years to come, his *Bridge at the market place* and *A scene from the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* have achieved world recognition.

But the main source of carpets is still as it

was in the 16th century, the families who weave their carpets at home and send them to the bazaar or on consignment to a dealer to sell for them.

This will be the origin of most people's first Isfahan.

What will it cost? Recapping from our first article, if you want to buy a good Isfahan, the first price factor will be the size. A zaronim, 1m x 1.5m will cost in the region of four to eight thousand dirhams. ■

If you would like to make up a small group to learn at first hand more about this fascinating world of rugs and those who make them, you can contact Dawood at the Centre for Original Iranian Rugs in Abu Dhabi which is a treasure trove of modern, antique, historic and precious carpets. If you give him enough notice, he will arrange to take you on your own personal magic carpet tour.