



Safavid Textile with Paired Birds and Blooms

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Isfahan, Iran, 18th century

Lampas with polychrome silk and gilt-metal thread

47.5 cm high, 32 cm wide (stretched on wooden frame)

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This finely woven Safavid textile fragment exemplifies the technical sophistication that characterised Iranian silk production at its late apogee. Rectangular in format and measuring 49 × 32 cm (19¼ × 12½ in.), the fragment is mounted on a stretcher and preserves a remarkably legible section of what was originally a larger textile. Such luxurious fabrics belong to a category historically referred to as *dāmās-i robah*, reflecting their primary use in elite dress and courtly garment.

The textile is woven in the lampas technique, a compound structure that allows complex figural and floral designs to be rendered with fluidity and chromatic subtlety. Here, a polychrome silk and gilt-thread double repeat is brocaded over a silk ground structured in extended tabby, or *Gros de Tours*. The ribbed taffeta-like ground, woven in safflower-dyed orange silk, is subtly articulated with a triple-line

chevron self-pattern that animates the surface beneath the brocaded design.

This sophisticated construction characterises productions from the Isfahan court workshops, revitalised under Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1587–1629), who established royal *karkhanehs* and encouraged skilled weavers—including many Armenian artisans relocated to the suburb of New Julfa—to refine silk weaving techniques. Alongside Isfahan, royal workshops in Yazd and Kashan produced luxurious brocades for court use, diplomatic exchange, and the bestowal of *khal'at*, robes of honour granted to high-ranking officials.

The decorative scheme privileges rhythm over strict naturalism, in keeping with late Safavid aesthetic preferences. It consists of a repeating paired composition of stylised birds shown affronted and perched above floral sprigs. The birds are symmetrically arranged, their gently arched bodies and partially extended wings forming an elegant, almost calligraphic silhouette. Their plumage, rendered in subtle variations alternate light blue—partially discoloured to soft grey-tan—and white, outlined in yellow-hay or dark brown silk to enhance definition. Beneath them rise blooming rose sprigs and leaves as well as buds, rendered in a restrained yet luminous palette of white, turquoise, dark green and metal thread highlights - now partially lost- wound around a yellow silk core. The seemingly irregular distribution of colour within the floral elements is deliberate, intended to make a limited repeat appear visually richer and less mechanical. The vivid blues and greens combined with safflower-derived orange—now softened through natural fading—are consistent with the chromatic range of late Safavid production.

The imagery belongs to the celebrated Persian motif known as *gul-u bulbul* ("rose and nightingale"), deeply rooted in Persian literary and mystical traditions. The nightingale's yearning song to the aloof rose served as a metaphor for unrequited love and, in Sufi poetry, for the soul's longing for union with the divine. In Safavid visual culture, the motif transcended literary reference to become a pervasive emblem of refined taste, courtly elegance, and cultivated sensibility. While bird-and-flower compositions recur throughout Safavid textiles, this example—with its dense patterning, specific chromatic harmony, and refined scale—reflects the aesthetic shift of the later seventeenth century away from earlier, more spacious designs. The treatment and proportions of the birds align closely with textiles associated with the reign of Shah Suleiman (r. 1666–1694), a period of intense artistic production at the Isfahan court.

The significance of this fragment is underscored by close comparisons within museum collections. The Cleveland Museum of Art preserves a smaller fragment (22.3 × 16 cm ; acc. [no. 1927.370](#)) displaying an almost identical paired-bird composition, differing only in a subtle variation of the rose sprig beneath the birds and woven on a plainer ground. Acquired from the renowned dealer Dikran Khan Kélékian (1868–1951) this fragment attests to an established corpus of such textiles and their circulation on the early twentieth-century art market. The Cleveland Museum also holds a larger Safavid silk taffeta fragment with the *gul-u bulbul* motif (acc. no. [1943.91](#)), further reinforcing the prevalence of this imagery in elite dress fabrics of the period.

Most compelling is the comparison with an early eighteenth-century Safavid court coat in the Calouste Gulbenkian Collection, Lisbon (inv. [1454](#)). The main fabric of that garment displays a closely related bird-and-flower design, executed in virtually identical hues and with the same sequence of silk and metal threads against a comparable orange chevroned ground. Together, these surviving examples strongly suggest that the present fragment once formed part of a sumptuous robe or overcoat integral to Safavid ceremonial life.

Safavid silks of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are widely regarded as the pinnacle of Iranian loom weaving and were prized both domestically and in international markets. This fragment stands not merely as a decorative remnant, but as tangible evidence of the aesthetic refinement, technical mastery, and symbolic vocabulary of Safavid court dress, vividly echoed in contemporary miniature paintings depicting dignitaries clad in similarly patterned silks at the twilight of the dynasty.

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