

Graduate Theological Union

From the Selected Works of Carol Bier

1991

Beyond the Pyramids: Geometry and Design in the Carpets of Egypt 1450-1750

Carol Bier, *The Textile Museum*

**BEYOND THE PYRAMIDS; Geometry and Design
in the Carpets of Egypt, 1450-1750**

June 1, 1991 - February 16, 1992



Mamluk Carpets

Mamluk carpets present a paradox. For although they are among the most tantalizingly beautiful of all Oriental carpets, they are also the least understood. The answers to such questions as who made them, why they were made and for whom, and how they were used, are virtually unknown. These carpets, produced during the rule of the Mamluk sultans in Egypt in the late 15th century are arguably the finest ever produced anywhere.

Mamluk carpets are distinguished from all other carpet-weaving traditions. In part, this distinction derives from the dominance and simplicity of geometric form (#R34.32.1): squares and rectangles, octagons and eight-pointed stars. Set within the broadly defined bold geometric forms are intricate designs that reflect a superlative play in the manipulation of color and form to create complex patterns that both please and tease the eye.

The special beauty of Mamluk carpets is also marked by the jewel-like tones of red, green, and blue, suggestive perhaps of rubies, emeralds, and sapphires with imperial connotations. The wool is lustrous and has retained its silky sheen through the ages.

Quality of materials and excellent craftsmanship are indicated by the equal number of knots per linear unit of measurement in both vertical and horizontal directions, enabling the execution of perfect squares and circles without elongation.

There is no doubt that Mamluk carpets represent an extremely high level of technical competence. The designs are carefully executed to convey the appearance of perfection.

The wool yarns for warp, weft, and pile are prepared in a manner unlike those of Persia and Turkey, and elsewhere in the rug-producing world. Whereas wool is usually spun in a counter-clockwise direction (called "Z"-spun), that of Mamluk carpets is spun clockwise (called "S"-spun). The characteristic bright red color is also unusual compared to carpets of other rug-weaving traditions. This color was achieved with a dye made from an insect residue, called lac, which in the Mamluk period was probably imported from India.

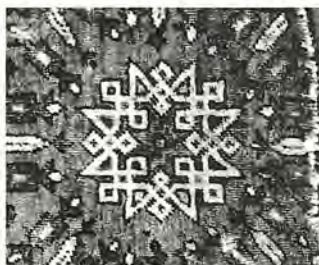
The Origins of Mamluk Carpets - A Mystery

Mamluk sultans ruled Egypt from 1250 to 1517. Having successfully wrested power from the Ayyubid dynasty, the Mamluks, with military slave origins, checked the western aggression of the Mongols and finally defeated the Crusaders. Policies and politics of the time continued to bring Turkish youths from northern regions of the Islamic world as slaves to participate in the military aristocracy of Egypt. This was a period of both turmoil and imperial aggrandizement.

Although Mamluk carpets are among the earliest carpets preserved intact, they comprise a fully developed tradition for which we know no antecedents. The origins of the fully developed Mamluk style in carpets is, therefore, shrouded in history and open to speculation. One respected scholar, Charles Grant Ellis, relates the layout of Mamluk carpets to that of Mongol carpets, of which none survives. He

Cover:

PILE CARPET, Mamluk geometric style Egypt, Cairo, late 15th century, The Textile Museum #R16.1.2. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1928.



PILE CARPET FRAGMENT (detail), "Para Mamluk" style, Eastern Mediterranean, 15th - 16th century, The Textile Museum #R34.32.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1953.

argues for a direct relationship with the Golden Horde of Russia, from whose ranks many of the Mamluks in Egypt emerged, and identifies ultimate Chinese origins for certain of the designs. Another author, Esin Atil, postulates that the defeat of Turkoman tribal states in northwestern Iran and eastern Anatolia led indirectly to the employment of carpet-weavers along with other artisans at the Mamluk court in the late 15th century. But again, no earlier carpets remain to offer supportive evidence.

Aside from the mystery of their origins, Mamluk carpets are related to contemporary decorative arts. Pervading the arts and architecture of Egypt from the middle of the 13th century to the Ottoman conquests of 1517, the Mamluk style is robust and yet sensitive to color, form, and light. Stained glass, inlaid metal, carved stone, inset wood and ivory all play with geometry in ways similar to the design of Mamluk carpets. Similarities of layout have led to speculations regarding the relationship of carpet patterns to carved and inlaid stone fountains, to stained glass windows, and to painted wood ceilings, as well as to the mandalas of Buddhist religious thought offering a symbolic mapping of the cosmos. Regardless of their origins, development and visual symbolism, the beauty and technical competence attested to by the Mamluk carpets which survive today cannot be contested.

Ottoman Carpets

When the armies of Sultan Selim I conquered Egypt in 1517, the Ottoman Empire, we presume, inherited a fully developed industry of carpet manufacture. In the following century official documents record the transfer of rug weavers to the imperial court in Istanbul. But gradually, it seems, Mamluk carpets yielded to the tastes of the new Turkish ruling class. Their artistic style was incorporated and adapted to the emerging Ottoman imperial style. The largest difference may be recognized in the progression from geometric elements to floral forms that are elaborate and ornate. Stylized tulips, hyacinths, and jasmine flowers may be identified, combined with naturalistic stems and leaves arranged in a flowing manner, repeated across the central field and surrounding borders of Ottoman carpets.

The Textile Museum has the largest and most important collection of Mamluk carpets in the world. Although the collection is well-published (but for six examples acquired in recent years), it has rarely been seen. Selections from the collection were last exhibited in 1981, and before that in 1970, with individual carpets on view in Washington, or lent for temporary exhibitions around the country. Two important carpets in the collection were not selected for exhibition due to the fact that they had been on view recently for extended periods



PILE CARPET, "Chessboard" or compartment style, Eastern Mediterranean, 16th or 17th century, The Textile Museum #R34.34.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1927.

PILE CARPET WITH HEBREW INSCRIPTION, Ottoman floral style, Egypt, Cairo, 17th century, The Textile Museum #R16.4.4. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1915.



of time (#R16.4.4, Synagogue carpet and R16.1.1, Mamluk carpet, illustrated in the Summer 1990 *Bulletin*).

Many of the carpets in The Textile Museum's collections were acquired through dealers in the United States by the museum's founder, George Hewitt Myers, at a time when these were not readily sought after by collectors. Abroad, two Mamluk carpets were recently discovered unexpectedly in a disused storage room of the Pitti Palace in Florence where they had been placed, presumably, by a member of the Medici court at a time when the palace was being refurbished. Other single examples are to be found in the collections of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Gallery of Ontario, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and in several European collections, both public and private. The Philadelphia Museum of Art has particular strengths in this area as well.

This exhibition, the first of Mamluk and Ottoman carpets at The Textile Museum in more than a decade, explores stylistic groupings of related carpets. Supplemented by loans from private collections, the Walters Art Gallery and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, this exhibition presents a unique opportunity for visual comparison and attempts to portray one important aspect of the development of this rich but enigmatic tradition.

Noted rug scholar Charles Grant Ellis, Research Associate of The Textile Museum, served as curatorial consultant for this exhibition.

Carol Bier, Curator, Eastern Hemisphere Collections

The Textile Museum
2320 S Street, NW
Washington, DC 20008
(202) 667-0441

Suggested Readings

Atil, Esin. **Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks**, 1981. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington. (Textiles and Rugs, pp. 223 - 248).

Ellis, Charles Grant. Gifts from Kashan to Cairo, **Textile Museum Journal**, 1962. vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 33-46.

Ellis, Charles Grant. Mysteries of the Misplaced Mamluks, **Textile Museum Journal**, 1967. vol. 2, no. 2, December, pp. 3-20.

Ellis, Charles Grant. Is the Mamluk Carpet a Mandala? A Speculation, **Textile Museum Journal**, 1974. vol. 4, no.1, December, pp. 30-50.

Ellis, Charles Grant. **Oriental Carpets in the Philadelphia Museum of Art**, 1988. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. (Egyptian and Syrian Carpets, pp. 117-131).

Kühnel, Ernst and Louisa Bellinger, **Cairene Rugs and Others Technically Related** (15th - 17th Century), 1957 The Textile Museum, Washington.

Mackie, Louise W. Woven Status: Mamluk Silks and Carpets, **The Muslim World**, 1983. vol. 73, no. 3/4, pp. 253-262.