The status and use of carpets in Iran in the century following the end of the Safavid age, in 1722, have not been altogether clear, partly because this period in Iran’s history has not been properly covered or well understood. Due to the era’s complicated political situation, among other factors, the arts received inadequate attention. Consequently, few scholars were aware of the carpet weaving tradition of this long period. While the Safavids (1501–1722) were directly involved with the carpet industry—setting up workshops and using carpets in their palaces—even little is known about how their successors dealt with it. The present study addresses an aspect of carpet history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, namely, the presence and use of carpets and related floor coverings in royal Persian paintings from the Afsharid (1736–96) and Zand (1760–93) periods, as well as the reigns of the first two Qajar monarchs (1785–1834).3

It has recently been shown that carpet weaving in Iran continued throughout these years and did not decline as was previously believed.4 Even though it was primarily a rural craft practiced at the folk level, fine carpets were nonetheless woven in professional ateliers (kārkhāna) in urban centers. Furthermore, they are repeatedly mentioned in historical accounts in royal contexts. We thus learn, for instance, of the large number of carpets commissioned by Nadir Shah (r. 1736–47) from Kirman, and of the gold-threaded carpets donated by ‘Ali Mardan Khan Zand (r. 1781–85) to the shrines in Iraq. In the Qajar epoch, carpets were omnipresent in the palaces of Fath ‘Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834) and some have survived bearing dedicatory inscriptions to Nasir al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96). Consequently, it is safe to assume that knotted-pile carpets were woven in Iran during these two centuries and, moreover, were used by members of the various dynasties.5

Persian painting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often depicted royal subjects and scenes at court. A substantial number of textiles are present in these works as elements of furnishing. Afsharid painting has generally been overlooked, due to its scarcity and poor quality, but floor coverings are ubiquitous in the formidable corpus of Zand and Qajar art, a better-studied subject.6 No carpets have been recognized in these paintings, however, nor has any convincing explanation been given towards identifying the various floor coverings therein. The common assumption is that they are stylized models of textiles that have not survived.

Relying on historical and artistic evidence, including surviving carpets from the period, this paper argues that carpets were indeed represented in Persian painting from the post-Safavid period. Furthermore, the evidence presented below demonstrates that in addition to carpets, Persian artists often depicted two very particular types of floor covering: felts and silks. We will examine the nature and significance of these two types, as well as the impact they had on carpet weaving.

S. G. W. Benjamin, the first American envoy to Iran, remarked upon the reliability of Persian paintings in depicting real objects when he visited the Gulistan Palace and its treasury rooms in 1883. Looking at the early nineteenth-century paintings on the walls, he noted that:

The portraits are evidently characteristic likenesses, while the various court costumes of eighty years ago—silks, embroidered sashes, tunics of Cashmere shawls, and glittering decorations and armor—are represented with a fidelity that give great historic value to the painting.7
We may infer that floor coverings were represented with similar precision. Within the wider scope of woven fabrics, therefore, we will focus on these, since other textiles have been covered elsewhere.8

A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

The later Safavid shahs grew lax and their rule was weak and negligent. Regional peace and prosperity aided them but matters came to a head under Shah Sultan Husayn (r. 1694–1722), when in 1722 a band of marauding Afghans under the command of Mahmud Khan Ghilzai captured Isfahan after a brutal siege. The city’s fortunes plummeted under the weight of the atrocities that befell its population and its institutions (including its workshops). The Afghan invasion ushered in three-quarters of a century of warfare and general instability, during which the country was rarely unified. Afghan rule was put to an end in 1729 by Nadr Quli, a chieftain from the Afshar tribe. After expelling the Russian and Ottoman armies that had wrested control of the western half of Iran, he had himself crowned as Nadir Shah in 1736, inaugurating a reign that was violent, harsh, and excessively occupied with warfare. His invasion of India in 1739 stands out, mostly for the extraordinary booty that he brought back: it kept the Iranian economy afloat for the rest of the century and had a powerful impact on the Persian decorative arts. Nadir’s assassination in 1747 led to a further period of turbulence, with the country eventually splitting into two separate entities. Khurasan, the large northeastern province, formed a buffer state for the revived Afghan kingdom and was ruled by Nadir’s blinded grandson, Shahrukh (r. 1748–96). The southern and western provinces, meanwhile, were submerged in tribal wars until they were brought together under the rule of Karim Khan Zand (r. 1760–79), whose reign brought to his domains a measure of respite, allowing arts and crafts to revive, particularly lacquer and oil painting, which flourished in this period. His Zand successors were quickly eclipsed by the rising fortunes of the Qajar tribe, whose leader, Agha Muhammad Khan (r. 1785–97), defeated the last Zand army in 1794 and regained control of Khurasan in 1796, reuniting the country at last. The Qajars would rule Iran until 1925.

Even though Iran’s borders contracted in the nineteenth century, its society, economy, and craft production were greatly influenced by events during this period. The reign of Fath ‘Ali Shah witnessed a major revival in royal patronage for the arts, mostly painting, and a distinctive Qajar style evolved out of the foundations that took shape under the Zands. Miniature painting revived while the age’s greatest artists worked on lacquer painting and the characteristic oil portraits that became the hallmark of Qajar art. These trends continued under Muhammad Shah (r. 1834–48) and Nasir al-Din Shah, during whose reign European cultural and economic penetration reached new heights.9

A NOTE ON FELTS

It is necessary to explore the characteristics and functions of luxurious felts before embarking on a study of post-Safavid carpets. Felts or namads often appear in paintings and lacquer work and are regularly mentioned in contemporary accounts. However, they have hitherto received little attention from scholars, partly because they were not exported10 and also because not many have survived.11 There is considerable evidence that they were regarded as an essential element of Iranian furnishing (see below), admired mostly for the comfort they provided. As Benjamin noted: “But nothing in the way of a carpet can be so luxurious and suggestive of comfort as a Persian namad an inch thick.”12 Some saw in carpets and namads a way for an Iranian to express his wealth. Around 1820, the British artist and traveler Sir Robert Ker Porter observed:

The utmost magnificence of his [an Iranian’s] house consists in the number of apartments and extent of the courts; of the rose trees and little fountains in the one, and the fine carpets and nummuds in the other.13

Felts were made all over the country; Kirman, Yazd, and Hamadan were noted production centers.

Namads were ubiquitous across all sections of Iranian society, i.e., among nomads, in villages and cities, and at the royal court. Relatively coarse and intended primarily for practical comfort rather than decoration, namads played a major role in nomadic life, covering