

# Fabrics and looms in present-day Iran: Beyond Persian carpets

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<sup>1</sup> Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural de España (IPCE).

<sup>2</sup> Chasuble of Saint Vital, 2,60 mt from selvedge to selvedge; chape de Saint Mexme, 2,57 mt; chasuble of Saint Bernardo de Clairvaux, 2,53 mt; chasuble Saint Ermengol, 1,77 mt de la Seu d'Urgell, among others.

Sometimes the world seems like a very small place, and it seems that our fate is written in the stars ...

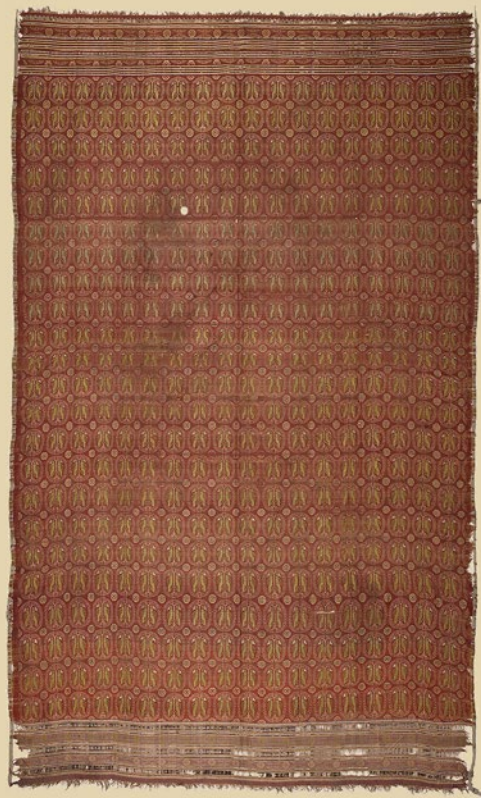
In the summer of 2013 I happened to meet Kaya Kikuchi Munakata. Kaya is Japanese, but now lives in Tehran because of her work. She was on a visit the CDMT to spread the word about the fabrics that Iranian artisans continue to make today. Kaya brought samples of their work, and taught me the names of the different fabrics: *karbafi*, *daraibafi*, *shaarbafi* ... She showed me photos of the weavers who had made them, the places where they live, and the makeshift workshops where they produce their creations. Kaya and I became friends immediately. It couldn't really have been otherwise: with her love of fabrics, my love of looms, and our shared passion for the craft of weaving.

As it happened, at the time I was preparing a study, together with Pilar Borrego<sup>1</sup>, of two mediaeval pieces made of silk with elaborate designs, found in Carrión de los Condes (Palencia). One of the most striking features of these fabrics is their size, especially the larger one, the blue – a single, seamless piece of cloth, measuring 140 cm long and 271 cm wide.

Pieces which today surprise us because of their size<sup>2</sup> are kept in museums all over the world, but there is no clear explanation of how they were made, or what kind of loom was used. As a weaver, imagining how these exceptional pieces were woven has always fascinated me and has been one of my main research areas for a long time.

As I explored the published literature, I saw that a type of loom reported in Iran in the early 1960s might prove to be the answer to the question. It was this finding that spurred me on to travel to Iran in order to see this loom for myself.

Now, together with Kaya Kikuchi Munakata, who in the second part of this article describes the project she has launched in support of traditional Iranian weavers, I take pleasure in presenting this text. The idea of the article is not to go into great technical detail about the pieces and processes (a description of that kind would be better suited to a more specialized magazine) but to offer a token of appreciation and respect for all the weavers I met there, artisans who still today work with traditional techniques, and who always welcomed me with a broad smile and a good cup of *chai* (tea).



St Zoilus fabrics, Carrión de los Condes (©Centro de Conservación y Restauración de Bienes Culturales de Castilla-León). [See detail.](#)





Woman working in a pit loom (© JMJI).



Weavers from the Ancient Arts Centre (Kashan) © Sílvia Saladrigas Cheng.

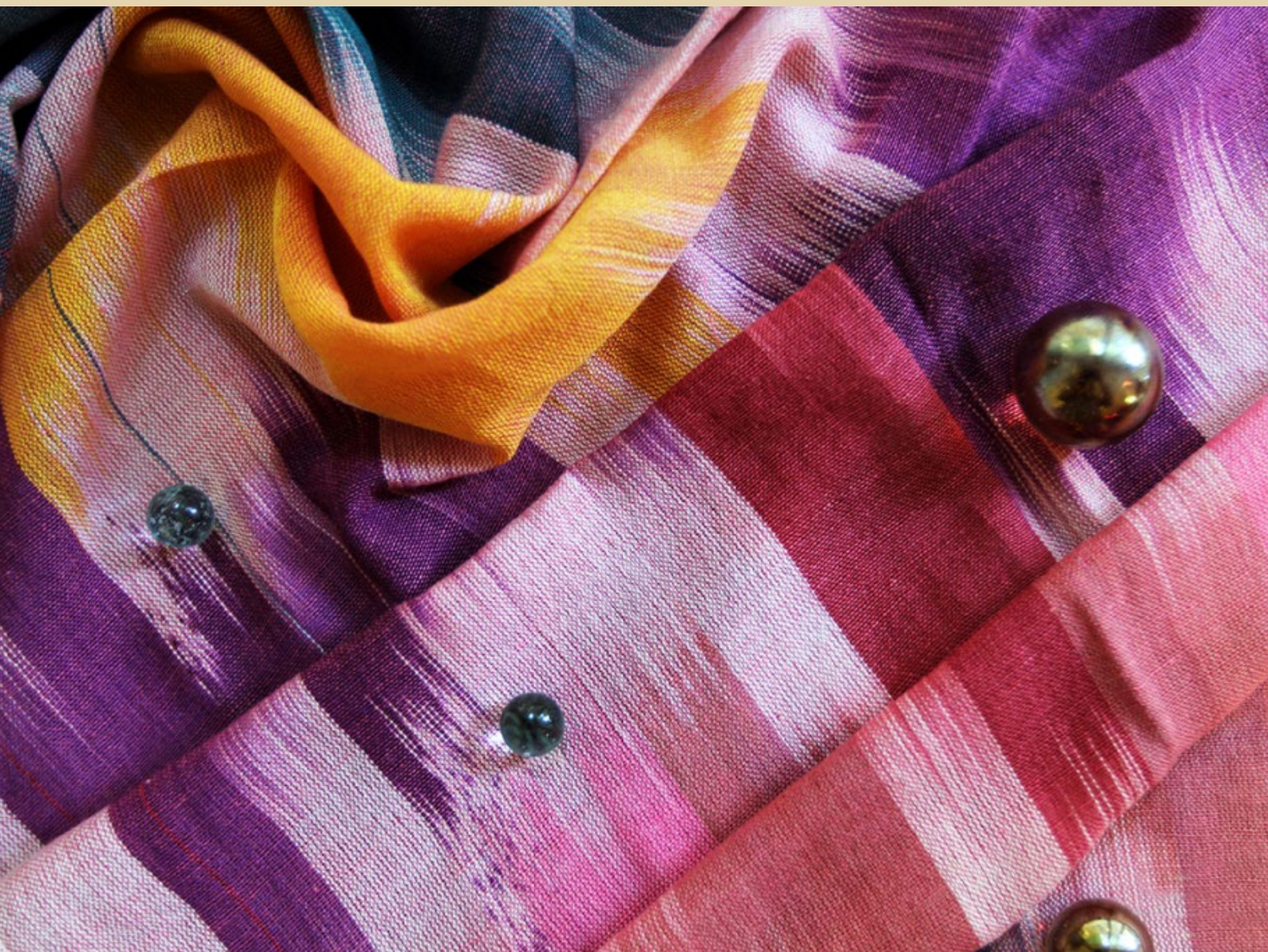
## Not just carpets

Iran has always been acknowledged as the largest producer of quality carpets in the world. Persian rugs have been a major element of the country's exports; both humble and luxurious pieces adorn the walls and floors of nomad tents, urban and rural homes, mosques and palaces. Rugs can be found everywhere – from the remotest corner of Iran to the world's most prestigious museums.

But other craft fabrics are also produced in Iran today and in fact are as old as the well-known traditional carpets. Inside the rich Iranian textile tradition we also find simpler, more practical creations, produced on a smaller scale for everyday use.

*Kaarbafi*, *daraibafi*, *shaarbafi* ... are the names of some of them. *Kaarbafi* is a plain cotton weave, usually with only a few colours. They have been woven for over a thousand years by Iranian women who pass on their designs from generation to generation. *Kaar* means “work” and *bafi* means “weaving”, so the word *kaarbafi* reflects the fact that weaving has always been among the main tasks of women in the home. Traditionally this fabric has been used to make bedspreads, tablecloths, napkins, table mats, and so on.





*Daraibafi* fabric detail (©JMJI).





Karbafi fabric detail  
© Quico Ortega.

*Darai* means reserve dyeing (ikat). In this process, the warp threads are tied before dyeing to achieve a variety of colours for each thread. This technique is known and practised in many other countries, but in Iran it is performed only by men, in the city of Yazd, on the edge of the desert. It has been in use for about 400 years.

In Kashan, in Isfahan province, *shaarbafi* fabrics are woven. *Shaar* means “very fine hair”, and the fabric that receives this name is made with very fine silk or cotton to ensure a smooth, light texture. Woven by men, it may be in one or many colours, and often with stripes. Like *kaarbafi*, it may be a plain weave fabric or also twill.

Other fabrics such as *termeh* and *zaribafi* are much more elaborate, and bear figurative designs such as certain kinds of velvets. *Zaribafi* always works with a gold thread weft (*zari*) creating complicated compositions. And we shouldn't forget the fabrics printed with hand-carved wooden moulds.

### Looms and weavers

It is wonderful to see how these fabrics are produced today. Created on handlooms with pedals, some of them date back to the models reproduced in antique miniatures or listed in documents. An example is the “pit loom”, for instance, the weaver sits next to a pit dug in the ground, on top of which the harness is placed with the heddles and the pedals attached to them hang down into the pit. The *kaarbafi* fabric, always made by women, is usually produced on this type of loom.





*Shaarbafi fabric (©JMJI).*



The fabric are woven from the reverse side (© Sílvia Saladrigas Cheng).



3 Using the vocabulary of the Centre International d'Etudes des Textiles Anciens.

*Daraibafi* and *shaarbafi* are also made on simple wooden looms, with four heddles and pedals usually driven by a pulley system. None of these looms have a warp beam; the warp is picked up by groups, making several “balls”, or with the thread rolled around large spindles, hanging from a structure behind it. This is an interesting way to set up many metres of warp thread in the loom while maintaining good tension and providing an ideal shed opening.

For more elaborate fabrics, two people are needed. A weaver's assistant, sitting on a structure above the loom, holds the warp threads up with a complex system of drawstrings. In this system, the fabric pattern is, so to speak, “memorized” and can be repeated cyclically. The weaver operates the pedals to create the ground fabric and simultaneously passes the different shuttles, made of walnut wood, with the wefts of different colours that correspond to the pattern. To open the shed better, the weaver uses two big wooden wedges, inserted between the strings that raise the warp.

All the wefts go from edge to edge of the fabric and the fabric has two warps: one that maintains the cohesion of the fabric and the other that ties the wefts in a twill pattern. The weave is *samite*<sup>3</sup>, and this is the same system as was used to make many of the silk fabrics of mediaeval times. This loom, today called a drawloom, is still in use throughout the Middle East and India, and the width of the fabrics is usually around 80 cm.

But which loom was made to make the large pieces? In the end I found it; it turned out to be a totally different type of loom from any I had seen so far. An amalgam between a vertical two bar loom and a horizontal heddle loom, its wooden structure may measure more than three metres wide. It is called a *zilu* loom because it is used to weave a kind of prayer mat that bears this name, traditionally made in white and blue cotton.





Warp threads set up in the loom (© Silvia Saladrigas Cheng).



▶ Drawboy in the drawloom  
(© Silvia Saladrigas Cheng).

Drawloom structure. ▶







Zilu loom (© Silvia Saladrigas Cheng).

4 Using the vocabulary of the Centre International d'Etudes des Textiles Anciens.

This loom does not have a comb, and there are two warps and two wefts, which make what today we call *taqueté*<sup>4</sup>. Two “heddles” with a system similar to Chinese looms, separate the warp threads and make the structure of the fabric, and a series of strings cross-sectional to the warp located above of them, going from end to end of the loom serve to open the shed for the pattern, which is usually geometrical.

In this loom, the strings are operated directly by the weaver who uses some large wooden hooks that keep the threads open to the passage of the weft, and unlike the drawloom, there is no system to memorize the pattern. Some years ago, an assistant weaver would have participated, opening the threads and moving the weft. But fewer and fewer people are taking up weaving. The work involves a long apprenticeship and is very hard; and not many young people today are interested in it.

Could this *zilu* loom be connected in some way to the Carrión de los Condes fabric? It's possible. We can imagine the same structure, maintaining its great width and another kind of assembly similar to the horizontal drawloom, perhaps with one or two assistants to open the shed for the pattern weft to pass .... we might also imagine a horizontal loom similar to the one used now, but changing the sizes and with more than one assistant helping to make the fabric. At the moment these are only hypotheses; we need to look much further before we can make any conclusive statements.





▲ Detail of the *zilu* loom  
(©Silvia Saladrigas Cheng).

Detail of *zilu* carpet  
(©Silvia Saladrigas Cheng). ▶







Zilu weaver  
(© Sílvia Saladrigas Cheng).

What is true is that the numbers of weavers who master these skills are falling, and they're all growing older. It is vital to publicize their work while there is still time; this is why projects such as the one promoted by Kaya Kikuchi Munakata deserve all our support.

### **Kaya's Experience Supporting Weavers: the Project with JMJI**

My name is Kaya Kikuchi Munakata, and my first encounter with traditional Iranian hand-woven textiles was at an exhibition at Tehran's Baagh Muze (Garden Museum), organized by the International Institute of Jam-e Miras-e Jahan (JMJI) in May 2013. The exhibits included a variety of Iranian hand-woven textiles besides Persian carpets and amazed visitors with their versatile beauty, their simplicity and practicality, and the warmth that the artisans had woven into them. JMJI is a private Tehran-based organization whose main activities include running workshops on Iranian heritage and culture for





Sidaar سی‌دار

Persian Handmade Textile پارچه دستبافت ایرانی

JMJI logo.

children and preserving traditional Iranian weaving arts. In the latter area, they have been supporting female *kaarbafi* weavers in a small town called Meybod in the outskirts of Yazd by supplying cotton threads and repairing worn-out handlooms.

In 2011, JMJI launched its own textile brand named “Sidaar”. “Si” means “thirty” and “daar” “handloom” in Persian, and the name reflects the fact that there were originally thirty kinds of hand-woven textiles in Iran in addition to Persian carpets, though some of them unfortunately have already disappeared. Since Sidaar’s launch, JMJI has been actively working on preserving Iranian hand-woven textiles – not only *kaarbafi*, but also *daraibafi*, *shaarbafi*, the Iranian silk brocade *zaribafi*, and sheep and camel wool fabrics as well. They established a sustainable production cycle in which they work with weavers to create textile products adding modern design that will appeal to a wider customer base in Tehran; they also donate part of the profits to the weavers to enable them to keep weaving for Sidaar and possibly to achieve a stable income.

Eventually, I wondered why these Iranian hand-woven textiles had never really become known outside Iran. I felt that they deserved as much international recognition as the already famous Persian carpets. After some observation, I came to the conclusion that Iran had been isolated from international communities politically and economically, and that this isolation had had a serious effect on the country’s commercial and cultural activity. First of all, since the West imposed economic sanctions and limitations on political and diplomatic relationships on Iran in 2006, the flow of products, visitors and cultural exchange to and from the country has stagnated. Secondly, it is extremely difficult for Iranians to obtain visas to travel overseas. In addition, the information available in the media is also limited so it is very difficult for them to exchange information with abroad.

In spite of all these problems, I still strongly believe that traditional Iranian hand-woven textiles should be recognized internationally by a wider audience outside Iran. JMJI and I discussed possible ways in which I could help these Iranian textile arts to gain global recognition. We agreed that I would take charge of introducing them outside Iran through charity exhibitions and sales, as I was a non-Iranian national living in Tehran and the limitations on travel and other things would not greatly affect me. The reason why we chose charity was that it resonated with JMJI’s sustainable production cycle to support weavers and to preserve their textile arts.





Tokyo exhibition  
© Kaya Kikuchi Munakata.

### The Tokyo Exhibition

My first charity exhibition of Iranian hand-woven textiles was held in Tokyo on a summer weekend in 2014. The venue was a gallery located in a high-end area of the city called Jiyugaoka, where visitors and residents are generally keen to lead a quality lifestyle with creative, original home products. A range of Iranian textiles including *kaarbafi*, *daraibafi* and *shaarbafi*, mainly scarves, along with two models of tablecloths and dish cloths, were exhibited and available for purchase. I had promised JMJI to donate all the profits to the Iranian hand-woven textile industry which they support. Visitors including adults, students, teenagers and passers-by showed up to see Iranian textiles other than Persian carpets for the first time, and to learn about the textiles and artisans by examining the exhibits, the pamphlets, photos and videos introducing the background of the textiles and artisans, and by listening to my experiences in Iran and with Iranian textile arts.

### The Barcelona Exhibition

Silvia Saladrigas Cheng, the CDMT's textile documentation specialist who has personal ties with textile artisans in Iran, offered me the opportunity to hold another charity show in Barcelona. Thanks to Silvia's passion for supporting her artisan friends in Iran, she and I co-hosted our charity exhibition at Taller





Barcelona exhibition, Taller  
Tèxtil Teranyina (©Kaya Kikuchi  
Munakata).

Textil Teranyina, near the Ramblas in the city centre, in December 2014. The owner of the venue, Teresa Rosa Aguayo, who is an active weaving artist, supported our cause and kindly provided space in her studio for our exhibition and sales. A similar range of textiles to the Tokyo exhibition was presented, along with audio-visual information on the background of the textiles and weavers. In contrast to the Tokyo exhibition, although most of the visitors were seeing Iranian textiles for the first time, they were either textile experts, weavers or students learning weaving. Once again, I decided to donate the profits to the Iranian textile industry through JMJI, with Silvia's and Teresa's approval.

### **Effort to Create Sustainable Development**

Ever since the Tokyo exhibition, JMJI and I have been discussing how we can support the Iranian textile industry in a meaningful way in which the profits will be used to the fullest. As our primary objective is to support the industry for sustainable development, I insisted the profits should be given to a project









Warp threads for *daraibafi* in the new looms of Hameed Falahi workshop (© Kaya Kikuchi Munakata).

that is not just temporary but continuous, looking towards the future. After careful consideration, we decided to focus on training prospective weavers who will take over textile arts in the years to come.

JMJI introduced me to a young *daraibafi* weaver in his late twenties named Hameed Falahi, from the only *daraibafi* artisan family based in Yazd. Hameed has been preparing to open a weaving training centre where he plans to teach young prospective weavers. He wants to save his family's tradition of *daraibafi* from disappearing, and also to create job opportunities in his community. JMJI and I found Hameed's personal but also social project quite sustainable and contributed by using the profits from the Tokyo exhibition to buy three handlooms for his training centre. We visited Yazd to check upon our handlooms and his centre-to-be in January 2015.

Although JMJI and I acknowledge that Hameed's project has made significant steps forward with our donation, we have to admit that there are still more issues that we need to define as the project progresses. For example, what kind of people should Hameed be teaching? How can trainees be motivated so that they will become weavers in the future for sure? Where or for whom will trainees will be working as weavers after completing the course? I have a responsibility to provide continuous support to Hameed along with JMJI, and I need to come up with a meaningful way of donating the Barcelona profits so that they can be used to encourage his success.

To conclude this report of my project of supporting Iranian textile arts sustainably in collaboration with JMJI, Hameed Falahi, Silvia Saladrigas Cheng, and Teresa Rosa Aguayo, the main point is that we need to encourage the most effective way of ensuring that artisans' traditional values, knowledge



and skills are respected and maintained. In addition, we need to prioritize training in order to increase the number of weavers. Furthermore, I believe the Iranian textile industry also needs new visions to add commercial value to their traditional products which will bring in the income it needs to keep on going. In any case, I am determined to gain international recognition for these beautiful Iranian textile arts through fund-raising exhibitions, mainly outside Iran, and to devote the profits to achieving sustainable development for the Iranian textile industry. ●

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