What is an Oriental Carpet?

Carol Bier, *The Textile Museum*
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Have you ever just stared at an Oriental carpet? Have you ever wondered what makes it so attractive, fascinating, or puzzling? Have you admired its simplicity or its intricacy? Have you ever wondered where it came from? Or, how it was made?

*What is an Oriental Carpet?* attempts to answer some of these questions. Conceived in response to visitors’ requests for more basic information about textiles, this educational approach encourages the viewer to participate in an exploration of Oriental carpets.

Although the terms carpet and rug are often interchanged, here a carpet is defined as a fairly large pile-weaving intended for use as a floor covering, while the term rug refers to a much wider variety of objects originally made for utilitarian purposes. Weavings selected for exhibition include fine examples from Turkey, the Caucasus and Central Asia; supreme craftsman­ship and drawing are exemplified in classical fragments from Iran and India. Various layouts are represented, including prayer rugs, and carpets with central medallions and those with overall repeat patterns. Several weavings extend the definition of rugs beyond carpets to include a bread pouch, cargo carrier and flat-woven cradle.

All of the objects on view were woven on a loom, a wood structure that holds the warp taut, thus enabling the interlacing of warp and weft. Basic loom-types are vertical or horizontal. In either case, the warp yarns are the lengthwise elements strung up on the loom; the weft yarns are crosswise elements that interlace in an over-one, under-one sequence. Pile in carpets is produced by introducing a supplementary weft that wraps around pairs of adjacent warp yarns, and is then cut to form the projecting tufts. The discontinuous supplementary weft segments are called knots, although not actually knotted. Various sequences of wrapping distinguish rugs produced by different peoples in many places. Along with traditional edge and end finishes, these features provide groupings of diagnostic features which help in identifying Oriental carpets and figuring out where they may have originated.

PILE CARPET, Turkey, (Kurdish), 19th century, wool warp, wool weft, wool pile, The Textile Museum R34.12.4, Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1912.
come from and who wove them. The two most characteristic knot-types are called symmetrical (often referred to as Turkish, or Ghiordes) or asymmetrical (often referred to as Persian, or Senneh).

Many Oriental carpets were imported into Europe and America in the late 19th century. But to go back to their origins is to journey to Central Asia and the Middle East, to lands of low rainfall and many sheep. There, animal husbandry and the seeking of good pastures has historically served as a primary economic force for sustaining human life. The sheep are raised and tended in order to produce dairy products, meat and lard, hides, and fleece. Wool, produced from the fleece, is clipped annually or semi-annually and prepared for use in several steps that may include washing, grading, carding, spinning and dyeing. Wool is prepared for sale in the market, or it is used to produce felt, carpets or other textiles for domestic use or to sell.

The physical properties of wool have given it a special place in the history of carpet making: it absorbs and retains dyes very well; it is resilient, springing back after being under pressure; its natural oils make it resistant to dirt; it is a readily available and renewable resource. Although it wears well, wool is not as easy to weave as cotton or silk because of its scaly, hairy surface, which can be seen under a microscope. But cotton requires heavy rainfall or intensive irrigation for its cultivation, and silk, drawn from the cocoons of silkworms that are fed a special diet is more expensive to obtain. Thus, it is often the case that among weavings

PILE CARPET, (double niche format), Turkey, Ushak, early 17th century, wool warp, wool weft, wool pile. The Textile Museum R34.1.5, Acquired by George Hewitt Myers prior to 1950.
produced by nomads and rural pastoralists, wool is the exclusive ingredient for warp, weft and pile.

For carpets woven in cities, wool is retained for the pile, while cotton is more often used for warp and weft. Silk is rarer, appearing in products woven for the court or in high level commissions from commercial weaving centers. A silk foundation (warp and weft) may yield a higher knot count and more fluid drawing as curvilinear lines and diagonals may be more closely approximated. If silk is used for pile, it offers the possibility of a bright spectrum of colors with a lustrous and shiny appearance that was much sought after by kings and their courts and much admired by royalty abroad. Occasionally, one may even find in the products of nomadic weavers small amounts of brightly colored shiny silk or bleached cotton used for special effect.

The way a rug is designed is also a function of where it was made and who made it. Among nomadic weavers, the design is generally passed on from mother to daughter (or grandmother to granddaughter) and memorized after considerable practice. In commercial workshops in the cities, designs are drawn on graph paper and called cartoons, which serve as a model for the weaver to follow. At court levels of production, designing a carpet was a specialized task, with designs often related to other arts of the period such as book-bindings and illustrations, architectural ornament, ceramics and metalwork.

Today in the Middle East and Central Asia, rugs are still made by commission, but most are sold in markets. In Europe and America, rugs may be purchased at retail dealers or galleries, and department stores often receive large shipments from wholesalers. But because of the history of collecting and trade over the past century or so, rugs may appear in estate sales and are sold through the major auction houses. Others may still be found unexpectedly at country auctions and swap meets.

Carol Bier, Curator, Eastern Hemisphere Collections

The Textile Museum wishes to acknowledge the American Conference on Oriental Rugs for generous support of this brochure.
Glossary of Terms

abrash  color variation in a carpet deriving from variability in the dye process

border  defined area surrounding the field of a carpet

carding  process of aligning fibers in preparation for spinning

carpet  large pile-weaving intended for use as a floor-covering

dyeing  chemical process using dyes by which colors are imparted to fibers, yarns, or fabrics

dye  liquid containing organic or inorganic coloring matter derived from natural or synthetic sources, that is used for dyeing sometimes with a mordant

dyestuff  organic or inorganic coloring matter used to produce a dye

field  central area of a carpet, usually rectangular in shape and patterned

flatweave  any of several weave structures without pile

guard stripe  narrow band outlining the border of a carpet or rug

Ghiordes knot  see Turkish knot

kilim  type of flatweave with tapestry weave structure; often used more generally

knot  cut supplementary weft wrapped around a pair of adjacent warps to form a carpet's pile; typically, knots are either symmetrical (often referred to as a Turkish knot) or asymmetrical (often referred to as a Persian knot) see pile

loom  frame for weaving, suitable for holding the warp taut

mordant  substance (often a metallic salt) used in dyes to create a chemical bond with dyed material so that the color remains stable

Oriental carpet  any of a variety of knotted pile carpets from one of the major rug-producing regions of the world (the Orient once referred to regions east of the Mediterranean where the majority of rug weaving cultures are found, hence the designation Oriental)

Persian knot  rug knot the structure of which is asymmetrical

pile  loops or cut ends of yarn that project from the plane of a fabric to form a raised surface; in rugs, pile is formed by the cut ends of supplementary wefts, called knots

prayer rug  small Oriental carpet with the representation of an arch or niche in the field

rug  any of a variety of coarse utilitarian weavings

selvedge  edge at either side of a textile that is built up during weaving by return passages of the weft

spinning  technique by which fibrous materials are combined to form a thread or yarn

supplementary weft  weft used in addition to the primary weft

tapestry  weft-faced plain weave with discontinuous wefts

Turkish knot  rug knot the structure of which is symmetrical

warp  longitudinal or lengthwise set of threads or yarns stretched and held parallel under tension during weaving, that interlaces with the weft to form a textile

weaving  process of interlacing warp and weft to form a textile

weft  transverse or crosswise set of threads or yarns that interlaces with the warp during weaving to form a textile

Cover: PILE CARPET, Turkey, Bergama region, 19th century. The Textile Museum 1991.42.1, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Luther S. Roehm.
The major rug-producing regions of the world - Turkey, Iran, India, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Historically, carpets were also woven in Spain, Egypt, and possibly Syria. Rugs from these regions share several major regional groupings as shown.

Major Rug-Producing Regions of the World
Artwork: Ed Zielinski, 1993

Suggested Readings

Beattie, M.H. 1982

Bier, C. 1992

Bode, W. von and E. Kühnel 1984

Collingwood, P. 1968
Techniques of Rug-Weaving, London.

Denny, W. 1979
Oriental Rugs, New York.

Eiland, M., Jr. 1973

Ellis, C.G. 1988

Erdmann, K. 1960

Ford, P.R.J. 1992

Tattersall, C.E.C. 1949
Notes on Carpet-Knotting and Weaving, London.

Thompson, J. 1988
Oriental Carpets from the Tents, Cottages, and Workshops of Asia, New York.

Ware, J. 1992


Auction house catalogs provide additional useful information with price estimates.

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