

## REVIEW

WALKER, Daniel. *Flowers Underfoot. Indian Carpets of the Mughal Era*. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1998. 220 pp., 145 ill., 108 in full colour, Checklist of the Exhibition, Notes, Glossary, Bibliography, Index. Reviewed by Dagmar Pospíšilová.

The reviewed monograph was published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, held on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indian Independence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from November 20, 1997 - March 1, 1998. India has contributed a significant share to the so-called Oriental carpet production, by flawlessly executed stylization of patterns whose elaborate colour pattern resembles the style of paintings rendered in delicate shades of rarely seen colours. An Iranian influence that was discernible in the early period was soon transformed into an autonomous artistic expression based upon India's domestic traditions. The earliest surviving example of Indian carpet production is a fragment of a carpet decorated with a design of fantastic animals, coming from northern India, from the period between 1580 and 1585. The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the collapse of Mughal sovereignty, a process that entailed a decline in the output of the court workshops. It was moderately revitalized only during the final third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, albeit merely by way of imitating earlier types of carpets. The quantity of surviving carpets from India is not large. There currently exist about five hundred carpets scattered around the world which were made during the Mughal so-called classical era (16<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> centuries). Anyhow, these do include representative specimens making possible the study of various types of carpets encompassing the period in question in its entirety. As no scholarly evaluation has been carried out so far of the Indian carpet production set in a broader context, it was assumed that the task of assessing a wide variety of its aspects would be better served by a monograph study than by the standard exhibition catalogue. Similarly as the latter, however, the monograph under review contains a checklist of the exhibition, complete with descriptions of the individual items on view there, indicating all the relevant data including venue and year of display, and literature wherein each given exhibit was published.

Obviously, of essential consequence to present-day study of carpet production is research into its technical aspects (e.g., the nature of the

materials used, the dyes employed, the characteristics of the weaving structure, etc.) which, rather than considerations of design, pave the safest way to the correct bracketing of individual specimens and groups of carpets alike as regards the period and locality of their origin. Apart from the actual surviving carpets, there exists a wide scale of sources serving for the identification of carpets, ranging from accounts of travellers to India, memoirs of the rulers and chronicles by the historians of the Mughal court, through records of the various trading companies, down to Indian and European paintings depicting carpets. In view of the fact that the monograph is not intended exclusively for scholarly use but anticipates a broader readership, its author opted for the narrative form of account, comprising an outline of India's history in the era of the Mughal domination, information about the international carpet trade in the period in question, and a description of technical aspects of carpet-making. The largest portion of the book is devoted to the actual description of carpets, classified according to styles (Persian and Flower), and within that category, according to patterns, with sections dealing with Fantastic-Animal Pattern, Pictorial Designs, Scrolling-Vine-And Animal Pattern, etc. The final part provides a typological survey of the carpets, with categories such as Durban (Audience), Millefleur, Multiple-Niche Prayer Type (Saph), and Silks. A special place is reserved for the Kyoto collection which does not represent a homogeneous group, but a highly varied assortment as regards place and time of origin. The study deals only with pile carpets, leaving out flat weaves, as representing an independent weaving tradition.

Even though the exhibition presented less than ten percent of the surviving body of carpets (42 exhibits - or rather, 44, as Nos. 1 and 7 were split into two fragments each), these were thoroughly unique specimens. In fact, the condition of numerous carpets, which are scattered as solitary items or in pairs around a myriad museums and private collections, precluded their lending for the show. Besides eleven exhibits coming from American museums and eight specimens on loan from private collectors, the remaining carpets came from leading international museums, including four from Kyoto, Japan. The book is supplemented by an index (common for personal names and subjects), reference notes attached to each chapter, a glossary of technical terms, and bibliography listing literature, press articles and auction catalogues, ordered alphabetically according to authors' names, initial words of titles and publication venues (in the cases of auction and exhibition catalogues), with publication dates. The works' titles are given preference over the names of editors. While this is a non-standard

approach to bibliographical notation, it is in no way misleading. The study also includes two annexes: Microscopic Analysis of Animal Fibres Found in Classical Indian and Persian Carpets; and Natural Dyes in the Near and Middle East and India.

The book's impact is enhanced by a simple map of India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, showing the major regions and cities.

On the whole, this is a publication which will provide enjoyment to scholarly readers and the general public alike by the succinct and comprehensible way of treating its subject, as well as by the multitude of outstanding reproductions conveying the magic of Indian carpets. Accompanying an exhibition by a book of such unequivocal achievement, both content-wise and in terms of layout and design, is undoubtedly the dream of every art curator.



Detail of the desing of lady's trousers decorated with embroidery. Silk thread on silk. India, Parsees, around 1900 (NpM A 14 272)