

# QUILTS AND TEXTILES *in Iran*

By Michelle Gilder

My name is Michelle Gilder. I am British and have lived in Iran for more than 25 years. Iran has an incredibly rich history of textiles, ranging from finely woven silk carpets and tribal kilims and gabbeks to woven silk brocades and velvets, as well as traditional embroidery from the many tribes such as Turkmen, Bakhtiari and Baluchi. In fact, it is a feast to the eye to wander into any bazaar in Iran, as well as any mosque, palace or museum, as the architecture and elaborate tile work never fail to amaze.

**S**ilk brocades and velvet weaving are traditions that are unfortunately dying out in Iran, but independent sponsors are trying to keep them going by setting up workshops taught by the old masters.

Until recently, traditional embroidery has been too familiar to be of much interest, but I sense a change in how the younger

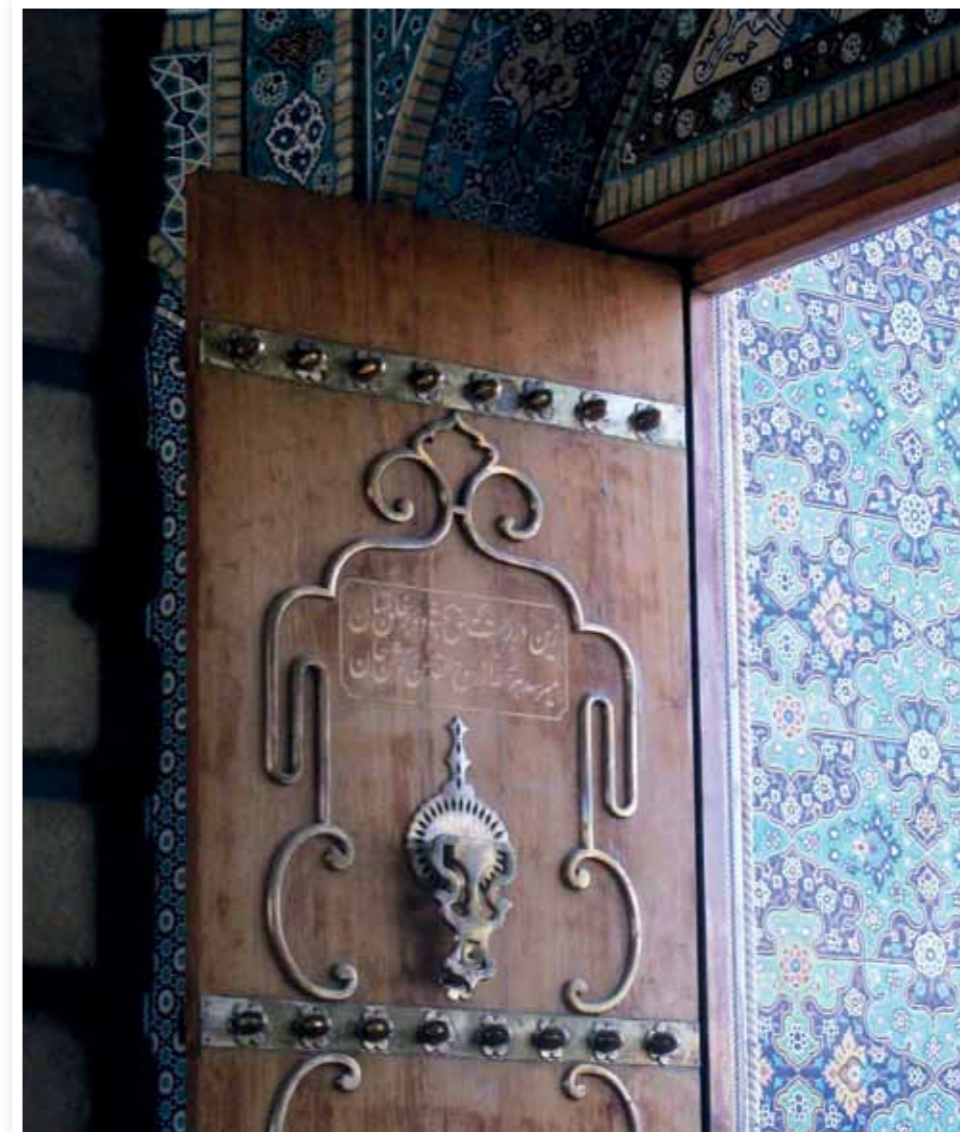


Weaving silk brocade and velvet in Kashan

generations are considering traditional textiles as they become incorporated into modern fashion and furnishing items. This is a good thing as it will significantly improve recognition of and demand for traditional products and, as a result, traditional craftswomen may get the opportunity to trade their wares.

Carpets have always been a legitimate financial asset in Iran and therefore draw serious investment. Even the humblest of homes are beautifully carpeted and the carpets are very often stored one on top of the other. Mosques, of course, are fully carpeted too.

Due to Iran's long history of intricate woven fabrics and embroidery, patchwork and quilting have never really been taken seriously as a craft. However, as in most other countries, Iran does have its own history of patchwork, with fabrics being patched together to make blankets and quilts for bedding or tents for migrating tribes, as well as the delicate



Samples of Iranian tiles and brick work



quilting of cotton garments with wool to insulate against the winter cold. Quilting is used for both mattresses and bed quilts as many Iranians sleep on roll-out mattresses similar to Japanese futons, and use quilts made up of layers of wool or cotton fibres depending on the climate or the season, coarsely quilted with a strong cotton thread.

It is still the custom in the more provincial areas to give newlyweds a dowry of bedding, with wholecloth quilts of silk ikats or velvets quilted with traditional floral and geometric patterns, and re-springing mattresses. Re-quilting is done by men who cycle around offering their services; they call out "lahaf-doozi", which means "quilt sewer". They undo all the cotton fibres inside the quilts, re-buff them and quilt them back together, creating a brand-new puffed-up mattress and bed quilt for the year to come.

The early '60s western influence of fashion and craft magazines popularised the hippy-type patchwork patterns we associate with that time, such as Dresden plates and Grandmother's Garden. There are examples of Log Cabin quilts



made by women who obviously followed the trends of the day, and although they executed the craft very primitively in comparison to today's standards, they made beautiful coloured quilts. Quilting as we know it today, with modern equipment and techniques, is fairly new to Iran and started to really take off when I founded Patchiran in 2005.

In 2001, I joined a diplomatic ladies' group in Teheran run by a French woman called Martine Callone; members of the group participated in patchwork and quilting to pass the time. Martine was due to finish her posting in Iran and wanted to "give something back" for the kindness and hospitality she had received during her stay. I suggested we start a small group, so I invited eight Iranian women to whom I felt indebted during my early years in Iran, and Patchiran was born. We began by teaching hand patchwork and quilting. Martine taught in French and I translated into Farsi. We had hilarious moments with the languages, with words like "fil", which means "thread" in

*This Log Cabin quilt was made more than 50 years ago by a dressmaker who used all her left-over dress fabrics and a pattern from a European craft magazine*



*Time Honoured, by Michelle Gilder and Maryam Tabatabai, with traditional Mamaghan Doozi, or stitchwork, by Zahra Razavi*

French but means "elephant" in Farsi, and me conjugating French verbs with a Farsi grammar twist! But it all worked out as we were ready for our first exhibition in 2005.

The exhibition was sponsored by Bernina and received a terrific response. It was time to move out of my living room and into a proper space. I decided with my friend and colleague, Maryam Tabatabai, who you can see with me in the photo page 115, to take the risk and rent 90 square metres in an old run-down building. We had no idea how to pay the rent and went into debt immediately, as we had to import the cutting mats, rotary cutters and quilting rulers in order to start the classes.

Registering the name Patchiran was also challenging. Although the name sounds quite appropriate in English, the Iranian authorities are very wary of anything that is too western. Surprisingly, after a lot of research, we were able to register Patchiran as the word "patch" in Farsi is the old word for chequered fabrics!

In August of the same year, we had a special treat as your very own Jenny Bowker was invited by the Iranian Ministry of Education to turn 18 teachers chosen from the provinces into patchwork enthusiasts! Patchiran taught a 10-day beginner's course to prepare the women, and Jenny took over

to teach 10 days of intermediate machine patchwork, innovative imagery, and colour and design projects. It was a tremendous success and patchwork and quilting spread to the four corners of Iran.

Patchiran became a way for me to fuse my passion for textiles and teaching with the need to give something back to the community I live in, and I quickly learned that patchwork and quilting were the perfect tools with which to do that. Patchiran soon became something much bigger than I had initially planned. We had so many people wanting to learn and so many organisations coming forward wanting classes, we realised that if we tapped into this enthusiasm and stuck to our work ethics we could achieve great things under the auspices of the humble needle and thread.

Living within a very traditional society, with very clear rules about women's roles, we diplomatically set out on a mission to encourage and empower women without upsetting the apple cart too much. I must say that our members came through with flying colours.

Supporting women to be creative and giving them the confidence to express themselves artistically is a very subtle yet influential approach to empowerment. It builds self-esteem and confidence in a constructive way, encouraging women from all walks of life to find a voice. At Patchiran we have witnessed how this reflects on the way women interact both socially and within their own families; our craft gives many of them pastimes and leisure pursuits, allowing them to channel their energy into something constructive.

Iranian women are sewers and are always eager to learn anything new, regardless of their economic background, and by teaching a well-grounded program we could very quickly produce superb-quality work. This gave women looking for a means to support themselves a swift and reliable way to increase their personal income. Women who join our classes to learn as a hobby are enrolled to give back to their communities by going into organisations and teaching free of charge. One of the great things about patchwork and quilting is the opportunity they give us to be altruistic and philanthropic, at the same time as having so much fun being creative.

More than 1350 women have passed through Patchiran on their own journeys since we began in 2005, and in turn have passed on their talents by either setting up their own educational establishments, importing and selling fabrics and quilting equipment, or just supporting local charities by sewing in small friendly groups and gatherings. We have made

## Iran



*Michelle Gilder (seated), founder of Patchiran, and Maryam Tabatabai (standing), who runs the day-to-day operations of Patchiran*

do with local fabrics for the past seven years, but now we can actually get quite a decent range of western commercial fabrics and of course all the rulers and cutters etc. However, I am not sure if this is a good thing. Before these fabrics were imported we had to stretch our imaginations and come up with solutions you quilters “out there” cannot imagine! I also try to encourage Iranian quilters to use traditional fabrics and incorporate traditional textile techniques in their work so we can keep their quilts authentically Iranian, although I do appreciate it’s very tempting to revert to stable, colour-fast, “western” printed fabrics!

Today Patchiran teaches through Iran’s two national craft magazines and we have published our own educational DVDs in an attempt to reach the women

in the provinces who cannot get to a class in Teheran. We have classes running six days a week and they are always full.

We have taken part and won prizes in the Dubai International Quilt Show and the Festival of Quilts in the UK and have so far held six national exhibitions. We are proud to have been the initiators of this craze of “patchwork productiveness” here in Iran.

As for me and my own personal journey, all I can say is that it has been an honour and a pleasure to be able to give back in a small way to my adopted homeland, a country and people I have come to love and admire in so many ways. Our plans and goals are only beginning, as we feel we have laid a solid foundation for our craft and are ready to take the next step in the art world, no matter the challenges ahead.

Enjoy sewing the Golestan quilt project and please join us in our journey at [www.patchiran.ir](http://www.patchiran.ir) and on Facebook.

*Samples of Iranian tiles and brick work*

