An Introduction to Oriental Carpets: The Arthur D. Jenkins Collection

Carol Bier, The Textile Museum
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This rug, a favorite of Arthur D. Jenkins, provided a striking backdrop for the collector as he sat for his 1976 portrait by Painter Robert Templeton. The portrait and the rug hang at the entrance to the exhibition.

Arthur D. Jenkins, an American collector of Oriental carpets, was intrigued by the social origins of rugs. Early in his collecting career, he decided to focus not on the more familiar and more often commercially produced and marketed Oriental carpets that had graced the parlors and drawing rooms of American middle-class homes. Instead he focused on the lesser-known traditions of tribal and ethnographic peoples of the Near East.

The rugs of these peoples have a long history, but have more recently entered the realm of collectibles. Some rugs were produced for the people that wove them, and they were not made for commercial sale. They were worn and well-used, and only rarely available in the markets and bazaars of Cairo, Istanbul, Tbilisi and Bokhara. Those that survive today most often were produced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by rural sedentary and nomadic population groups of Anatolia, Persia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, which today fall within the present borders of Turkey, Iran, and southern republics of the Soviet Union.


The strengths of Mr. Jenkins' sizable collection were many. Five areas of particular significance have been selected to serve as themes for the exhibition: prayer rugs, Turkmen...
weavings, flatweaves, Senneh kilims and related weavings. The galleries are arranged to highlight each of the five areas of significance. These subject headings reflect the diversity of Arthur D. Jenkins' collection, and provide a rare opportunity to conceptualize different approaches to the study of Oriental carpets.

The prayer rugs offer a functional designation, defined by their axial format and directional orientation, which are suggestive of the uses to which they were put. Turkmen weavings document the textile traditions of specific groups of peoples, offering an ethnographic approach. Flatweaves enable the careful consideration of structural variations within several weaving traditions, providing insight into the relationships between design, structure, and technology. Grouping Senneh kilims and South Persian weavings allows the exploration of geographic attributions of Oriental carpets, which present textile arts of both urban and rural, nomadic and sedentary peoples.

Prayer Rugs

Prayer rugs are a classic type of Oriental carpet in the minds of most Americans. Prayer rugs represent a diversity of carpet-weaving traditions from nearly all areas of Oriental carpet production. Within the Islamic world, these rugs provided a means for the wealthy to define a sūtra, a ritually pure space for performing one's prayers five times a day. The words for prayer rugs (ja-i namaz, sajide, and namazlik) in Persian, Arabic, and Turkish, reflect this function, with meanings having to do with prayer and prostration.

The niche format, size and portability, and the direction of pile, relate to the ways in which prayer rugs were used by Muslims. The liturgical obligation for sūtra may be met merely by defining a clean space for prayer within which the worshiper orients himself towards Mecca.
Prayer rugs are not the only type of Oriental carpets associated with religious usage. So-called Transylvanian rugs, with a red ground and double-ended niche, were used as floor coverings of churches in Romania and Hungary. Small rugs from China and Tibet with symbolic imagery and specific formats served to cover furniture and architectural surfaces in Buddhist monasteries. In addition, many rugs lacking an axial orientation or a niche format, and not specifically called prayer rugs, were also used for prayer in many areas of the Islamic world.

Market demand in Europe and America reinforced export production of "prayer" rugs in Turkey and the Caucasus toward the end of the nineteenth century, but many examples are seen in which the pile direction is in relation to the design rather than liturgical function. Prayer rugs became larger than necessary for personal use, and some room-size examples are known from early in this century.

**Turkmen Weavings**

Turkmen peoples live in the grassy steppes east of the Caspian Sea and the arid lands surrounding the Kara Kum desert. Historically, the Turkmen adapted to a nomadic life to accommodate pastoral pursuits and to maintain political autonomy, withstanding central authority in both Iran and Russia. Their weavings often serve utilitarian functions for storage and transport, as well as to ornament and decorate their immediate environment.

Flatweaves

Flatweaves (rugs without pile) represent many different textile structures, offering almost infinite design possibilities. They often have a foundation in plain weave, that is, the simple interlacing sequence (over one, under one) of two sets of elements: warp (vertical) and weft (horizontal). Plain weave may be balanced, weft-faced, or warp-faced.

Familial and tribal affiliation and ethnic identity, are reflected in rug-weaving traditions. It is said that a Turkmen, upon seeing a distant caravan, can immediately identify who is passing from a recognition of woven patterns. The designs, passed on from generation to generation, are generally small and often repeated. The favorite motif, called gul, by the Turkmen, is a stylized floral form or emblem, and shows innumerable variations in type. Notice the frequent alternation in dark and light areas within each gul.
Flatweaves have been produced in all areas of the rug-weaving world. Generally, they are less costly and less time-consuming to make than rugs with knotted pile. Heavy and rugged, flatwoven textiles serve many varied purposes. They are used as covers for walls, floors, bedding, and low tables, or placed over the hearth. Some are hung in doorways, or in front of recesses that serve as closets and cupboards. Others are saddle cloths or are used as animal blankets. In some areas, even cradles are made by slinging a flatweave between strong wooden poles.

**Senneh Kilims and Related Weavings**

Extremely fine kilims with tiny repeat patterns are attributed to the region of Kurdistan in western Iran, in and around the town of Senneh. These kilims, all in slit-tapestry weave, are distinguished from other flatweaves in several ways. They are not the product of a nomadic environment; their curvilinear designs reflect urban artistic traditions, and their patterns relate more closely to commercially woven textiles and pile carpets. Rugs and animal trappings with pile structures produced in this region, which exhibit the same designs as Senneh kilims, are characterized by a fineness of weave, a high knot density, and single-wefting.

Current scholarship postulates that this local tradition is derived from Safavid court styles. Senneh was the capital of the Kurdish governors of Ardalan after the fall of the Safavid dynasty in the mid-18th century. Production of these weavings may reflect the artistic patronage and strength of this local leadership.

**Suggested Readings**

For a general introduction to Oriental carpets, the following books are recommended:


Several of these reference works are available for sale in The Textile Museum Shop (discount for members), hours Tuesday-Saturday, 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m., Sunday 1:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.

Materials are also available for reference in The Arthur D. Jenkins Library at The Textile Museum, hours Wednesday-Friday, 10:00 a.m.-4:45 p.m., Saturday, 10:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.

This exhibition has received generous support from Oriental Rug Retailers of America, Inc.

Drs. John and Donna Sommer
CALENDAR

April

Continuing Exhibition
An Introduction to Oriental Carpets: The Arthur D. Jenkins Collection
Through September 17, 1989

Opening Exhibition
Early Indonesian Textiles from Three Island Cultures
June 17 through August 6, 1989

Closing Exhibition
Eagles to Roses in Chichicastenango Textiles
Through April 30, 1989

Docent-led Tours
Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, 10-4:00 p.m.;
Thursday, 1-4:00 p.m.
For reservations, call the Education Department two weeks in advance

Highlight Tours
Wednesday, 1:30 p.m.
Sunday, 2:00 p.m.

1 Members’ Gallery Talk: “An Introduction to Oriental Carpets,” Carol Bier, curator of Eastern Hemisphere Collections, The Textile Museum
Refreshments will be served in the Founders’ Room following the talk.
Saturday, 9:30 a.m.
Registration Required; Limited to 35

Saturday, 11:00 a.m.

5 Conservation & Eastern Hemisphere Curatorial Consultation
Wednesday, 11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.


This two-day workshop, conducted by the noted rug restoration expert, will focus on basic methods of repairing selvedges, ends, holes and splits as well as repiling. Bring a well-vacuumed carpet that needs restoring, a thimble, and pliers. Box lunch and other supplies included in registration fee.
Thursday and Friday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. $85. Members; $100. Non-members; Early registration advised.

Textile Appreciation Morning: “Noble Women’s Ceremonial Sarongs of East Sumba,” Barbara Warren
Saturday, 10:30 a.m.

Rug Appreciation Morning: “Woven Gems from the Shahsevans,” John Wertime
Saturday, 10:30 a.m.

Rug Appreciation Morning: “Turkish Village Pieces (pre-1850),” Dennis Dodds (Museum rugs featured)
Saturday, 10:30 a.m.

Lecture: “pile & Pattern: An Introduction to the Woven Art of Oriental Carpets,” Julia W. Bailey, assistant curator of Islamic and later Indian art, Harvard Univ. Art Museums
Wednesday, 6:00 p.m.
†Registration Required

Saturday, 10:30 a.m.
June

3 Celebration of Textiles Day and Dupont Kalmara Museums Walk Day
Saturday, 10:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.

10 Workshop: “Beduim Weaving,” Joy May Hilden
The instructor, who lives in Saudi Arabia and who has been doing field research in weaving among the Bedu, will guide participants in planning their design, warping a simple frame loom, making heddles, and weaving a small warp-faced piece. Weft twining and finger-weaving techniques will also be introduced. Handspun Beduin yarns will be provided. Box lunch for both days included in registration fee. A brief list of supplies needed for simple frame loom will be sent to participants upon receipt of registration.
Saturday & Sunday, 10:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.; $85. Members; $100. Non-members. $10. supplemental fee required for yarns.

17 Members’ Gallery Talk: “Early Indonesian Textiles from Three Island Cultures,” Robert J. Holmgren & Anita E. Spertus, guest curators
Refreshments will be served in the Founders’ Room following the talk.
Saturday, 9:30 a.m.
Registration Required; Limited to 35

17 Public Walkthrough: “Early Indonesian Textiles from Three Island Cultures,” Robert J. Holmgren & Anita E. Spertus, guest curators
Saturday, 11:00 a.m.

24 Textile Appreciation Morning: “Ikat in Indigo,” David Faly
Saturday, 10:30 a.m.

* Note: When the audience is invited to bring samples for a Saturday Rug or Textile Morning, please be sure the samples are clean and well-vacuumed.


Of all Lampung cloths, tampan enjoy the widest range of ceremonial use. Owned by almost every family, tampan function at the ritual heart of the community, commemorating critical family transitions.

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