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A Kurdish Reed Screen

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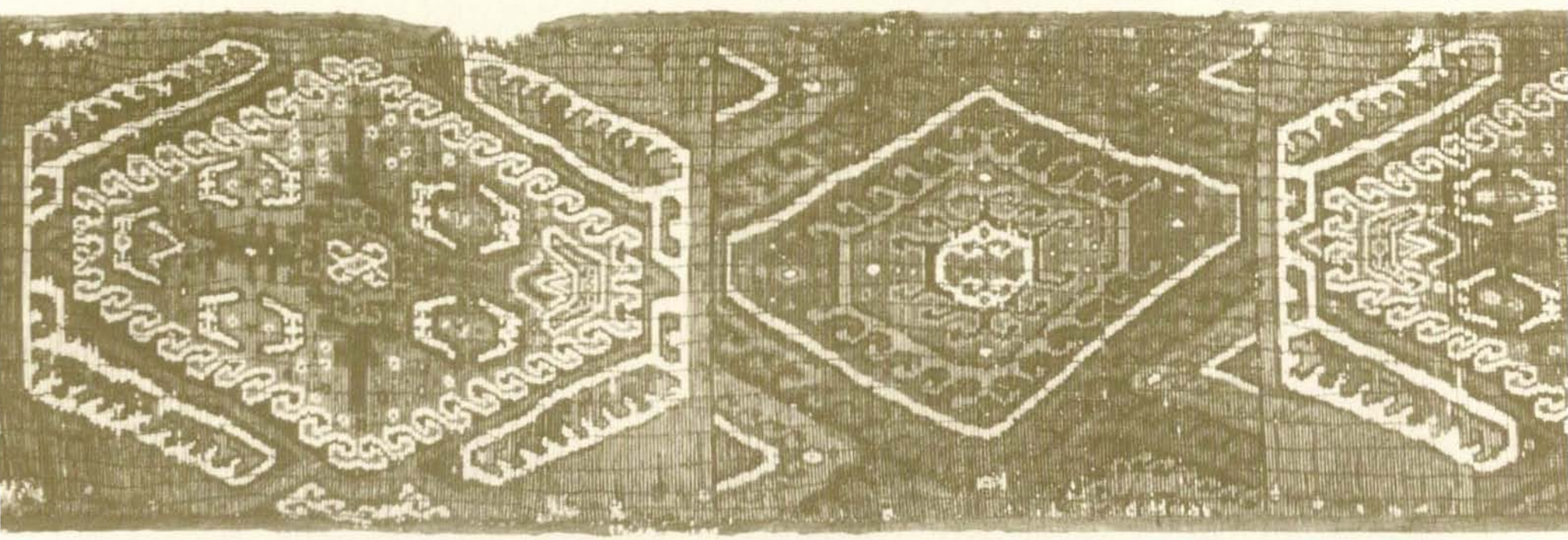


A Kurdish Reed Screen

A unique ethnographic monument recently donated to The Textile Museum merits special attention not only for its size (twenty-five feet long and four feet high), but for its important place in the history, use, construction, and decoration of functional textiles.

Use and Decoration

Designed to enclose space in a nomadic environment, the reed screen may be considered an architectural textile destined for use within the community in which it was made. This distinguishes it from commercial products manufactured for the market, and, indeed, from most other utilitarian textiles, although it shares with carpets and kilims an obvious intent to beautify the environment for which it was designed.

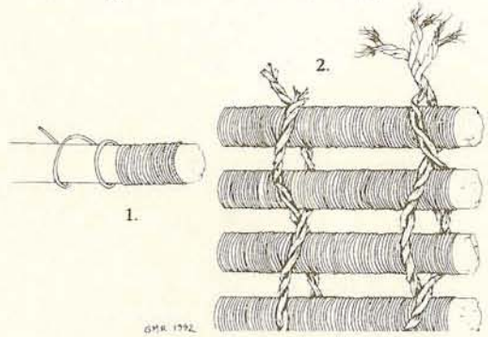
Similar textiles woven with reeds serve as doors, or as walls to define or partition space. The length of this type suggests that it would have served as an enclosure, most probably for a domestic living quarter in a tent. Several different nomadic peoples across Asia have used such screens, including the Kazaks and Kirghiz of Turkistan, Turkmen groups, and the Kurds of western Iran, the southern Caucasus and eastern Anatolia. The screens are typically referred to by various names such as *chikh* or *cig* (with related pronunciation).

The particular type of screen seen here is decorated with five rectangular panels with two alternating arrangements of centralized medallions. The sets of progressively smaller hooked medallions, one type with surrounding pairs of large stylized leaves, are familiar from Kurdish kilims and pile carpets of eastern Anatolia and the southern Caucasus. This example, well worn, probably served to extend the dwelling and work area of a Kurdish household residing in one of the typical black goat hair tents of the region. When unrolled and set up, it would have served the in-house needs of a family, allowing gentle air circulation while screening out dust and wind, and minimizing glare from the blazing sun. Chickens and other small animals would thus also be kept out of the way of women engaged in household tasks and in preparing milk products from the flocks and herds of sheep and goats. When rolled up, it could be easily carried on a camel, the traditional mode of transport during seasonal migration between lowland and highland pastures.

Construction

The reeds of which this type of screen is made are nearly straight, without joints, and circular in cross-section. The interior is fibrous and fairly dense without growth rings. This suggests either the branches of heavily pollarded trees that are cut back annually, or the stalks of some other kind of plant.

Reed screens are assembled using a set of paired binding cords, which serve as the longitudinal elements (warp), and a set of reeds or sticks which are inserted as the transverse elements (weft) as weaving progresses. The reeds are prepared in advance, wrapped with wool yarns in different colors to carry the design. During the weaving process, each prepared reed is laid in sequence, bound in place by alternate warps which are widely spaced in pairs. The binding cords are three-ply, made up of a brown hairy fiber that is probably undyed goat hair. The reeds are bound in pairs, and the binding cords are twined (that is, the alternate yarns of each pair cross over one another at points of intersection with each pair of reeds). [Note: when viewed horizontally in its functional position, the reeds of the reed screen are seen as the vertical elements.]



This diagram shows successive steps in the process of reed screen manufacture: 1. wrapping of reeds (before weaving), 2. laying reeds horizontally and bringing up binding cords alternately around pairs of reeds to form twined warps.

The bright and shiny colors wrapped around the reeds, which serve as highlights (white, yellow, yellow-green, pink, blue, and orange) may be silk, but this has not been conclusively determined. The weaving technique is related to the making of blinds with binding cords and paired canes, which is still practiced today in many parts of the industrialized world. The production of reed screens, however, has almost vanished as a result of both urban migration patterns, and settlement policies of central governments through which nomadic lifestyles are radically replaced by new methods of livestock management.

Although of relatively recent construction, the designs of this textile, and the technology they represent, are thought to have a much older history. Perhaps, the diagonal outlines and the stepped increments of color, which are determined by the thickness and diameter of each reed, are what led to aesthetic preferences seen in the patterning of kilims. If this proves to be the case, it is possible that the reed screen and its simplified weaving technology antedate the development of kilims.

The Textile Museum
2320 S Street, NW
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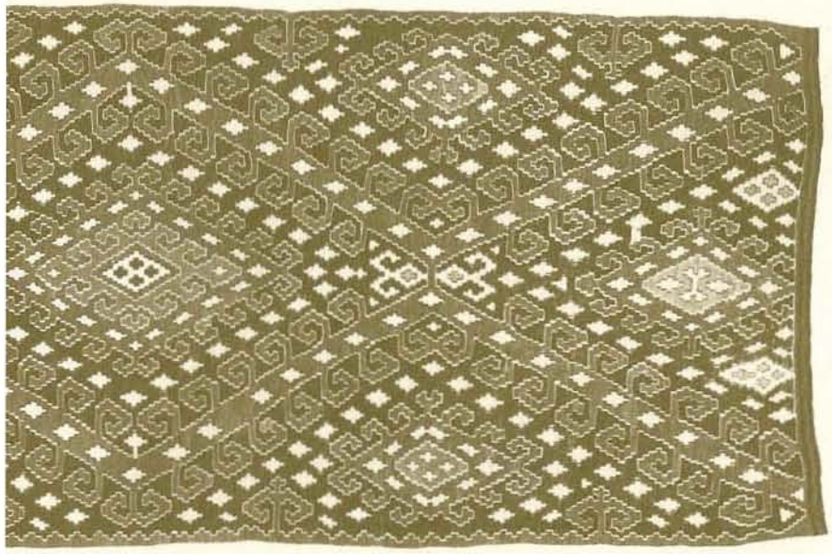
Kurds and the Reed Screen

Living in Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, the Kurds share an ethnic identity without a politically recognized homeland. Among the earliest groups to have migrated to southwestern Asia, they harken back to the days of Indo-European migrations possibly as early as 4000 years ago, long before the successive movements of Turkic groups across the Asian continent in the last 1500 years. Predominantly Muslim although of different sects and orders, the Kurds speak an Indo-Iranian language related to Persian. Many Kurds still dwell in mountainous rural areas, tending their flocks and depending on unpredictable rainfall in regions that are marginal to agriculture. Tribal identity remains important for Kurds who have remained in their homeland, and who continue to pursue a traditional way of life. Very often, tribal affiliation is defined by pattern and expressed through textile designs as a means of visual communication. But in the past 50 years, as elsewhere, there have been economic incentives to move to cities for jobs in government, business, and the professions. In the process, as families pursue alternative lifestyles, traditional modes of communication are modified or abandoned. In the case of the reed screen, it is fast becoming a relic of the past.



◄ *KILIM, Southern Turkey, 19th/20th century, The Textile Museum 1991.45.2. Gift of John L. and Donna M. Sommer. Photo: Franko Khoury.*

KURDISH REED SCREEN, detail (3 of 5 panels), Eastern Turkey, late 19th/early 20th century, The Textile Museum 1991.45.1 Gift of John L. and Donna M. Sommer. ▼

Dating

While we may conjecture about the origins, evolution, and influence of this unusual textile type, and assert that this example was produced by Kurdish pastoralists in eastern Anatolia, its date is less easy to determine. A conservative estimate would place its construction not longer than a century ago.

Few reed screens enter the market, since they were made to suit local requirements. One fine example is in the De Young Museum in San Francisco, and several are in private collections today. This reed screen was the gift of John and Donna Sommer to The Textile Museum in December 1991.

Carol Bier, Curator,
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Suggested Readings

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Andrews, Peter Alford. "Tent Screens to Kilims," **Hali**, 1988, London, issue 33, [reprinted in Oriental Carpet and Textile Studies (London), vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 61 - 64].

Mateeva, Stella and Jon Thompson. "Patterned Reed Screens of the Kirghiz in the State Historical Museum Frunze," **Oriental Rug Review**, 1990, Part I: vol. 11, no. 6, August/September, pp. 10 - 15; Part II: vol. 12, no. 1, October/November, pp. 48 - 53.