

Graduate Theological Union

From the Selected Works of Carol Bier

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Visions of Infinity: Design and Pattern in Oriental Carpets

Carol Bier, *The Textile Museum*

VISIONS OF INFINITY:

Design and Pattern in Oriental Carpets



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VISIONS OF INFINITY: Design and Pattern in Oriental Carpets



A fascination with color and geometric pattern is expressed in Islamic art. In many areas of the Islamic world, historically from Spain to Indonesia, two-dimensional repeat patterns provide the primary means for organizing color and space. Ornamentation of architecture, ceramics, metalwork, book illumination, textiles, and Oriental carpets relies upon the repetition of complex or simple designs, creating overall surface patterns of apparent complexity and intricacy.

Patterns may consist of geometric, floral, calligraphic, or figural forms. The majority of patterns in Oriental carpets consist of geometric and stylized floral designs, arranged in a system of repeats within an oblong central field framed by borders. Traditionally, designs are arranged in the central field and borders of a single carpet according to varying systems of repeat. The profusion of patterns contributes to the sense of complexity and intricacy, which so characterizes the apparent visual aspect of Oriental carpets.

Drawn from The Textile Museum's collections the carpets selected for the exhibition date from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century and reflect regional design traditions from Spain, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia.

*PILE CARPET,
Safavid Iran, 17th century,
Textile Museum R33.1.3
Acquired by George Hewitt Myers,
1924*

Visions of Infinity explores concepts of infinity and ambiguity which are made manifest in the patterning of Oriental carpets. Not immediately apparent to the untrained eye, the sharp contrast of finite borders enclosing an infinitely repeating pattern is nonetheless visually expressive. The containment of motifs within individual segments of an infinitely repeating geometric framework is at once a statement of contrast and ambiguity. Such carpets required skilled weavers and a fairly high level of capitalization for the materials required for weaving. Favored floor coverings for imperial courts, carpets were also within the domain of nomadic pastoralists whose flocks of sheep provided wool, a renewable resource. Commercially produced carpets were made for sale in the bazaars, for export to the West, and for commission. Carpets produced at all economic levels share in the expression of repeat patterns, achieved in each case by the juxtaposition of knots (cut segments of supplementary wefts), which are wrapped around adjacent pairs of warp yarns.

Occasionally a carpet's main field will exhibit a multiple system of pattern repeats (no. 2, Persian carpet), visually understood as being on different levels. The perception of depth may also be achieved through the representation of interlace (nos. 3 and 4, Spanish carpet fragments).



In another carpet, the system of repeat is so large that only one unit fills the entire central field (no. 1, Mamluk carpet). Many carpets that were produced commercially exhibit complex systems of repeat which were most likely copied from drafted cartoons. Carpets produced by pastoralist communities, both those woven for personal use as well as those for commerce, exhibit a simplified system of repeat which was easily retained by memory, passed on from mother to daughter (nos. 7, 8, and 9, Turkmen rugs and carpets). Yet within all this diversity, a common language of pattern is seen to exist.

*PILE CARPET, Mamluk Egypt,
15th/16th century
R16.1.1 Acquired by George Hewitt
Myers, 1953*

We invite you to look at these carpets as a group, to discover their individual peculiarities which are evident only by means of comparison. Examine the overall pattern; try to identify the unit of repeat, and individual elements of the design. Are the basic motifs floral or geometric? Is the repeat system simple or complex? Is it on multiple levels? Can you find evidence of interlace? Is there an infinitely repeating pattern? If so, how and where is it arbitrarily cut off? Can you identify axes of symmetry and repeat? Are they vertical? horizontal? Is there a radial pattern? How is the pattern constructed?

It is not easy to "read" a pattern, particularly for Westerners so much more familiar with the representational traditions of Western art focused on systems of proportion related to the human form. Visual analysis of pattern is a process. It requires patience and curiosity on the part of the viewer. But the effort is, in fact, relatively simple, worth while, and enjoyable. Once gained, this visual awareness adds a new dimension to one's perception of our world.

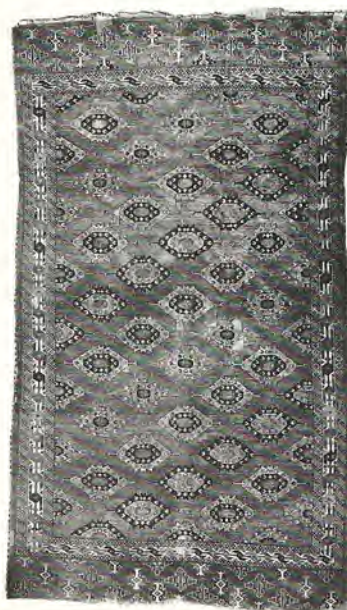
by Carol Bier, curator, Eastern Hemisphere Collections and Lorna Carmel

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PILE BAG FACE,
Central Asia (Salor/Turkmen),
18th/19th century,
Textile Museum 1980.13.4
Gift of Arthur D. Jenkins

PILE CARPET, *Central Asia (Yomud Turkmen),* 19th century
R37.5.1 Acquired by George Hewitt Myers



PILE CARPET FRAGMENT. *Anatolia, 17th century.* Textile Museum R 34.17.2. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1927.

Suggested Readings On Pattern

Islamic Patterns, An Analytical and Cosmological Approach, K. Critchlow (1976). New York: Schocken Books.

The Sense of Order, A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art, E. Gombrich (1979). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Geometric Concepts in Islamic Art, E. Issam and A. Parman (1988). London: World of Islam Festival Trust.

Symmetries of Culture Theory and Practice of Plane Pattern Analysis, D.K. Washburn and D.W. Crowe (1988). Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.

Islamic Designs, E. Wilson (1988). London: British Museum.