RUGS IN THE ALTMAN COLLECTION

By MAURICE S. DIMAND
Curator of Near Eastern Art

Last January, when the Picture Galleries were reopened to the public, the adjacent galleries around the main stairway, containing renaissance furniture, sculpture, goldsmiths’ work, and oriental rugs, were also opened as part of the reinstalation of the Altman collection. Here the visitor will find some of the masterpieces of Persian and Indian rug manufacture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Among the Persian rugs are three magnificent silk ones, the most luxurious products of the Safavid court looms of Kashan, which was famous for its sumptuous brocades and velvets. Often the knotting of these rugs is so fine that their texture resembles velvet. Some of them have eight hundred knots to the square inch. Such rugs as these were made for the Persian court and were often presented to foreign rulers. In 1566 Shah Tahmasp sent his ambassador to Adrianople with many precious gifts for the Turkish sultan, Selim II, including twenty large silk carpets and many small ones decorated with birds, animals, and flowers. A rug of this type is illustrated on the next page. The red field shows six rows of animals, single or in combat, placed in a mountainous landscape among flowering plants and trees with birds in them. Animal representation has always been one of the favorite subjects of Persian decoration. In the Altman rug we recognize typical Persian animals: lions, leopards, tigers, deer, jackals, foxes, and hares, while other creatures such as a dragon, a ch’i lin, and lionlike animals with flaming shoulders are of Chinese origin. The other two silk rugs have a rich floral and arabesque decoration with central medallions.

The manufacture of silk rugs continued in the seventeenth century under Shah Abbas (1587-1628), the great patron of the arts, and his successor, Shah Sufi I (1628-1642). The silk rugs of this period, of which there is an example in the Altman collection, are woven in soft colors, with pastel shades predominating, and enriched with gold and silver threads. These seventeenth-century rugs are often referred to as “Polish” because for some time they were regarded as products of Polish looms. Actually, some of them bear coats of arms of noble Polish families, for whom they were made in the Persian court manufactories at Kashan and Isfahan.

The Altman collection is also notable for fine Indian rugs. Like Mughal painting Mughal rug-weaving was influenced by examples imported from Persia. According to the historian Abu’l-

ABOVE: Detail of a border of cypress trees and flowering shrubs, from an Indian rug of the period of Shah Jahan (1628-1658). Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913
Silk rug with a central design of animals in a mountain landscape, arranged in a rather free composition, and a border of stylized pheasants and palmettes. Persian, xvi century. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913.
Part of a floral rug showing a repeat pattern of stylized Persian motives combined with realistic Indian plants and flowers, which appear also in the border. Period of Shah Jahan. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913
Fazl, Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) “caused rugs to be made of wonderful variety and charming textures” and appointed experienced workmen who produced many masterpieces. “The carpets of Iran and Turan are no more thought of, although merchants still import rugs from Jushagan (between Kashan and Isfahan), Khuzistan (in which province Tustar is the chief town), Kirman and Sabzawar (in Khurasan). All kinds of rug-weavers have settled here and drive a flourishing trade. These are found in every town, especially in Agra, Fathpur, and Lahore.” The most popular Persian rugs imported into India were the Herat rugs from Khurasan, generally known as Isfahans. They are frequently represented in Mughal paintings of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. From these Persian prototypes Hindu rug-weavers, introducing naturalistic plants and flowers, gradually developed a style which is typically Mughal.

The rugs in the Altman collection belong to the period of Shah Jahan (1628-1658), when the Mughal style reached its height. In technical perfection these rugs, made chiefly at Lahore, often surpass the best Persian products. One of the finest pieces from Shah Jahan’s looms is a floral rug (p. 179) which was inspired by a rug of the Herat or Jushagan variety but with the design essentially modified in Mughal fashion. The large, elongated leaves, stylized palmettes, and blossoms are combined with realistic Indian plants and flowers rendered in rich colors on a claret red background. The color scheme shows many new shades and nuances unknown in Persian rugs. The blue-green border has a row of Indian plants, roses, lilies, carnations, and other flowers, well known from the borders of contemporary Mughal miniature paintings. Other Indian floral rugs in the Altman collection have a trellis framework forming an all-over pattern. A detail of such a pattern with ogee-shaped compartments connected by large composite palmettes and filled with floral scrolls is shown below. The border of this rug has a naturalistic, hilly Indian landscape with cypress trees and flowering shrubs.