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Oriental Rugs in Renaissance Florence.

By Marco Spallanzani. 281 pp. incl. 101 col. ills. (The Bruschetti Foundation for Islamic and Asian Art, Textile Studies I, S.P.E.S., Florence, 2007), £80. ISBN 978-88-7242-3141.

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MUCH HAS BEEN written about the trade in Oriental rugs in Europe – in Italy in particular – using documentary and visual sources to identify types. Marco Spallanzani's book takes the study of the trade to a higher level of precision and insight. It focuses on Florence from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth, and in a systematic way treats issues relating to supply and demand: importation, distribution, the range of customers, prices and sizes, functions and taste. It is a distillation of knowledge that comes from years of patient archival study, analysing hundreds of different types of document, from inventories to letters, from bills of lading [~~please explain~~] to records of excise duty. The author uses visual evidence, and the book is beautifully illustrated in colour with depictions, mainly by Florentine painters, of scenes in which carpets, rugs and covers appear. The combination of documentary and visual sources, rigorously analysed, makes this book a fundamental study of the subject.

Despite the dense factual content, the writing is of exemplary clarity and a pleasure to read, even when the author tackles complex problems of terminology, for example, the interpretation of words such as *carpita*, *coperta* and *tappeto* (pp.3–5). In the Introduction, documentary and visual sources are interwoven to clarify terms and types. Spallanzani also deals with the problem of the interpretation of visual sources (pp.6–7), concluding that these are helpful only when they correspond to an identifiable, existing object; when they do not it should be assumed that the textile is the fantasy of the painter and cannot be attributed to a local manufacturer, given the absence of documentary evidence of the manufacture in the West of rugs in an oriental style.

The next section, on supply, gives a lucid summary of the various routes by which oriental merchandise reached Florence. Venice was a particularly important port; from there specialised carrier companies would organise transport by sea or along the Po to Ferrara and on by boat to Bologna, where the goods would be transferred to pack animals to make the crossing of the Apennines to

Florence. But Florentine merchants also made use of Ancona, while other shipments came via the Tyrrhenian ports of Genoa and Pisa. This section also covers the transactions involved and the trading networks set up and manned by Florentine merchants and their agents. The presence of a Florentine colony in Constantinople soon after the city fell in 1453 reflected the increasingly favourable trading circumstances there, and in the fifteenth century Turkish rugs, some from Bursa, become a significant element of Levantine trade. Once in Florence, they were distributed through a complex mercantile network that catered for various categories of customer.

Around the mid-fifteenth century demand for imported Eastern goods increased and in the latter half of the century the Medici became the most important buyers. But such was the variety of rugs that they were not the preserve of patrician families and the church alone: more modest individuals are also recorded as owners. The next section provides insights into the relationship between the price and size of rugs, the comparative costs of other artefacts and the amount of labour required to earn the sums involved. While good quality small rugs could cost three to four florins, larger ones could cost twice as much, yet at the time of Lorenzo il Magnifico pieces of rare Chinese porcelain (celadon or blue and white) were surprisingly less expensive, costing on average one to two florins apiece. Clothing was much more expensive: gold and silver thread was woven into silk textiles, and the cost of a gold brocade garment for ceremonial occasions might cost one hundred or even two hundred gold florins. While a labourer might need to work for up to three months to earn the price of a small oriental rug, for an artisan, let alone those better off, even medium-size rugs were affordable.

The section on function outlines the various uses to which the rugs were put – mainly to cover benches, tables, *lettucci* or moneychangers' counters. Rugs were not normally used to cover the floor, except when placed around a bed, a custom that seems to have increased over time. Those that are depicted beneath the Virgin's feet should be regarded as indicating a sacred space where no mortal feet should step.

The final section, on taste, attempts the difficult task of filling the gap left by the paucity of surviving rugs by carefully sifting documentary and iconographic evidence to recapture the Florentine taste in rugs. Exactly what weight of interpretation such evidence can bear is arguable, but what does emerge is the overwhelming popularity of Turkish rugs with the motif of a repeated wheel pattern (*a ruote*) that have long been labelled Holbein rugs; they were so fashionable that one customer, wanting variety, insisted '*non gli voglio a ruote*' (p.63).

The text is followed by a substantial (pp.75–145) section presenting the documents upon which the analysis is based, and this in turn is followed by the dazzling array of

colour reproductions of Florentine paintings, arranged chronologically, with among them plates of the surviving carpets, including a splendid Anatolian Lotto rug. The design and production of the volume is exemplary, doing justice to an outstanding piece of research that sets new standards of scholarly precision and insight in this field.

