

Ido Michaeli

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# Background Study

Can Central Park be represented as a Persian carpet?

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Throughout art history, it is common to find depictions of Persian carpets in European paintings. This project suggests the contrary: to portray a picturesque Park using the visual language of Persian carpets. While these two artistic expressions of West and East can be considered as opposites, carefully superimposing one over the other reveals a shared interest: both focus on ideal landscapes as a subject matter.

These artistic expressions emerged as a reaction to irreversible changes that happened as a result of two separate technological revolutions. These changes create a need for a sanctuary of tamed nature. On one hand, Central Park, as well as landscape painting of the 19th-century, can be seen as a reaction to the

Industrial Revolution. Growing urban centers in the West deprived people of green spaces and created a desire for wild nature. Persian carpets and gardens, on the other hand, can be seen as a continuation of a tradition stretching back to the very first cities in history. This material culture that emerged from the Agricultural Revolution is evidence of the longing for a lost primordial garden. Surprisingly, both of these cultures draw inspiration from the same myth of the Garden of Eden.

Persian Carpets is a form of Islamic art that was inspired by the ancient garden design styles of Mesopotamia. As if echoing from an earlier time, “paradise” is a translation of the word “garden”— derived from the Persian “pairidaeza”— arguably the most common theme in Persian carpets. In the Quran, the depiction

of the human form is considered idolatry and typically, though not entirely, forbidden. Due to these religious reasons, generations of Islamic artisans have focused their work on representations of the natural world. Therefore an intricate visual language was developed with special sensitivities to depict Central Park. If we agree that different stages of our history as humans are embedded in us and not erased, we can see how the medium of a Persian carpet might portray Central Park in an incredibly profound way.



The Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir and Central Park West.

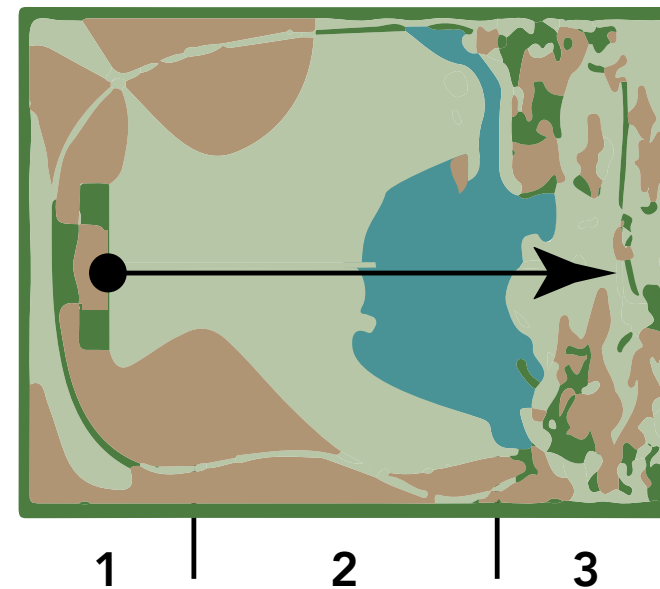
A popular misconception about Central Park is that it is the last remaining natural land in Manhattan. But this piece of landscape is entirely man-made, a great expanse of sculpted nature.

The park was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, in a style called Picturesque, meaning literally “in the manner of a picture; fit to be made into a picture.” Olmsted himself described the design as: “a gallery of mental pictures.”

Picturesque style aimed to recreate an idealized view of nature reflected in the tradition of European landscape paintings. By reconstructing artistic conventions into a landscape, Picturesque gardens invite visitors to walk inside a painting.

This style emerged in 18th-century England, influenced by the irregularity of the classic Chinese gardens of the East. Up to this point, Western gardens were formal and geometric.

Similar to the one-point perspective in Western paintings, landscapes are organized through different scenic viewpoints.



#### Diagram of Picturesque Garden

1. Beautiful Foreground
2. Picturesque Middleground
3. Sublime Background

**Top:** *Stourhead Garden*, England, mid-18th century. **Bottom:** Claude Lorrain, *Apollo and the Muses on Mount Helicon*, 1680.

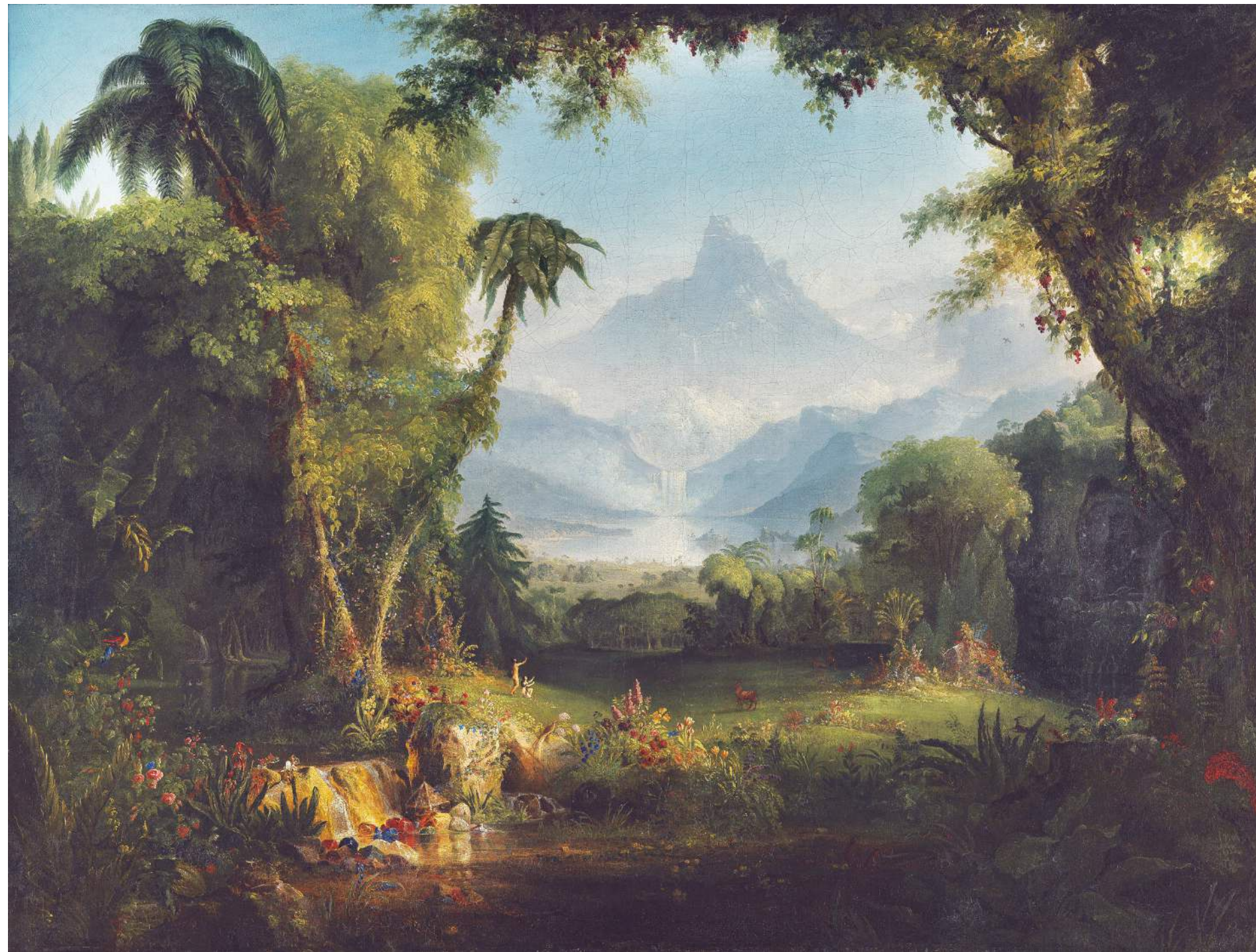




**Above:** Jan Frans van Bloemen, *Arcadia*, 1662. **Right:** *Sheep Meadow*, Central Park.



Pastoral landscapes symbolize a peaceful lifestyle, that of shepherds herding livestock around open areas of land. These landscapes are inspired by Arcadia, the equivalent of Eden in Greek mythology, a theme that was revived in Italian Renaissance art.



**Above:** Thomas Cole, *The Garden of Eden*, 1828. **Right:** *The Reservoir*, Central Park.



Landscape was the main focus in the intellectual climate of the time Central Park was created. In an attempt to establish a distinguished American canon, it signified the uniqueness of the New World — Edenic paradise, uncluttered by the ruins of Europe.



First and foremost, Central Park is the living embodiment of 19th-century American landscape painting, particularly of the Hudson River School. These Romantic landscapes also sought to create a sublime effect.

**Above:** Thomas Cole, *The Hunter's Return*, 1845. **Right:** Wollman Rink, South Central Park.



**Above:** Albert Bierstadt, *Minnehaha Falls*, 1850. **Right:** North Woods, Central Park.



A Picturesque landscape is complex, rugged, and irregular, affecting the imagination with a sense of mystery. "Truly all is remarkable and a wellspring of amazement and wonder. Man is so fortunate to dwell in this American Garden of Eden."—Albert Bierstadt

The idea of America as a "New Eden" is also tied to the colonial mission: Columbus was hoping to reach China and India (i.e. the 'East,' where the Bible locates Eden) by sailing West. He did not know he had discovered the Americas and died believing he had found Eden.

Columbus Circle at Central Park.  
Columbus monument, Gaetano Russo, 1892.





The desire to find Eden was also common in medieval legends, such as the fables of Prester John's kingdom and Saint Brendan. Marco Polo was the first European to cross Asia (1275 CE) by tracing the roots of the Silk Road. His pursuit was economic, but he was also hoping to find the earthly Garden of Eden.



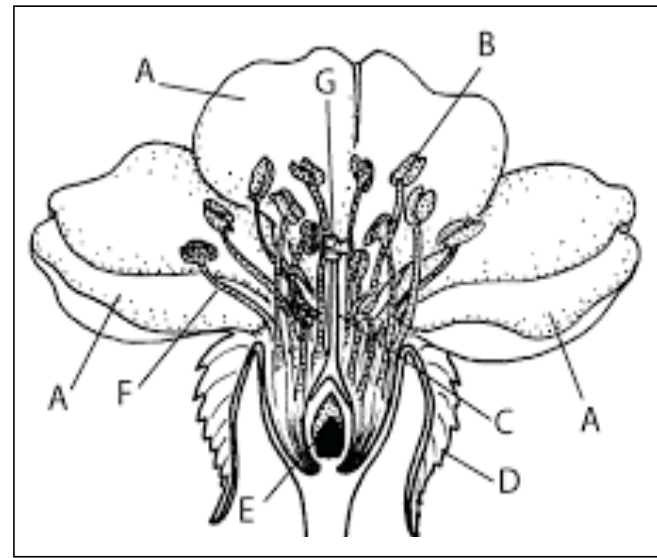
**Below:** Abraham Cresques, *The Catalan Atlas*, circa 1375. **Above:** Detail, Merchants traveling on the Silk Road followed by Marco Polo expedition.

For centuries, carpets were sometimes the only evidence of material culture from the East.



Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, 1662. **Left:** 'Petag', Persian Tabriz, 17th century.

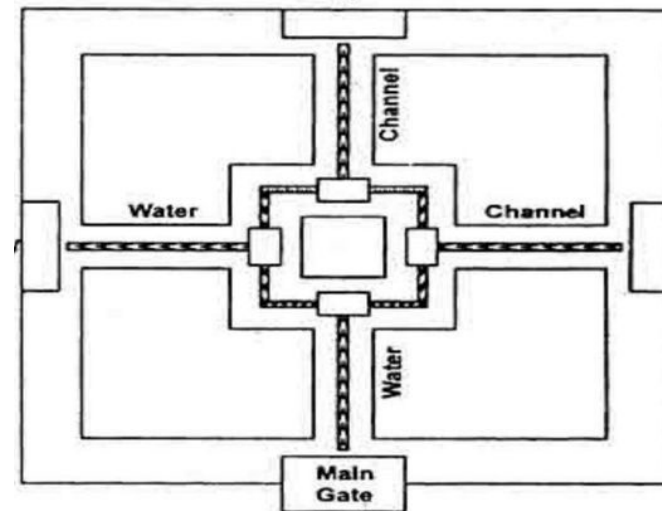
Although there are different levels of abstraction, all Persian carpets depict plant motifs. These designs have been copied numerous times and formulate an ideal essence rather than an earthly realism.



Detail of a Persian Heriz Serapi Rug, next to a diagram of a flower anatomy. **Right:** Plant motifs from Persian carpets in a variety of styles.

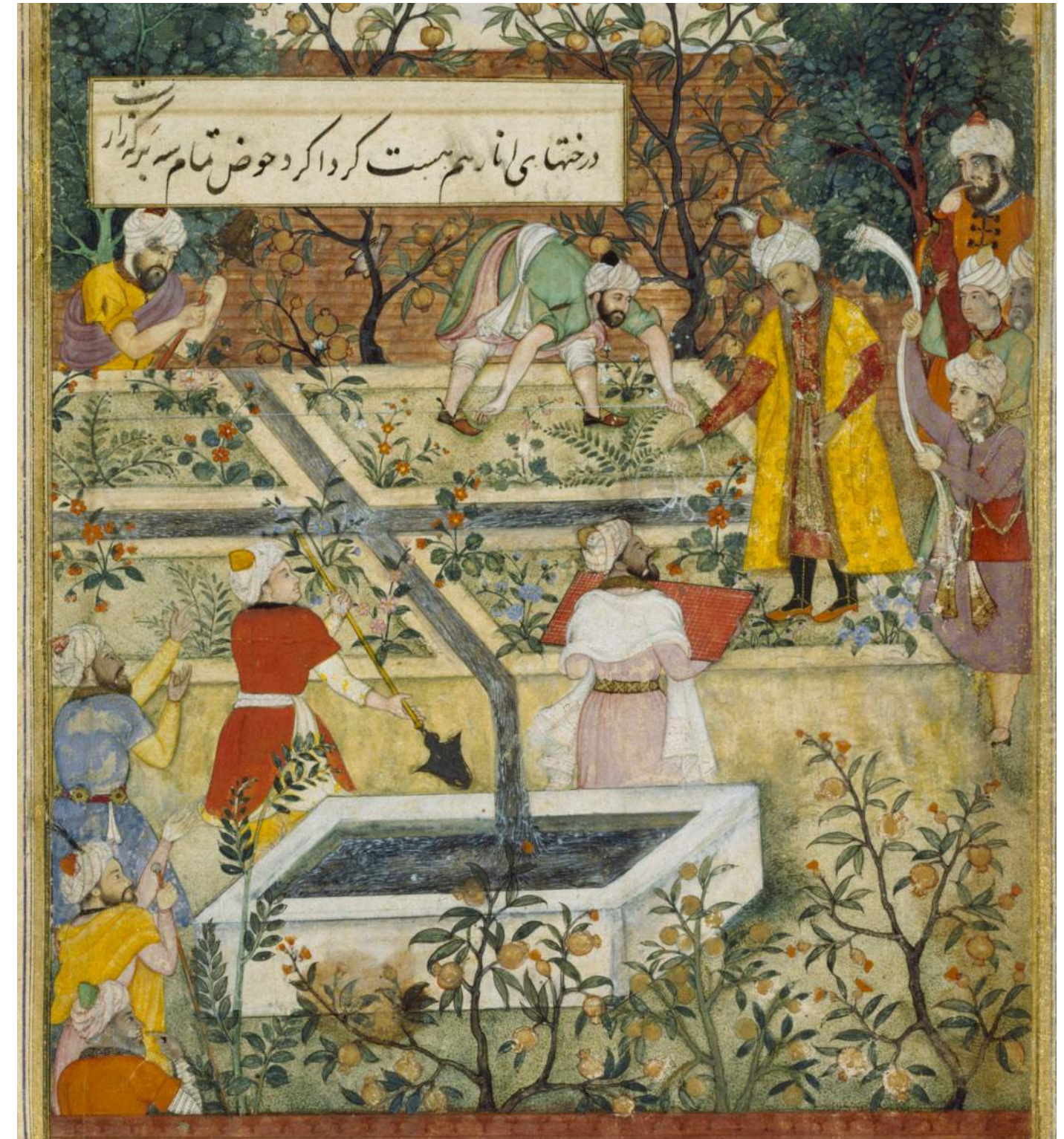


The word “paradise” comes from “pairidaeza,” the Persian word for “garden.” Persian carpets, as well as gardens, are meant to reflect Paradise as it is described in the Quran: Eden was split by four rivers and therefore divided into four gardens. This is why carpets are always divided into four symmetrical parts.



Garden Carpet and a diagram of a Persian garden design called Chahar Bagh, meaning: the four gardens of paradise.

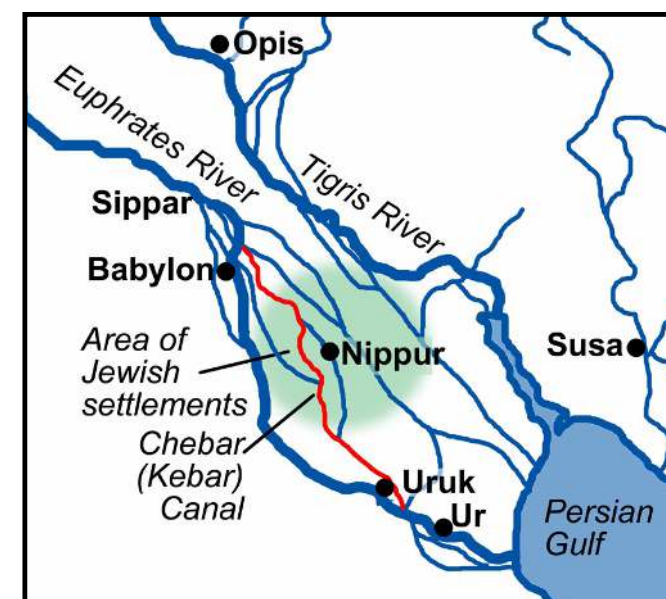
**Right:** Mughal emperor Babur supervising the laying out of the Garden of Fidelity, Afghanistan, 1590.





Fragment from Genesis, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 300 BCE.

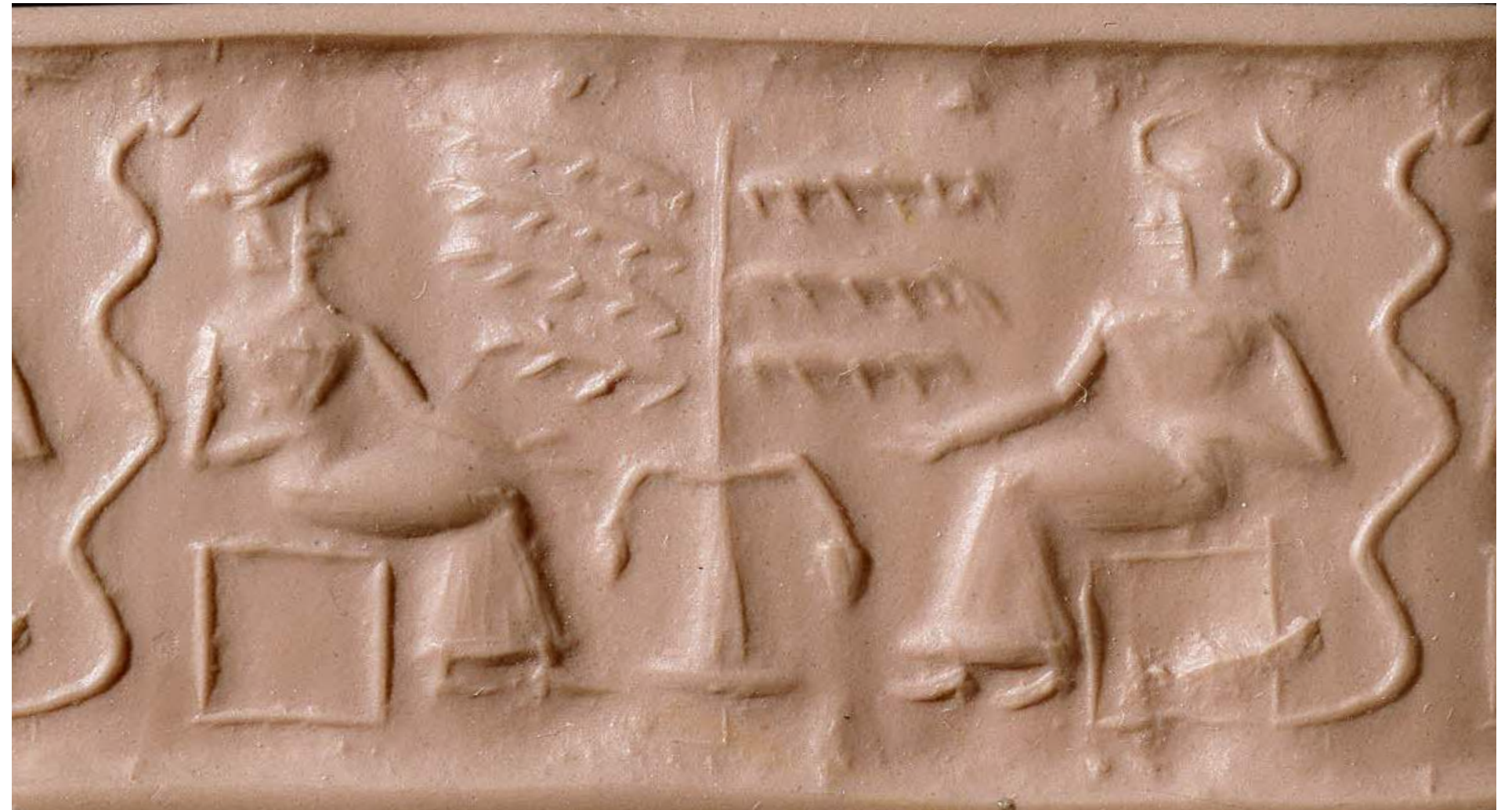
Some researchers argue that parts of the Hebrew Bible were influenced by pre-existing Mesopotamian myths. The book of Genesis was written during the Babylonian exile (450 BCE), and the location that it describes for the Garden of Eden and its four rivers—Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates—corresponds with the location of the Garden of Eden as it is described in the Quran.



Jewish exiles in Babylon 539-430 BC. **Right:** Euphrates river.

In the Epic of Gilgamesh (2700 BC), Eden is mentioned as the garden of the Gods and is also located somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

This pre-biblical myth emerged alongside the beginning of urbanization. The longing for the lost primordial garden started with the first society that cultivated nature.



*The Adam and Eve cylinder seal, also known as the "Temptation seal." The seal depicts two seated figures, a tree and a serpent. Post-Akkadian origin, 2200 BCE.*



Relief from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal shows a luxurious garden watered by an aqueduct, Nineveh, 669–631 BCE.

Olmedt invented landscape architecture as a modern profession. But Gilgamesh was the first landscape architect in written history. Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization where the Epic of Gilgamesh is set, was also the location of the first cultivated gardens. Kings described themselves as gardeners and collected plants from across their empires to build luxurious gardens. The ancients created wonders such as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

By building a paradise within an untamed landscape, city-dwellers created a microcosm of “ideal life.” To carve symmetry and order out of chaos constituted a powerful statement of authority, fertility, and legitimacy. Persian gardens are the foundations for a City.



**Above:** Persian Garden, Chaharbāgh, Fars Iran.  
**Left:** Shalimar Bagh, Lahore, Pakistan.

Similar to the function of Persian gardens, carpets provide a sanctuary from the chaos outside, a place of comfort, stability, and contemplation.

There is a religious sense behind their arabesque designs: that our every suffering has a symmetrical comfort in the eye of Allah. The carpets evoke a mindset of eternity, a reminder of something bigger than us. They suggest a great order, and that everything is known through faith.



*Heriz Serapi Rug, North West Persia, 18th century, Nazmiyal collection.*

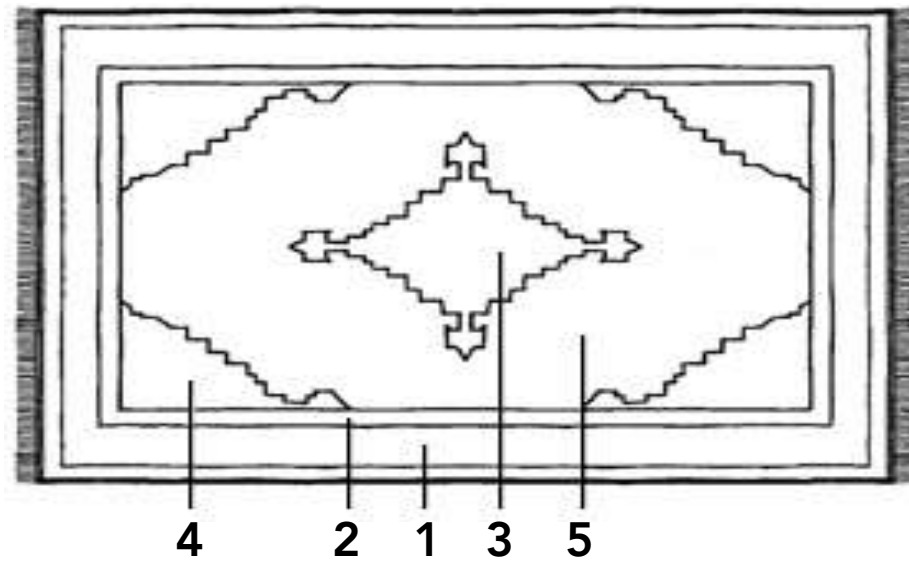
In contrast to American and European paintings, which are made from a human perspective, Persian carpets are designed from God's gaze, meant to affirm an awareness being seen from above. This visual language works well with maps and satellite imagery.



**Above:** *Garden Carpet, Persia, 18th century.*

**Right:** *Imam Square, Isfahan, Iran, 1598 - 1629. (Google Earth).*





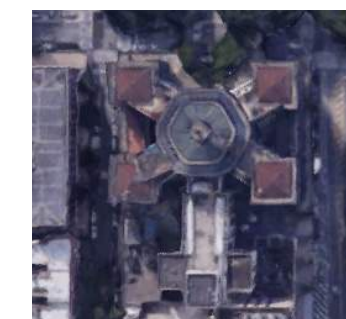
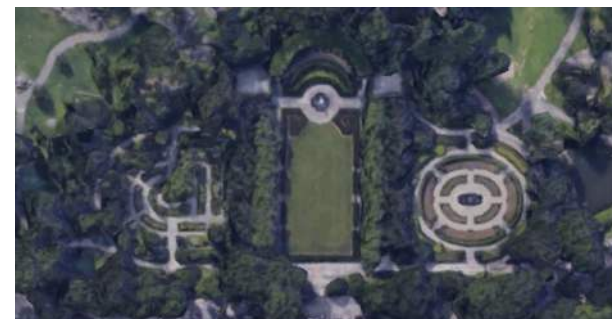
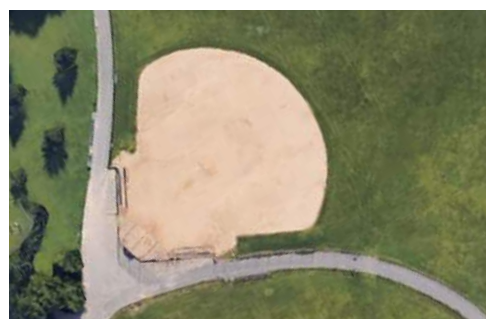
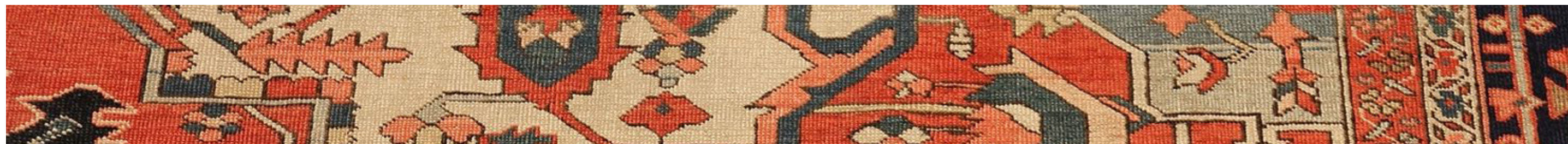
Often referred to as an oasis in a desert of concrete. We can already think about Central Park as the carpet of New York City. Although it is not symmetrical and off-grid, Central Park has all the elements of a runner shaped carpet.

1. It is framed with buildings that function as a border
2. It is surrounded by roads that create an additional frame
3. The Reservoir functions as a medallion
4. The gats at the corners get special treatment
5. The field is composed of a tamed landscape, that contains vegetation, water, and soil
6. The four seasons together echoes the double symmetry of the Persian four gardens.

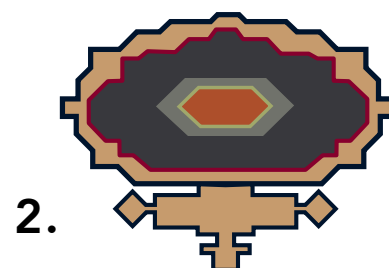


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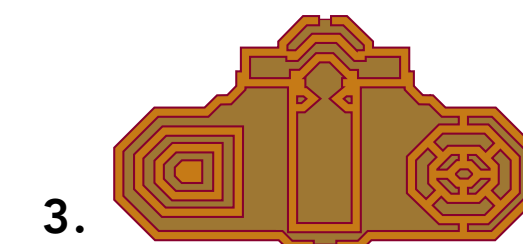




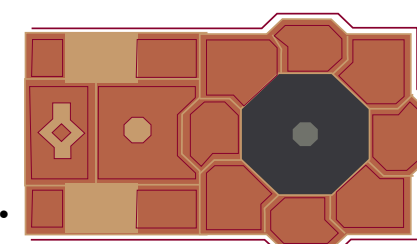
1.



2.



3.



4.



5.

The abstract qualities of some carpet designs, such as Persian Heriz, are open to interpretation. This ambiguity allows room to depict a variety of elements in the park. Central Park Carpets will depict the topography of the Park in great ornamental detail.

1. Baseball Field
2. Conservatory Water at 72th St.
3. Conservatory Garden at 106th St.
4. Bethesda Terrace
5. 5th Ave & 105th St.

**Above:** Detail of Heriz Serapi Rug, north west Persia, 18th century.



Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, oil on oak, 1533.

**Right:** Detail with Turkish Oushak carpet (also known as a Holbein carpet) and cartography tools of that time.

Carpets were status symbols that indicated extensive trading prowess. They were often depicted alongside cartography equipment. Western science suggested that we should not take for granted what we know. Everything can be questioned and researched.

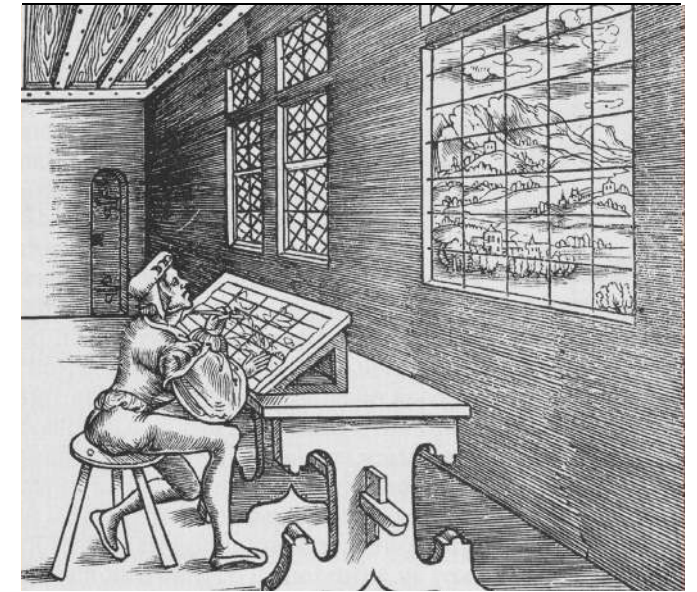


The differences between Western and Eastern cultures are often attributed to these stereotypes: Western societies are known for having an egocentric outlook, and Eastern societies are characterized in terms of a fundamentally allocentric point of view.

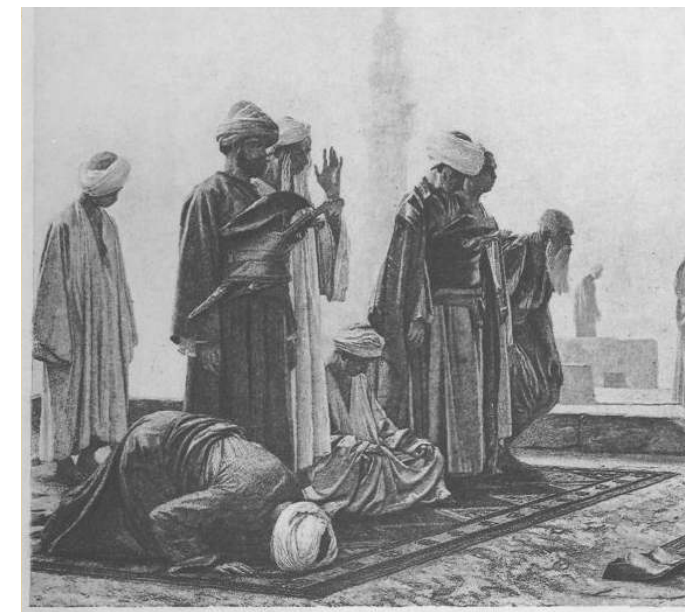
Egocentric societies believe in individualism: they hold that each member should have the space to develop their own perspective, even if that perspective goes against the larger beliefs of the group. Western artists are often described as innovation-seeking individuals, who pursue original ideas based on their own unique point of view.

Allocentrism, on the other hand, is a form of collectivism. Members of allocentric societies tend to be interdependent and to behave according to commonly held cultural norms. Eastern artisans are defined in terms of their family heritage, not as individuals. Rather than innovate, they seek to recapture the aesthetic of their ancestors.

### Artist / Artisans

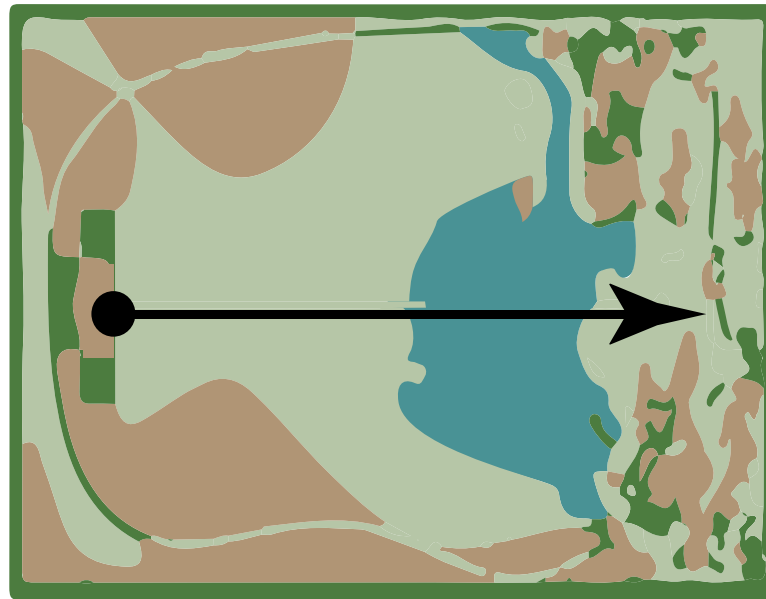


Individual Artist



Group of Artisans

## Style in Landscape Design



Picturesque Garden Diagram

## Cultural Artifact

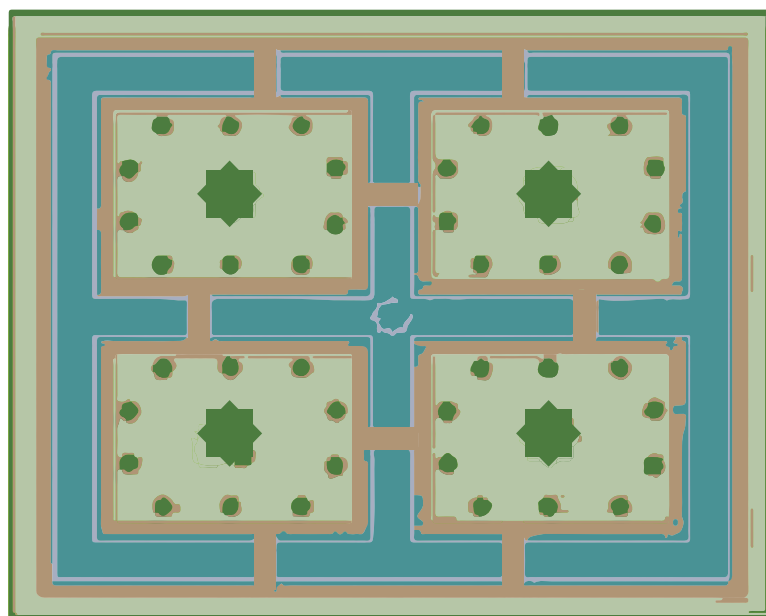


Western Painting

## The Two Artistic Expressions

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Picturesque style presents the world from the egocentric perspective of the human eye in order to reflect humanistic values. It focuses on a self-to-object relationship that emphasizes a three-dimensional illusion of depth.



Persian Garden Diagram



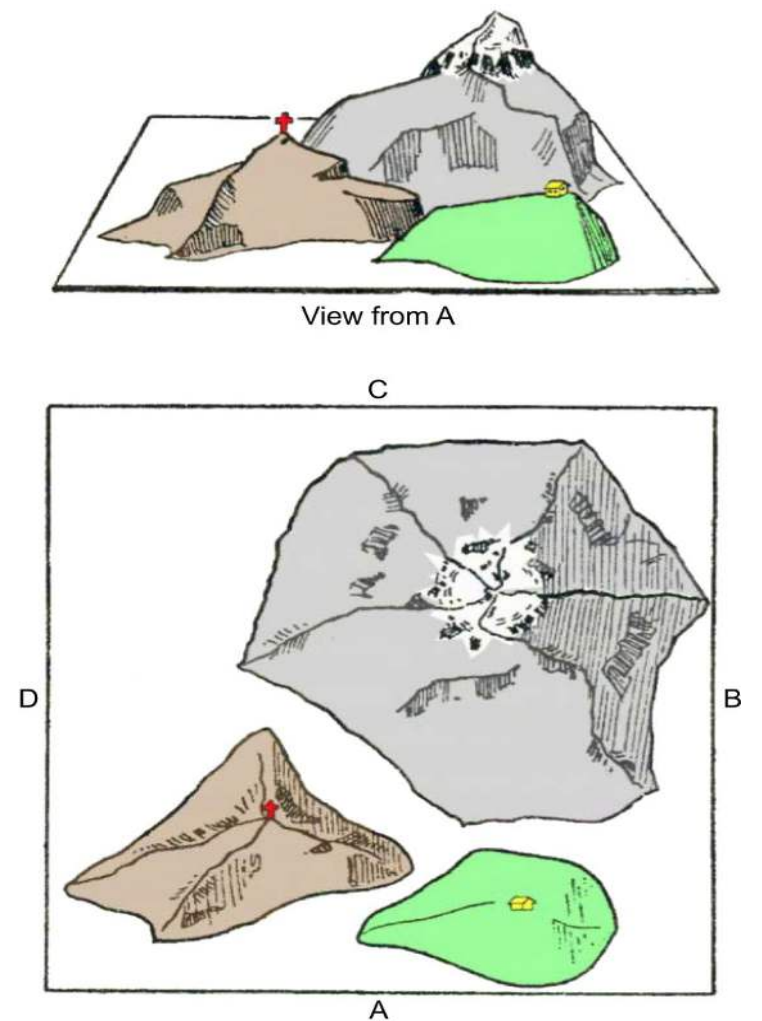
Oriental Carpet

Persian style (Chahar Bagh) presents a view of the world from the allocentric perspective of God's eye, a reflection of Islamic values. It focuses on the relationships between objects to emphasize mathematical principles and ideal essences as two-dimensional spaces.

Egocentric and allocentric perspectives also reflect the way the human brain navigates physical space. Studies in cognitive psychology and neuroscience have shown that we constantly switch back and forth between these two perspectives as we gather information about our location and where we are in relation to our environment. When we explore new places, information gets encoded from an egocentric perspective and is subsequently translated into a mental representation of an allocentric map.

This allocentric map is basically imaginary—it is representative of our absolute location in relation to our environment. The mind creates it, using speculation based on personal experiences, learned knowledge, and even cultural information to fill the gaps.

Environments that are based on allocentric perspectives, such as Persian gardens, tend to be more symmetrical: as a result, maps of these environments are inherently practical and are easier to share amongst a group. In allocentric settings, you can easily imagine a map of your environment and where you are in relation to it. An allocentric map of a picturesque garden, on the other hand, is almost impossible to visualize.



**Above:** Egocentric spatial coding: self-to-object

**Below:** Allocentric spatial coding: object-to-object



Central Park, New York City, NY

When we look at the urban contexts in which Central Park and Shalimar Bagh are located, it becomes clear that the Eastern and Western civilizations these two parks represent are negative imprints of one another. The grid of New York City



Shalimar Bagh, Lahore, Pakistan

is very allocentric in comparison to the grids of the Eastern cities that feature Persian gardens: without exception, these cities are irregular and evolved organically, without a city plan.

Both American and Persian aesthetics emerged as a reaction to significant changes in their social fabrics as a result of technological advancement. The artistic expressions of both cultures — including urban gardens — communicate a desire to recreate a lost environment and to return to simpler ways of thinking and living. It could be argued that each of these artistic expressions arose out of a sense of longing— an idealized aspiration of cultural identity.

The reality is that there is a strong collectivist element to American society: individuals share deeply held values that protect the good of the group; they oppose political corruption, justify their behavior in rational ways, and obey the law. These governing concepts represent a kind of allocentric perspective that can be manifested in American symbols like the all-seeing eye. Moreover, this sort of environment creates a desire for an idealized space, where one can become lost and do whatever one wishes.

By the same token, individuals in the East cannot fully rely on collectivism: they must also depend on their individual units, their families and tribes. This kind of structure creates a yearning for a theological order that can provide ties to an eternal force— a fantasy that appears in the paradisiacal landscapes of Persian carpets, which represent safe havens and are drawn from the myth of Eden.

To conclude, cultural identities are defined mainly in terms of their opposites. In a framework that is based on absolute ideals, American and Persian identities are seen as inverted. But in reality one's identity is more complicated and filled with contradictions.

Central Park Carpets is a synthesis between the ideal landscapes of these two cultures: it creates common ground that allows us to navigate the idealized realm of the other. In order to orient themselves in an overly familiar landscape, New Yorkers will need to change their perspective and allow their eyes to adjust to a visual language that is not completely familiar to them.

Islamic art represents a kind of otherness to the American culture, and in this sense it has the capacity to incite what Freud described as the uncanny—a deeply unsettling feeling we experience when we are confronted with the unfamiliar in a familiar context. The goal of Central Park Carpets is to create an eye-opening encounter that will question familiar dichotomies and challenge stereotypes.