

An Approach to Medallion Ushak Carpets in European Painting*

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Abstract

During the second most prominent period in the Art of Turkish Carpet-Weaving, large carpets were woven with the patterns developed by muralist/miniaturists in the Ottoman Palace atelier for mosques, palaces, mansions and export. One of the two main groups of 16th century Ushak carpets is Medallion Ushak carpets, which continued to develop until the end of 18th century. Those carpets produced in Ushak and its environs, have been transported to the West throughout the centuries via Izmir, the safest port city in Western Anatolia. The earliest and best large Medallion Ushak carpets were woven for the Ottoman market but we can see from paintings by artists such as Holbein, Velasquez and Zurbaran, that large medallion Ushaks began to appear in Europe by the sixteenth century, depicted in the paintings of Royalty and the very rich (christies) Categorized as 'Oriental Carpets' in the West, Medallion Ushak carpets made by knotted weaving technique appear in European Painting until the end of 16th and 18th centuries.

Keywords: Medallion Ushak Carpet, European Painting, artists.

Introduction

Carpets and luxury textile products have been regarded as symbols of power, status, and high-class wealth for thousands of years. In 1271–1272, Marco Polo famously remarked that the best and most beautiful carpets in the world were made in Turkomania (Anatolia) (christies). After the Anatolian Seljuks period, Ushak Madallion carpets, also categorized as Ottoman Palace carpets, are one of the most famous categories of early period Turkish carpets. After the Seljuks period, they were produced during the greatest period of Ottoman Empire when carpet-weaving regained its prominence. They are large carpets, designed by muralists of the Ottoman Palace.

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The pattern of these predominantly large carpets, characterized by a medallion with pointed ends and pendants, singly or in repeat in the center of the field, may have been developed as early as the reign of Sultan Mehmed II, 1451-1481. Ushak named in late, traditionally mentioned as the place of production of these carpets, is a town that already appears in 15th century sources as a weaving center for carpets (Ydema, O., 1991).

Being produced in the 16th century, in the golden age of Ottoman decorative arts, and having influenced the carpet-weaving and textile art, these carpets bring revolutionary qualities to the Anatolian Turkish carpet hand-weaving with their distinct pattern and colors from the traditional Turkmen weavers' designs. Yavuz Sultan Selim brought many artists from the Palace atelier in Tabriz in 1514. Selim I, brought 16 miniaturists to exile from Tabriz, two of whom were painters. (İnalçık, H., 2008) Most of the large carpets for palace and mosques were produced in Ushak, based on the covers of the artists' books.

In the ateliers supported by the Palace, multi-figured Ottoman-style decorative elements drawn by muralists were placed on the curbs and the background of the carpets. As they were weaved on the large looms in ateliers, they have a thinner quality compared to the traditional Ushak carpets (Kayıpmaz, N. 2011). Made in large numbers and hugely popular both in the Ottoman Empire and in Europe, medallion Ushak carpets such as this were produced from the later fifteenth century to the eighteenth. The design in theory repeats infinitely in all directions, although 'cut' by the border. It consists of ogival medallions alternating with smaller eight-lobed 'stars' (Dimand&Mailey, 1973).

Medallion carpets woven in Ushak in West-central Turkey were also depicted frequently in European paintings (Denny, W., 2011). These paintings invite the viewers to witness the value attached to the carpets by the carpet purchasers. The owners of these carpets changed or their material was worn out throughout years and these situations prevented most of them from reaching the present day. The originals of these carpets couldn't reach today, however, today; their depictions in the paintings play a very important role not only artistically but also in terms of categorization and documentation.

The earliest specimens were undoubtedly made for the court, while the commercial production for the foreign market is assumed not to have evolved until much later. If you had been Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople would you have been content to rest your felicitous derrière on the type of rugs exported to the doges (donnenobili of Venice). This would explain the late date at which the same dallion carpets appear in Western painting (Ydema, O., 1991)

1. Medallion Ushak Carpets

After the Seljuk-period carpets, the most significant period of Turkish Carpet-Weaving starts with the carpets produced in and around Ushak. Ushak carpets, which are the most renowned group in Turkish carpets, are frequently depicted in the paintings of European painters; however, they are not referred to as Ushak in the inventories but they are known as Turkish carpets until the end of the 18th century (Aslanapa, O., 2015).

The 16th century is the period of expansion for the Ottoman Empire. In this period, the influence of intercultural interactions can be observed in the art of carpet weaving as well as in all art forms in terms of great variety and design. The medallion entered the art of carpet making from the bindings and the gilded pages of illuminated manuscripts, in other words from the art of the book. It has played an important part also in the Tabriz carpets of the 16th century. The conquest of Tabriz by the Turks in 1514 marks the beginning of the use of medallions in Turkish carpets. The wealth in diversity of the medallion types in Ushak carpets represents the supreme power and the creative force of the Turkish artists (Aslanapa, O., 2015).

It especially gained importance in the period of Suleiman the Magnificent and special carpets were ordered by the Sultan for Suleymaniye Mosque, which was built upon the Sultan's order. (Barkan, Lütfi Ö., 1972). Large Medallion Ushak carpets (Figure 1) are amongst the grandest and most successful of all the classical Ushak designs (Christies). The Medallion Ushak carpets, generally accepted as the more important of the two types, exhibit a further development during the course of the 18th century, that of reaching a length of nearly 10 meters. In these long carpets, the overall composition gives the idea of an endless continuum with a circular medallion on the main axis and a line of pointed lobed-medallions on both sides of it.

This makes them quite different from the Persian carpets where the composition is closed within definite borders.



Figure 1: Ushak Medallion Carpet, 16th century.

<http://istanbulavrupa.vgm.gov.tr/editor/file/Vak%C4%B1f%20Restorasyon%20Y%C4%B1ll%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1/SAYI%203/3005%20%20S%C3%B Cleymaniye%20Camisinin%20Hal%C4%B1%20Hazineleri.pdf>

The carpet pattern called Medallion Ushak carpets by the academicians, had two different names given by the carpet-weavers in Ushak: ‘Göbekli’ carpet (Carpet with a central part) and “Sofralı” (Sofralı) carpet (Usakligil,S., 2011). These carpets are composed of large parts and they have borders and a central pattern. They are woven with three or four-colored threads and the weft is made of wool (Atalay, B.,1967). The main motif in Medallion Ushak carpets is a large medallion central to the carpet, surrounded by smaller medallions. There is always a medallion at the centre of the carpet.

Brick red, dark blue and bright yellow colors are essential to the carpets. Alternatively, green and light blue colors and occasionally black contours can be observed on these carpets. The best known kind is blue medallion on a red background. The pattern is composed of a large medallion central to the carpet surrounded by smaller medallions with different settings. The center of the carpet is always emphasized by a medallion and has lots of varieties.

The pattern of these predominantly large carpets, characterized by a medallion with pointed ends and pendants, singly or in repeat in the center of the field, may have been developed as early as the reign of Sultan Mehmed II 1451-1481. Ushak named in late, traditionally mentioned as the place of production of these carpets, is a town already 15th century sources as a weaving center for carpets (Ydema,O.,1991).

Famous traveler Evliya Çelebi states in his 'Seyahat name' that despite its small size, Ushak was a famous center for carpets with its rich structures and bales of wool and carpets were carried to all parts of Anatolia by camel trains. Moreover, he compares Ushak carpets and carpets produced in Isfahan and Cairo concluding that the demand for Ushak carpets was high as they were sent to countries all around the world. Today, many great examples can be found in Islamic Arts Museum, Carpet Museum in Istanbul and many prominent museums around the world.

2. Medallion Ushak Carpet In The Western World

In the 16th century, English people living in İzmir started to buy the Ushak carpets arriving in Izmir. The Dutch, who had established large colonies in the East, also started to buy carpets from Izmir. By the end of this period, Italians, Austrians, Germans started to buy carpets for their palaces and churches.

The art of carpet-weaving started in Ushak in the 16th century (Atalay, B., 1967). Oriental carpets originating from Anatolia were depicted in the European Painting for the first time by the Italian painters in the 14th century. At first, they were only depicted in religious paintings as tapestry under the feet of the Virgin. Thus, Eastern carpets with special style of carpet were transferred to the following centuries through paintings. Although Medallion Ushaks were produced especially for the Ottoman domestic market in the earlier period; they were also produced for export and they can be encountered in European paintings in the second half of the 16th century.



Figur2: Lucas de Heere, The Family of Henry VIII, 1570.

<http://hfriedberg.web.wesleyan.edu/engl205/wshakespeare/sucall.htm>

The Family of Henry VIII, An Allegory of Tudor Succession, circa 1570, is the first painting depicting a large medallion Ushak in a western context (Figur2). In this painting, attributed to Lucas de Heere and presented by the Queen to her advisor, Sir Francis Walsingham, in the early 1570s, the figures of Peace and Plenty escort Elizabeth into the regal presence of her forebears: from left to right, the puissant Henry, his pious son Edward VI upholding the sword of faith, and the zealous Mary I on the left, who is shown chained to King Philip II of Spain, and bringing with her War (hfriedberg).

The significance attached to the depiction of the carpet with its vast size and its entire splendor under the feet of Henry VIII and his family in the portrait signifies the value of woolen-weaving as a luxury item in its time. The Family of Henry VIII (c. 1545). Prototypes for the portraits have been detected in paintings by Holbein (Henry), Scots (Edward), Mor (Mary and Philip), and, less confidently, Hilliard (Elizabeth)(wikimedia).

Ushak medallion carpets were also painted with great accuracy as table covers in Flemish interior paintings of the 17th century, as for example in works by Vermeer in Buckingham Palace, London and in Dresden, and by Terborch in the National Gallery in London (Aslanapa, O.,1983).

The fact that so many carpets appear in Dutch interiors of the time might lead us to believe that they were an integral part of Dutch living. However, they do not occur so frequently in death inventories and moreover, these "turkse" and "persichetapijten" are not documented in appreciable quantities on the cargo of Dutch merchant ships (christies).

Appreciation of the design resulted in a high demand for the carpets, increasing the production of the carpets to be exported to Western countries. At the beginning of the 17th century, the success of East India Companies in transportation of the Ottoman carpets to the Netherlands and England marked the end of Portugal in this field. The success of these companies in transportation of the carpets enables these carpets to become widespread in the Netherlands, depicting the everyday life of the Dutch through their rich design and still life patterns. Medallion Ushak carpets were painted by the prominent artists of the period, such as Jan Vermeer, Gerard Terbourche, Gerard Hon Horst, and we can infer that they may not be utilized widely in Dutch houses, perhaps, due to their large size.

3. Painters And Medallion Ushak Carpets In His Paintings

With the rapid expansion of the foreign trade of the Netherlands, colorful oriental carpets became very popular in the 16th and particular the 17th century as decorative objects, draped over tables or chests (Philippova, A., 2011). The carpets in the paintings can roughly be divided into two groups first, the carpets with an apparently fine weaving structure and rich patterns, and second, the coarser examples with patterns where the curvilinear designs of the earlier degenerated. The representations in paintings of the earlier group are the most interesting for the study of surviving Medallion Ushaks (Ydema, O., 1991). The depiction of these valuable Eastern carpets can be observed in nine of Johannes Vermeer's paintings which he painted in his short life.



Figure 3: Johannes Vermeer, the Procuress, 1656.

<http://www.christies.com/sales/oriental-rugs-and-carpets-london-april-2014/special-feature.aspx>

A famous example of a Medallion Ushak in a Netherlandish painting was painted in 1656 by Vermeer (Figur4), in *The Procuress*. (Ydema, O., 1991)

The large carpet placed on the table horizontally covers the two-third of the painting. On the left of the painting, a distinctive medallion carpet stands below the hand of the young lady with her yellow dress, elegantly holding a glass. There are two groups of medallions on the carpet. At the center of the carpet, there is a part of the star-shaped main medallion filled border with yellow flowers, and secondary medallions in corners at the top and bottom are aligned with border. Medallions in the corners are connected to the main medallion and they are divided by the border. Most of these large carpets are decorated with dark-red and blue medallions on indigo blue background. Rare carpets with dark-red background are mostly decorated with indigo blue medallions. This painting by Vermeer is an exception to the rule in that it has a blue background as it is observed in the medallion Ushak carpet in Thyssen-Bornemisza collection in Berlin. It is safe to say that this extraordinary painting from the first half of the 17th century truly depicts its time of production (1656).

In this painting of Vermeer, the carpet with eight medallions instead of sixteen medallions is a simplified version and it is different from the others. Yellow ochre or white colored branches flowers and leaves are decorated on the indigo blue background. *Procuress* displays a beautiful part from second medallion with red border. Embellishment of the medallions and matter illusion are painted by Vermeer very meticulously. Light red painted bright corners of the carpet on the right reflect the typical features of a Medallion Ushak carpet.

Unfortunately, the blue parts of the carpet appear today as a gray-blue or gray-green. Special analyses have revealed that Vermeer had used a rare pigment, probably vivianite, a mineral iron-phosphate which soon darkens under the influence of light. Its use may be seen as a further indication of Vermeer's delight in experimenting. The blue color in the carpet must have originally appeared as a clear, lucid blue of different saturation and lightness (essential vermeer).

In Daniel Mijtens' painting 'Portrait of Lady Martha Cranfield' the medallion Ushak carpet under the feet of the Lady has a very simple pattern. The angulated carpet has an indigo blue medallion embellished with flowers in contrast to the dark-red base.

D. Mytens and an unknown artist painted some of the earliest representations of so-called "Medallion-Ushak" rugs, arguably the earliest departure of Anatolian weavers from their traditional geometric patterns, perhaps under the influence of Persian weavers. (Galafassi, P., 2013).

Early Medallion Ushak carpets may be simpler than the carpets produced in later periods with a variety of patterns in terms of pattern quality. Carpet expert Onno Ydema writes that the carpet in the *Music Lesson* is a 16th-century Ushak type, from Turkey and is faithfully described by the artist. Most carpets were depicted as table coverings. They were simply too expensive to be thrown on the floor where they would be soiled (essential vermeer).

Ushak carpets are depicted in the second group of paintings in Dutch art. In one of the most famous paintings in this group 'Music Lesson', Vermeer meticulously portrayed a Medallion Ushak carpet pattern draped over the table on the left side of the painting. The artist painted the piles of knots in a way that can be noticed very easily. However, there are some differences between the Medallion Ushak carpets Vermeer painted and the carpets surviving today. The central medallion is extraordinarily large and medallions on the corners are smaller than usual.

The latter have a strongly simplified pattern, compared to that of the carpet represented by Vermeer in *The Procuress* and the surviving Medallion Ushaks. The ornaments filling the space between the medallions too are simplified; those floral ornaments have degenerated into more or less abstract whimsical ornaments. The border has a design which is equally unknown from authentic examples. It has stylized ornaments resembling rosettes, composed of four ovals around a cross-form motif. These rosette shaped ornaments are connected by a straight line coinciding with the parallel axis of the border. Small diagonally placed leaves are connected to alternate ornaments. As far as can be deduced from the three paintings by Vermeer 'Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window' and 'The Concert', the carpet shows a restrained color palette. The fact that the three representations hardly show any differences in the details of the design or the weaving structure is an indication that all three can be traced back to a single authentic model Vermeer might have had in his studio (Ydema, O., 1991).

This extraordinary Medallion Ushak carpet must have been depicted only by Vermeer in the seventeenth-century Dutch art as we see that other contemporary artists portrayed Medallion Ushak carpets very similar to Vermeer's depiction.

The fact that so many carpets appear in Dutch interiors of the time might lead us to believe that they were an integral part of the Dutch home. It is known that some painters supplied clients with the carpets themselves and a single carpet might be used for generations of artists. Vermeer himself seems to have used a least one of the carpets more than once (essentialvermeer).



Figure 4: Jan Steen, Soogewonne, sooverteert, 1661.

<http://tour.boijmans.nl/nl/46/>

One of the prominent painters of Dutch art, Jan Steen (Figure 4) portrayed this carpet a few times. In his painting 'Soogewonne, sooverteert' he portrays carpets with a more deformed ground than carpets in Vermeer's paintings. We encounter an early age Medallion Ushak carpet with a larger than usual central medallion, narrower corner medallions, and less embellishment of elegant leaves and curves. The color scheme corresponds with that of the examples painted by Vermeer, somber trees with some details in yellow (Ydema, O., 1991).



Figure 5: Nicolaes Verkolje, Young couple with a dog, 1694.
<http://www.1st-art-gallery.com/Nicolaes-Verkolje/The-Proposal.html>

Nicolaes Verkolje (Figure 5) is one of the important Dutch painters, who portray Medallion Ushak carpets in that period. The difference of Verkolje's carpet depiction in "Young couple with a dog" (1694) from his contemporaries is that the carpet is painted with brighter colors and lighter tones. The artist might have emphasized the light red color (second red) in accordance with the harmony in the painting. The color of the chair the woman leans and the feather on the man's hat match the bright red color of the carpet. This carpet may be woven with *Rubiatinotoria* acquired from second-wash paint.

The paintings by Vermeer, Steen, and Verkolje depict a special type of Ushak carpet of which no surviving counterpart is known. It is characterized by its rather somber colors, coarse weaving, and patterns with a more degenerated curvilinear design (wikipedia).

Today, concerning the carpet on the table in 'The Visit to the Nursery' by Gabriel Metsu in The Metropolitan Art Museum (Islamic Carpet in the European painting) Walter Denny states in his 2011 dated article that: "Medallion carpets woven in Ushak in west-central Turkey were also depicted frequently in European paintings. Metsu's sumptuous [Dutch interior scene](#) 'The Visit to the Nursery' shows a large Ushak medallion carpet draped over a table. The Metropolitan has several Ushak carpets of this type in its collection (Denny, W., 2011).

In his 1991 dated book 'Carpets and Their Datings in Netherlandish Paintings 1540-1700', Onno Ydema states that the painting in question, 'A Visit to the Nursery' by Gabriel Metsu, displays on the table a distinct representation of a Polonaise carpet. The dark blue colour of the borders of the carpet in the painting by Gabriel Metsu are relatively unusual, most Polonaise carpets have a dark green color (Ydema, O., 1991).

The carpets in Berlin Islamic Arts Museum, woven in Poland in the seventeenth century demonstrate that very successful copies of Medallion Ushak carpets were produced in Poland. Therefore, we can trace Medallion Ushak carpets by the dark blue borders and red background of the carpet in Metsu's painting.

One of the prominent Dutch artists, Gerard Terbouch painted a spectacular Medallion Ushak carpet in his painting, 'A Woman Making Music with Two Men' in 1667-68. Though influenced by the work of Metsu, the painting is more elaborate in composition and psychological resonance than comparable paintings by Metsu (National Gallery).

He depicted the woolen carpet with dark blue medallion and borders on a red background, draped over a table on the left with all its weight in a very realistic way. There are 28 paintings in Dutch art between 16th and 17th centuries recorded as depicting Medallion Ushak carpets. There are no authentic Ushak carpets corresponding to the representations of this group of paintings that are known to have survived. Representation of the type has not been found in other than Dutch paintings. If these atypical represented carpets are not found in any works by painters from non-Dutch schools, it could reasonably be assumed that such carpets were not available outside the Netherlands (Ydema, O., 1991).

The first research about the origin of the Medallion Ushak carpets was carried out by Dr. Brigitte Scheunemann. The presence of relatively large undecorated spots between the ornaments suggested to her an Anatolian origin. She also pointed out connections with patterns on carpets generally attributed to Ushak. For example, the medallions could be viewed as simple imitations of the corner medallions of Medallion Ushaks: 'ein grosser Teil der Bortenmusterkannan Kolonnenladiks, Medallion Ushaksoder Gebeds-Ushaks nachgewiesen warden' (Mills, J., 1987, nr.7).

Although experts estimate that these carpets were not very common outside the Netherlands, it is known that some examples exist in Flemish art, as well. For example, the carpet under Count's feet in Antony van Dyc's work called "The fourth Count of Pembroke, and his family," is claimed to be Persian carpet while Onno Ydesa states that it is a Medallion Ushak carpet. As the evaluation of patterns is based on the muralists from Tabriz, we can assume that both interpretations are valid.



Figure 6: Diego Velazquez, Infanta Margarita, 1653.
<http://www.artehistoria.com/v2/obras/264.htm>

Diego Velazquez painted the portrait of King Philip IV and his second wife Mariana of Austria and their daughter Margarita Teresa in 1653-54 (Figure 6). 'The Princess Infanta Margarita', who was painted for the first time when she was three years old, is portrayed in pink clothes, standing on a Medallion Ushak carpet with a large, indigo blue medallion on red background. One of the best small-scale portrait artists of the British school in eighteenth century, Francis Wheatly' spainting 'The Saithwaite Family' portrays a British aristocratic family on a large, eighteenth-century Medallion Ushak carpet.

Turkish carpets were popular in British homes during this period and became a ubiquitous component of the conversation piece, found in paintings by virtually every practitioner of the genre.

The example here can be identified as a medallion Ushak carpet, a style (named for its place of earliest manufacture) featuring a large central medallion with projecting finials on a patterned field containing additional medallions. From its relatively coarse design, the 'Saithwaites' carpet can be identified as an eighteenth-century example manufactured in Western Anatolia, rather than a British product in the Turkish style (Barker 2005).

Conclusion

Classified as Early Classical Period Ottoman carpets, Medallion Ushak carpets has taken an important place in carpet groups which are regarded as a symbol of wealth and power by the Western World since the sixteenth century. Thus, similar to other Oriental carpets, they earn a place in the Art of Painting, which reflects the church and the daily life of wealthy people. Besides their artistic value, these paintings display the lives of aristocratic people and bourgeois people, their economic and social relations and interior designs accompanied by Medallion Ushak carpets throughout centuries. Thanks to these paintings, furniture and latest fashion of the time, cultures, social relations, traditions, and mother-child relations come into life.

The appearance of Medallion Ushak carpets in European Painting is rare compared to the appearance of other Oriental carpets. Nevertheless, the artists who were interested in these carpets were the greatest artists of their time and in history of art. Among these artists, Vermeer is special in that he depicted the same carpet a few times. His contemporary 'Scheunemann' carpets Gerasrd Terbouch's paintings and the related carpet in his portrait of Pieter de Graeff are also important. His representation of a large Medallion Ushak is, like the more colorful version by Jacob van Oost, one of the finest to be found in Netherlandish paintings (Ydema, O.,1991).

Another famous artist of the period, Jan Steen's depiction of a moment from shabby but cheerful daily lives of middle class people and worn-out Medallion Ushak carpets in some paintings proves his expertise in realistic and meticulous depiction. It can be inferred from the existing paintings that most of the European artists who are not included in this article, such as Pieter de Hooch, C. Janssens van Ceulen, W Heda, G.van Honhorst, G. Schalcken painted Madallion Ushak carpets. It can also be inferred from some sources that the demand for 'Oriental carpets' popular in the sixteenth century decreases towards the end of the seventeenth century. However, the case is different for Medallion Ushak carpets.

The trade of this type of carpets starts in the 16th century and despite a decrease in the 17th century, the demand continues in the following century. By the 17th century, there is documentary evidence of a thriving export market for Medallion Ushaks in Europe. The greater availability of these carpets is reflected in the way the carpets are depicted in paintings. We continue to see Medallion Ushak carpets depicted in Royal portraits such as Velasquez's 1653 portrait of 'The Infanta Marguerita', but in the works of Vermeer we see the carpets depicted in the homes of wealthy merchants and in genre paintings such as *The Procuress*, 1656 (King & Sylvester, 1983).

The enduring appeal of the design is reflected in the longevity of the production, which continued into the 19th century, and the numbers that survive in European country houses. The special place of Medallion Ushak carpets in European Painting will continue to exist with different artistic stances and representations.

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