Carpet

Place of origin: Alcaraz (probably, made)
Date: 1450-1500 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Wool pile on wool warps
Museum number: 784-1905
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 63, The Edwin and Susan Davies Gallery, case WN, shelf EXP

Public access description

Carpet weaving in Spain developed during its Moorish occupation in the early medieval period. There is evidence as early as the late 12th century for the export of some sort of carpets from Murcia, in Southern Spain, and Spanish carpets were brought to London in 1255 for the marriage of Eleanor of Castile and the future Edward I. Inventories from the late 13th to the 15th centuries show that Spanish carpets were highly prized in many European countries at a time when almost no floor coverings were being woven elsewhere in Europe.

Such relatively small carpets as this were laid on the floor beside beds, placed on or before altars, on tables, chests and cupboards, hung behind chairs of estate and on festive occasions were draped from windows, balustrades and balconies.

Descriptive line
Carpet, stars in octagons, Spanish, 1450-1500

Physical description
Spanish version of Large Holbein design: rectangles with plaitwork backgrounds enclosing octagonal frames containing stars with various diaper patterns in different colours on their rays, on a red ground.
Cut wool pile on wool warps and wefts. 21 warps and 10 wefts to the inch. 110 knots to the square inch.
The carpet has been cut across its width, and about one third of the original design may be missing.

Dimensions
Height: 205 cm, Width: 123 cm, Depth: 0.5 cm

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Object history note

The carpet was purchased from a Miss A E Burwood, a private owner in London. It had been offered to the Museum for sale with a group of other textiles. She refers in correspondence to it having been previously purchased for 500 francs, but not where it came from. Described by the vendor as Arabian, it was noted by A F Kendrick to be "of Hispano-Moresque origin, probably dating from the 16th century". The Museum rejected her original asking price of £25 as too high, but eventually agreed to it, "as we do not think it advisable to lose this opportunity of securing an example which may not again occur."

Historical significance: The design of this carpet is what has become known (in the 20th century) as the Large Holbein pattern. It is derived from Turkish sources, with a grid of rectangular compartments with large octagons containing stars, which was adapted in Spanish workshops. Most popular textile designs of the early middle ages, influenced by Byzantine styles, were repeating patterns of circles containing animals or birds; in coarse woollen textiles such as carpets it was difficult to render circles satisfactorily so they were made into octagons. Turkish rugs with octagons enclosing stars of various kinds appear in European paintings, but the diaper pattern on the stars here, and the border pattern, which recurs in several of these sort of carpets, seem characteristically Spanish. Such Spanish carpets as this also have a characteristic knotting technique, which involves pile threads wrapped round a single warp end instead of two as was usual in the Near East. The design was given its name because such patterns are seen in well-known paintings by Hans Holbein the Younger and are on a larger scale from the small-pattern carpets which also appear in his paintings.

Historical context note

Carpet weaving in Spain developed during the Moorish colonisation of the Iberian peninsula. There is evidence as early as the late 12th century for the export of some sort of carpets from Murcia, in Southern Spain, and Spanish carpets were said to have been brought to London in 1255 for the marriage of Eleanor of Castile and the future Edward I. Inventories from the late 13th to the 15th centuries show that Spanish carpets were highly prized by Europeans at a time when almost no floor coverings were being woven elsewhere in Europe. The most important weaving centre was Alcaraz, in the Province of Murcia. Turkish carpet prototypes were adapted into distinctly European forms, reaching a peak in the 15th century, and continuing into the 17th; after the Christian re-conquest of the South, those Muslim craftsmen who chose to become Christian and remain in Spain continued to produce high quality carpets.
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URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O125158/carpet-unknown/