

**18 piece Seljuk carpet collection of the 13th Century:
Nomination for inclusion into UNESCO World Heritage Listing**



Source: Wikipedia (2011)



Source: Wikipedia (2008)

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
1.1 The influence of Islamic architecture.....	2
1.2. UNESCO: Protecting the architectural grandeur of Islamic Golden Age.....	2
1.3. Looking beyond Islamic architecture to art.....	3
2. Seljuk carpets-History and description.....	4
3. Outstanding universal value	5
3.1 Masterpiece of human creative genius (criterion i).....	5
3.2 Interchange of human values across civilisations (criterion ii).....	5
3.3 A unique testimony to cultural tradition (criterion iii).....	5
3.4 A testimony to the development of artistry across civilisations (criterion iv)	6
3.5 A fragile existence (criterion v)	6
3.6 A statement of local aesthetics and religious ideologies (criterion vi)	6
4. Conclusion.....	7
References.....	8
Image sources:	9

1. Introduction

1.1 The influence of Islamic architecture

History has depicted the East to be home to artistic and cultured civilisations, evident in its rich collections of architectural monuments which are still considered marvels of art and technological innovations in contemporary times. The Hanging Garden of Babylon, the Great Wall of China and the Pyramids of Egypt, all of which are examples of the Seven Wonders of the World located in the East, are great testaments of engineering feats and craftsmanship.

A major contribution to architectural developments in the East which is of notable mention is that of the Arabs. Inheriting the traditions and knowledge of the Greek, Persian and Roman civilisations which they conquered, the Arabs developed Islamic architecture through their historical dedication to arts and culture. From the aqueducts, arches and great roads of the Roman Empire to the Byzantine basilicas to the Persian pointed and horseshoe arches and the Byzantine mosaics, these characteristics were adapted into aristocratic and religious Arab buildings such as mosques, palaces, castles, shrines and tombs (Stimson, 2012).

Apart from bearing testimony to the innovations of ancient civilisations, Islamic architecture with its unparalleled vault and dome construction, has also been influential in the works of future generations, in particular the European Gothic (The Observer,1933). Its ability to connect the architectural developments of multiple centuries and cultures has contributed towards UNESCO's designation of several countries with these finest architectural monuments to be heritage sites worthy of preservation.

1.2. UNESCO: Protecting the architectural grandeur of Islamic Golden Age

An example is in the capital of Baghdad, which under the Abbasids became transformed into the biggest and most cultured city which connects itself to its neighbouring Persian culture, and is a confluence of cultural ideas from its Chinese and Indian neighbours of the East and Byzantines of the West (The Saylor Foundation, undated). As a city of lavish palaces constructed out of marble with structures and styles similar to those in Damascus and reflective of Persian influence, the Round City of Baghdad marks the beginnings of the Islamic Golden Age (Blair, 2011).

Neither did Egypt lag behind in its construction of Islamic architectural wonders during the medieval times. This is evident in UNESCO's (1979) labelling of historic Cairo, with its famous mosques, hammams, madrasas and fountains as one of the world's oldest cities to be conserved. Spain also occupies an outstanding position in its display of Islamic architectural grandeur, both in the Moorish monuments of Alhambra in Granada and in the historic centre of Cordoba. Both locations are emblematic of the erection of light and elegant palaces, citadels, mosques, gardens and fountains, with the characteristic artistry of arabesques, colourful mosaics, stalactites, domes, porticos and colonnades (UNESCO, 1984).

The ancient Merv should be credited with being an inspiration and pioneer of Islamic architecture, in particular that of Baghdad. In particular, the surviving Islamic monuments which dates back to the seventh century such as the series of mausolea adjoined with cut brick work, together with the Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar and the Seljuk city all narrate a little known story of Seljuk architecture (Government of the Republic of Turkmenistan, 1998).

1.3. Looking beyond Islamic architecture to art

UNESCO's efforts have demonstrated that the agency of Islamic architectural monuments in expressing the social, cultural, environmental and political motivations of centuries of human civilisation justifies their conservation. It should however not be forgotten that the advancement of Arabic culture and the refinements of its taste also present itself in the form of art, aside from architecture. From Arab calligraphy to pottery to glass art to gold and silver works to wood and ivory works to decorative tiling to carpet weaving, Muslim artisans seek excellence not only in their crafts, but also in integrating their cultural aesthetics into the work of art.

These works of art may thus be considered to be expressions of the architectural aesthetics which are found in the aforementioned Islamic architecture of the Golden Age UNESCO has designated as being of universal value. In light of this, it is thus rationale to propose that Islamic works of arts be included as a viable object for conservation. The following section thus nominates a non-architectural object to be considered for inclusion into the UNESCO World Heritage List. The focus of this paper will be on the carpet weaving craft of the Muslims, with specific justification to be provided for the inclusion of Seljuk carpets, also known as "Konya carpets" into the nomination listing.

2. Seljuk carpets-History and description

The Seljuk carpets were one of the key trade commodities during the period of Seljuk Anatolia, before becoming highly valued in the classical period of Ottoman carpets and were later the Ottoman Empire's main export (Turkish daily news, 2008). The art of carpet making first originated among the nomads in West and Central Asia, with the knotted carpets being one of the earliest examples (ibid). Created as a form of protection against harsh weather conditions, these carpets were made out of wool using the simplest tools of vertical and horizontal looms (ibid).

The artistry of carpet weaving was later imported to the Western traditions by Turkish tribes through their migration to the West (ibid.). The art is however reflective of the Seljuk tradition before its appropriation by the Ottomans like many other art forms (ibid.). Anatolian carpets are usually created out of high quality silk or wool, consisting of bright and dominant colours such as blue or red (The New York Times, 1981). The designs are often geometrical and at times incorporating more organic forms such as flowers, domes and animal figures (ibid).

The demand for and tradition of collecting Anatolian carpets has not died out, but rather has been rekindled in the West, with merchants from Turkey exporting more intensively to the aggressively growing demand among the Europeans and Americans (The New York Times, 1981). Of particular interest to this growing market are the prayer rugs which are perceived to not only make a good decorative but also to be a good investment (ibid). In view of the predominance and popularity of carpets today, it has become all the more necessary to conserve early works which marks remarkable Islamic traditions in the art of carpet making.

In this aspect, the rarest and earliest works of Seljuk carpets from the 13th century, those which are so tremendously treasured that they have been painted by Quattrocento artists at the feet of Madonna, ought to be included for consideration as a heritage object worthy for conservation (Scott, 2005). Only a few examples of these early Seljuk carpets have survived, eight of which are in the Istanbul Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, three in the Tomb of Mevlana in Konya and seven in the Stockholm National Museum. Out of these 18 piece collection, only 3 pieces are intact, with the others only existing in part. The following section thus discusses the outstanding universal value of the Seljuk carpets in order to provide justification for its nomination.

3. Outstanding universal value

This section adopts the UNESCO (2013) operational guidelines to justify the outstanding universal value of the 18 piece Seljuk carpet collection as a heritage object. In particular, it has met criterion (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), (v) and (vi) as laid out in the guidelines. Further elaborations are provided below.

3.1 Masterpiece of human creative genius (criterion i)

The Seljuk carpet is a masterpiece of human creative genius and is itself worthy of World Heritage Status. With the craft being first developed by the Seljuk Turks craftsmen and used to adorn the elegant Islamic architectural monuments of mosques, palaces and mansions, it is undeniable that these works are an outstanding complement to the highly valued heritage sites.

3.2 Interchange of human values across civilisations (criterion ii)

The Seljuk carpets have exerted considerable influence over the Ottomans who followed on the tradition of carpet weaving for the next 700 years. Carpet artworks have become so highly valued that they have come to adorn the palaces of the Ottoman Empire. Apart from having a localised influence among the Turks, Seljuk carpets have also set the precedent for the creation of Anatolian carpets, with its popularity stirring an international demand for such products.

In particular, the artistry first pioneered by the Seljuk Turks have been highly valued and desired worldwide as symbols of political power and social status (Smith, 2003). It reached the West through the Crusades and exerted a great influence over European painting as soon as it arrived, such as in a Holbein portrait of a rich trader and beneath the throne of Ghirlandaio Madonna (ibid.). It is thus evident that the Seljuk carpets in particular influenced architectural decoration and artistic development across a few civilisations in the East and the West.

3.3 A unique testimony to cultural tradition (criterion iii)

Needless to say, the Seljuk carpets are a unique tradition developed by the Seljuk Turkish Empire which prospered and then crumbled all in the 13th century (Smith, 2003). The remaining remnants of the 18 carpets of the Seljuks are thus a treasured reminder of the talented craftsmanship of a civilisation which once existed.

3.4 A testimony to the development of artistry across civilisations (criterion iv)

The early Seljuk pieces are a statement of the interactions between the Ottomans and the Seljuk Turks, which allowed for both a transfer of artistic skills and a trade in the material product. Seljuk carpets are also telling of the lifestyles of Turkic nomads from Central Asia in the 11th century who was the pioneers of the art. Yet more evidence, although inclusive, have demonstrated that the art embodied in these Seljuk carpets may date even further back to the non-Muslim Byzantine, Greek and Armenian people (Smith, 2003). What is however evident is that these carpets are emblematic of the stages of trade, migrations, conquests and development across the Romans, Greeks, Turkish and European peoples. The mystery and inconclusiveness of the origins of carpet art which are portrayed in the oldest, currently existing Seljuk carpets further justifies a need for its conservation for future research.

3.5 A fragile existence (criterion v)

The surviving 18 pieces, many incomplete and have been subjected to tremendous wear and tear over its 750 years of lifetime, are characteristic of the Turkish carpets and prayer carpets which are in high demand today as a collectors' item. Although they have been transferred to museums from their existing three locations, namely Aladdin Mosque in Konya, Beysehir Esrefoglu Mosque and from Cairo, they are fragile by nature and vulnerable under the impact of environmental change. Furthermore, many have been badly damaged. As rare existing pieces of human history, a restoration of these damaged carpets is justified.

3.6 A statement of local aesthetics and religious ideologies (criterion vi)

The Seljuk carpets with its geometrical patterns of crossing lines, eight pointed stars and symmetric hooks are expressive of the highly valued Islamic principles of aesthetics also found in its architecture, namely the ideologies of proportionality, repetition, symmetry, equilibrium, centrality, harmony, similarity and order (Foroozani, 1991). These patterns are also representative of the dominant philosophies of the Seljuk societies which were against the use of figurative patterns and confined themselves to geometric ornamentations (Ozkar and Lefford, 2006). Yet, the later inclusions of curvilinear patterns and stylised flower motifs are also telling of the change in social norms and construction techniques (ibid.). The Seljuk carpets are also a statement of the religious Islamic ideologies which rejects the portrayal of

living forms and embraces the creative use of geometry, floral decorative and calligraphic characters to propagate the message of Islam (Saoud, 2004).

4. Conclusion

This paper concludes that the 18 piece collection of Seljuk carpets should be included into the UNESCO heritage listing together with its current comprehensive list of urban and architectural monuments characteristic of the Islamic Golden Age. The reasons for this nomination is justified by its having met six criteria to be considered of outstanding universal value, as laid out by the UNESCO (2013) operational guidelines. This includes being (i) a masterpiece of human creative genius, (ii) representative of an interchange of human values across civilisations, (iii) a unique testimony to cultural tradition, (iv) a testimony to the development of artistry across civilisations, (v) a fragile existence, (vi) a statement of local aesthetics and Islamic religious ideologies.

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