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Approaches to Understanding Oriental Carpets

Carol Bier, *The Textile Museum*



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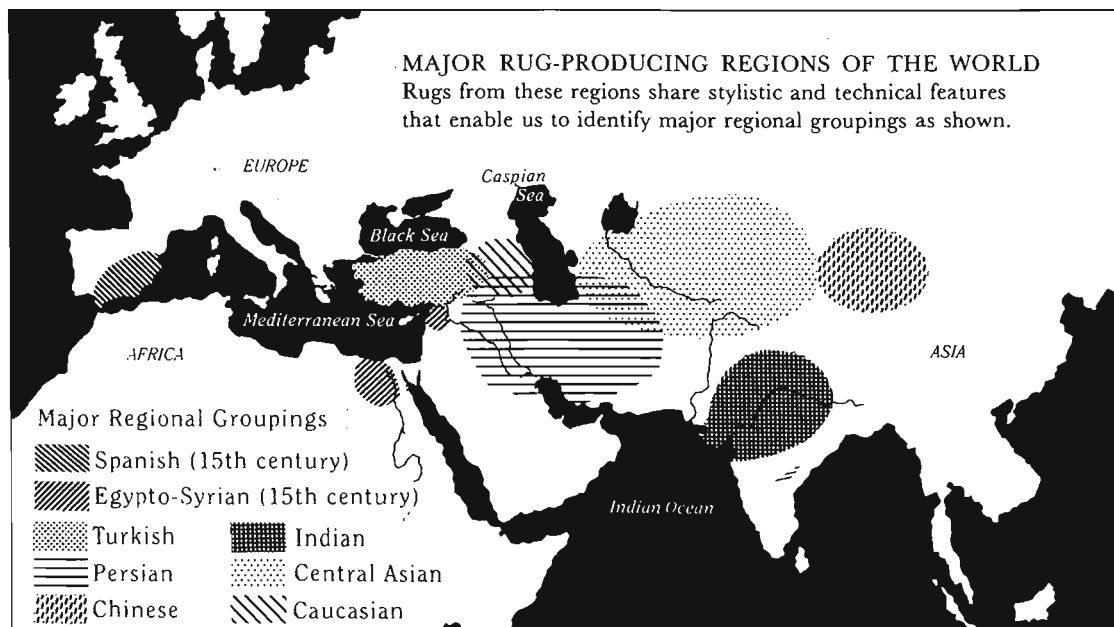
THE TEXTILE MUSEUM

Approaches to Understanding Oriental Carpets

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Studio photography by Franko Khoury



22 Major rug-producing regions of the world. Map drawn by Ed Zielinski

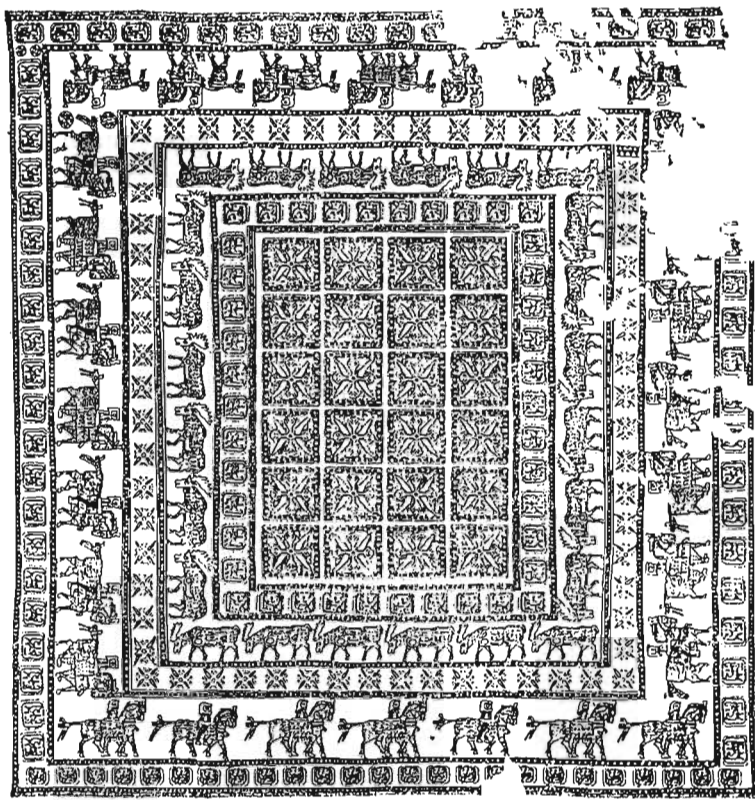
*24 ORIENTAL CARPETS reached a peak in production in the late nineteenth century, when a boom in market demand in Europe and America encouraged increased production in Turkey, Iran and the Caucasus.*Areas east of the Mediterranean Sea at that time were referred to as the Orient (in contrast to the Occident, which referred to Europe). To study the origins of these carpets and their ancestral heritage is to embark on a journey to Central Asia and the Middle East, to regions of low rainfall and many sheep, to inhospitable lands where animal husbandry and the seeking of good pastures has historically served as the primary economic force for sustaining human life.

To consider what an Oriental carpet is at its point of origin is to realise a difference of cultural perspectives. No one sets out to weave an Oriental carpet, for that is a Western construct; as expressed in one's own

language, one simply weaves a carpet.

Wool is the material of choice for carpets woven among pastoral peoples. Deriving from the fleece of a sheep, it is a readily available and renewable resource. Besides fleece, sheep are raised and tended in order to produce dairy products, meat, lard and hide. The body hair of the sheep yields the fleece. It is clipped annually or semi-annually; the wool is prepared in several steps that include washing, grading, carding, spinning and dyeing.

Traditionally, women undertake the preparation of wool. After preparation, it is taken to market. Depending upon cultural norms, men or women are involved in dye processes and in the production of felt. But women more often than men are responsible for the weaving of textiles, including carpets, for domestic applications and for sale.



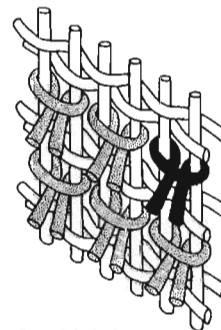
23 Drawing of carpet, excavated at Pazyryk, Russia, circa 300 B.C. The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg



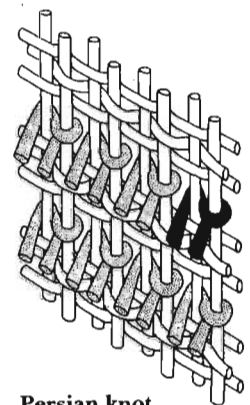
24 Rug, Caucasus, 19th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 150.5 × 112.5 cms. The Textile Museum R36.3.4. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1905



25 Woman weaving, Ashkabad, Turkmenistan SSR, 1989. Photograph by Carol Bier



Turkish knot
(symmetrical structure)



Persian knot
(asymmetrical structure)

26 Typical rug knots: (left) symmetrical (sometimes referred to as Turkish); (right) asymmetrical (sometimes referred to as Persian). Drawing by Milton Sondag in honour of Charles Grant Ellis. Reproduced with permission

Materials, Technology and Social Origins

The physical properties of wool are ideally suited for carpet manufacture: it is absorbent and retains dyes very well; it is resilient, springing back after being under pressure; it is resistant to dirt because of its natural oils.* Although it wears well, wool is not as easy to weave as cotton or silk because of its scaly, hairy surface (this characteristic may be observed by using a microscope). But cotton requires heavy rainfall or intensive irrigation and relies upon agricultural efforts for its cultivation so it is not readily available except by barter or trade to nomadic populations. Silk, drawn from the cocoons of silkworms that are fed a

special diet of mulberry leaves, is even more expensive to obtain.

For these reasons it is often the case that among rugs produced by nomads and rural pastoralists, wool is the exclusive ingredient used for warp, weft and pile. For carpets woven commercially in cities, wool is retained for the pile because of its resilience and colour-retention, and cotton is used for warp and weft. Silk is rarer, appearing in products woven for the court or by commission of wealthy patrons.

The different visual qualities of carpets produced using these different materials is significant. If silk is



27 Carpet, Central Asia, 19th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 400 × 188.5 cms. The Textile Museum 1993.31.1. Gift of Charles Grant Ellis from the Collection of Arthur Arwine



28 Carpet, India, Mughal period, 17th century. Wool pile on cotton warp, silk and cotton weft. 380 × 208 cms. The Textile Museum 1994.12.1. Gift of James D. Burns



29 Camel trapping for a wedding, Central Asia, 19th century. Wool and silk pile on wool warp and weft. 80 × 238 cms. The Textile Museum 1979.35.6. Gift of Arthur D. Jenkins



30 Carpet, Spain, 16th century. Wool pile. 185.5 × 84 cms. The Textile Museum R44.2.3. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1931



31 Carpet, Spain, 16th century. Wool pile. 234 × 164.5 cms. The Textile Museum R44.2.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1920



32 Carpet, Spain, 16th century. Wool pile. 373 × 152.5 cms. The Textile Museum 1976.10.3. Arthur D. Jenkins Gift Fund and Proceeds from the Sale of Art

used for pile, it offers the possibility of a bright spectrum of colours with a lustrous and shiny appearance that was much sought-after by kings and their courts and much admired by royalty abroad. Occasionally, one finds brightly coloured shiny silk or bleached cotton (for the brightest white) used for

29 special effect in the products of nomadic weavers. A silk foundation of warp and weft will yield a higher knot count because of the relative differences in diameter between silk and wool yarns. The use of depressed warps,* or warps on two levels, compresses the knots and further contributes to more fluid designs and curvilinear patterns because of higher knot density.

25 All Oriental carpets were woven on a loom, a structure designed to hold taut the lengthwise yarns that comprise the warp, thus enabling their interlacing with the crosswise yarns, or weft, as weaving progresses. Basic loom-types are upright or horizontal. In either case, the warp yarns are the lengthwise elements strung up on the loom; the weft yarns are the crosswise elements that interlace with the warp in an over-one, under-one sequence. Pile in carpets is produced by introducing an extra, or supplementary, weft that

26 wraps around pairs of adjacent warp yarns, and is then cut to form projecting tufts. These segments of supplementary weft are called knots, although they are not actually knotted. Various sequences of wrapping knots (around two warps or around one or four warps, pulled to the left or pulled to the right) distinguish rugs produced by different peoples in many places. These, along with traditional edge and end finishes, provide groupings of diagnostic features which help in identifying



33 Carpet, Spain, 16th century. Wool pile. 208.5 × 231 cms. The Textile Museum R44.2.7. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1926

ing Oriental rugs. The two most characteristic knot-types wrapped around two warps are called symmetrical (often referred to as Turkish, or Ghiordes) or asymmetrical (often referred to as Persian, or Senneh).

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 memorised 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 specialised task, with designs often related to other arts of the period such as bookbindings and marginal illustrations, architectural ornament, ceramics and metalwork.

The time it takes to weave a rug depends upon many factors, which differ from place to place. These include, for example, the skill of the weaver, the complexity of the pattern, yarn dimensions for warp, weft and pile, knot density, the construction of the loom, wages and payment schedules, other responsibilities of the weaver, and seasonal weather. In commercial production of handmade Oriental carpets, each weaver is expected to finish several rows of knots a day.

A carpet may be defined as a fairly large pile-weaving intended to be used as a floor-covering. Rugs include more diverse examples of utilitarian weavings that are relatively coarse when compared with other kinds of textiles. Using this definition, carpets comprise a subset of rugs.

Surviving evidence suggests that carpets have been produced for at least 2500 years.* The earliest nearly-complete carpet is the so-called Pazyryk carpet, excavated from the tomb of a nomadic chieftain that was found in Siberia dating from the fourth century B.C. A unique surviving example of its time, the Pazyryk carpet is in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. There are no groups of carpets that survive prior to the fifteenth century A.D. The earliest extant complete carpets date from fifteenth century Spain and Egypt.* The majority preserved of each of these groups are in the collections of The Textile Museum. Of an earlier date, large fragments of Turkish carpets dating from the period of Seljuk rule in Anatolia in the eleventh and twelfth centuries have found their way to Turkish museums, many having been preserved in old mosques.

Apart from these early examples of carpets, those produced commercially in the past five hundred years tend to utilise wool pile and a cotton foundation of warp and weft. Such carpets, generally categorised in the West as Oriental carpets, were manufactured in Turkey, Iran and the Caucasus, as well as in India and Central Asia, for both commercial sale and domestic use.* Pile carpets with foundations of cotton, but including silk as either pile or within the foundation structure, are known from the royal courts of these regions. Particularly significant are the highest quality products of Safavid Iran* and the Ottoman* and Mughal* empires in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nomadic production of woollen carpets in Central Asia may have a much longer history than is yet confirmed by surviving examples. Because of the hard uses to which they were put, most nomadic rugs one encounters today date from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And the vast majority of carpets in private collections and those on the market (of the previously-owned variety) were produced commercially in the period of boom production between 1870 and 1920 in Turkey, Iran and the Caucasus.

The Textile Museum's Collection of Oriental Carpets

The Textile Museum's collection of Oriental carpets numbers about sixteen hundred holdings. The collection has typically focused on more than just the great classical carpets that predate the eighteenth century, associated with royal courts and high-level commissions. From the time of its quiet and private beginnings in the dormitory room of George Hewitt Myers, his personal collection that became The Textile Museum also included examples of the more humble but no less majestic nomadic and tribal rugs. What fascinated and motivated Myers early on was that utilitarian weavings such as containers for storage and transport (e.g. saddle bags or bread carriers), and furnishings (e.g. flat-woven covers made without pile, and embroideries) represented the same cultural traditions as pile carpets used as floor-coverings. He observed, through his collecting, similarities of layout, colour and patterns characteristic of particular times and particular places. It was both the cultural connections between different fabrics, and the structural relationships between textile arts of different cultures (such as the tapestries of Egypt and Peru) that inspired Myers' collecting choices.* His dual intent, clearly expressed through his collections, was to educate the public to appreciate beauty by means of exhibitions and lectures, and to serve scholarship by means of research and publications. Neshan Hintlian, a trusted dealer, summed up Myers' collecting interests: "He wanted a collection not just to cherish for himself, but to share with others, in the hope that they, too, would learn." We are indeed fortunate that Myers forged such strong directions for The Textile Museum under his keen eye and leadership for more than thirty years. For it is upon his legacy and these foundations for the preservation and presentation of textiles, including Oriental carpets, that we continue to build our programmes for exhibitions, conservation and scholarship.

Myers' foremost concern in his regard for Oriental carpets was that they were under-appreciated by Western audiences as works of art. But he was not unique in this regard. The painter Paul Gauguin remarked that to learn about colour, one must study carpets. More recently, my own work on Oriental carpets has revealed much about apparent symmetries, asymmetry, and the perception of pattern and beauty. So much more is yet to be learned, understood and appreciated.

From its founding in 1925 to the time of his death in 1957 George Hewitt Myers gave to The Textile Museum the collection of rugs he amassed over the years. These, along with more recent acquisitions received as generous gifts or bequests from individual donors,* or museum purchases with restricted funds,* present a comprehensive view of Oriental carpets that continues to be drawn upon by students and scholars, artists and craftsmen, dealers and collectors for inspiration and understanding through exhibitions, programmes and publications.

Systems of Classification

A quick dip into virtually any book on Oriental carpets is a daunting experience for novice enthusiasts and beginning collectors alike. One is struck by a bewildering array of names that are at once unrecognised and seemingly unpronounceable. With a small dose of patience and persistence, looking at any two books, one is likely to discover inconsistencies of spelling, dating

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and description, adding to the frustration. It is easy to give up early and move on, leaving such detailed analysis to the experts, whether they be dealers, collectors or scholars, or anyone who has patience for such sorting and classifying.

But a brief excursion into systems of classifications of Oriental carpets can be a rewarding exercise, and The Textile Museum's collection of Oriental carpets lends itself admirably to this effort. Most of the terms associated with the study of Oriental carpets may broadly be categorised as follows: *geographic region* (such as the terms Turkish, Persian, Caucasian, Central Asian); *ethnic attribution* (such as Kurdish, Turkmen); *social origin* (such as nomadic, tribal, village, commercial, court); *relative age* (such as classical, antique, semi-antique, new); by *layout* (such as medallion, prayer niche, pictorial); and by *weave structure attributes* (such as depressed warps, pulled right, open left, double-weltd). The term "prayer rug" suggests a functional designation, hinting at the use of some but not all rugs with a niche format. Still, one may be fooled by such hints as George Hewitt Myers was reminded painfully at times ("most distinctly when the first sight of a tattered old Ghiordes threw the spotlight of authenticity upon two or three of [my] earliest purchases, which proved to be modern examples ... [with] an effective application of pumice-stone and elbow-grease").

The majority of patterns in Oriental carpets consists of geometric and stylised floral designs arranged within a central field framed by borders. Traditionally, several designs appear in the field and borders of a single carpet. The sense of intricacy and complexity is achieved by various systems of pattern repeats and by the use of colour and its alternation.

Understanding how a carpet was made is often easier than identifying its origin. The attribution of date and place of manufacture of a particular carpet is based upon a critical assessment of designs, materials and techniques, and the uses of colour, taking into account similar examples of its type. Historically, rugs were produced in arid regions across the Asian continent: Turkey, Iran, the Caucasus, Central Asia and India.* In addition, rugs were woven in Spain, Egypt, possibly Syria, and China. Rugs from each of these regions share stylistic and technical features that enable us to identify major regional groupings.

Carpets of Andalusia (Spain)

Carpets woven in Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries incorporate diverse influences from the Islamic Middle East, China, and Europe's Renaissance. Rug-weaving was centred in Andalusia, the south of Spain in areas long held by Muslims. But rug-weaving continued in Spain after the final reconquest of the Iberian peninsula under Christian rule in 1492. Muslims living in Spain under Christian rule, called Mudejars, wove carpets with elements of Islamic design as seen in various forms of interlace, geometric patterns, and the appearance of stylised Arabic scripts.* A curious amalgamation of Islamic motifs and Gothic silk patterns heralds styles of Europe's Renaissance in Spanish carpets.* And many Spanish carpets bear the influence of textile patterns from Turkey* and farther east.* Spanish carpets are characterised not only by their eclectic style, but also by the use of a single-warp knot that is unique to this tradition. All other carpet-weaving traditions utilise paired warps in the construction of individual knots.

The Textile Museum's holdings of Spanish carpets,

acquired by George Hewitt Myers, comprises the finest and most comprehensive collection in the world. They are well-documented in an early Textile Museum publication, *Catalogue of Spanish Rugs (12th to 19th Century)* by Ernst Kühnel and Louisa Bellinger (1953).

Carpets of Mamluk Egypt

While Egypt no longer boasts a pile carpet-weaving industry today, Cairene carpets of late fifteenth century Mamluk Egypt are among the finest ever produced anywhere. This distinction derives in part from the dominance and simplicity of geometric form: * squares and triangles, octagons and eight-pointed stars. Representational motifs include date-palms and a stylised umbrella-shaped leaf that is depicted in sprays and scrolls.* Jewel-like tones of red, green, and blue create intricate patterns in lustrous wool pile that reflect a superlative play in the manipulation of colour and form. 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, which enabled the execution of perfect squares and circles without elongation. Focused on three colours, the art of the Mamluk carpet is a mathematician's art like that of map-maker and plays upon the ambiguities of patterns. The use of simple shapes repeated within circles and squares, medallions and cartouches relates the designs of Mamluk carpets to those of contemporary architectural monuments that still stand in Cairo, Jerusalem and Tripoli.

With the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, new styles emerged in the development of Cairene carpets. Their artistic style adapted to the emerging Ottoman Imperial style with a preference for floral forms that are stylised and ornate.* Tulips, hyacinths and jasmine may be identified, combined with naturalistic stems and leaves, repeated throughout the central field and surrounding borders.

The Textile Museum has the largest and most important collection of Mamluk carpets in the world, well-published but for six examples acquired recently. Early documentation with technical analyses in the 1957 catalogue by Ernst Kühnel and Louisa Bellinger, *Cairene Rugs and Others Technically Related (15th century-17th century)*, set a new standard for later studies of pile carpets. Many of the carpets in The Textile Museum's collections were acquired by the museum's founder through dealers in the United States at a time when they were not readily sought-after by collectors. Perhaps the finest example of a Mamluk carpet, woven with a silk pile, resides in the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna, once in the collection of the Hapsburg emperors. Mamluk carpets, although extremely rare, continue to reappear unexpectedly. Several years ago two Mamluk carpets were found 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 refurbished.

Carpets from Turkey

Turkish carpets represent a long tradition of rug-weaving that no doubt had its roots in Inner Asia, spreading westwards with successive migrations of Turkic peoples. A thriving tradition in Turkey today, rug-weaving has been resuscitated in recent years often with village cooperatives electing to utilise natural dyes and traditional methods of manufacture. While Turkish carpets are depicted in paintings by European masters as early as the fourteenth century, most

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34 Carpet, Egypt, 15th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 186 × 137 cms. The Textile Museum R16.1.2. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1928



35 Carpet, Egypt, 15th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 188.5 × 135 cms. The Textile Museum R16.1.3. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1951



36 Carpet in Cairene style, Ottoman Empire, 16th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 350 × 218 cms. The Textile Museum 1986.38.1. The Ruth Lincoln Fisher Fund



37 Star medallion carpet, Turkey (Ushak), 16th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 305.5 × 179 cms. The Textile Museum R34.1.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1918



38 Small-patterned Holbein carpet, Turkey, 16th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 209 × 140 cms. The Textile Museum R34.17.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1928



39 Double-niche Transylvanian rug, Turkey, 16th or 17th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 162 × 115 cms. The Textile Museum R34.1.2. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1930



40 Kurdish rug, Turkey, 18th century(?). Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 254 × 153 cms. The Textile Museum 1993.35.1. Gift of Wells Campbell Klein



41 Rug, Bergama region, Turkey, 19th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 213 × 208.5 cms. The Textile Museum 1991.42.1. Gift of Mr and Mrs Luther S. Roehm



42 Star medallion carpet, Iran, Safavid period, 17th century. Wool pile on cotton warp and weft. 840 x 325 cms. The Textile Museum 1960.9.1. Gift of Joseph V. McMullan in memory of George Hewitt Myers

surviving carpets are dated from the sixteenth century onwards. As mentioned above, several examples of carpets woven in the Seljuk period (eleventh and twelfth centuries) are preserved in Turkish museums. Very few of the earliest surviving Turkish carpets have found their way to the Western market, a situation reinforced by the Republic of Turkey's recent concerns for the protection of cultural property. The oldest examples have small overall repeat patterns that take advantage of the rectilinear requirements of weaving. In the Ottoman period, readily evident in carpets of the fifteenth century, curvilinearity of forms relates to other decorative arts produced by and for the Ottoman court and at high levels of commercial production that relied upon court designs for their inspiration.* Turkish carpets, from the Ottoman period onward, continued to be exported in quantity to European markets and today many historical Turkish carpet styles bear the names of the European painters in whose works they are illustrated (Holbein,* Lotto,* Memling, and Crivelli). So-called Transylvanian carpets with a double-niche format were exported in large numbers to the Balkans.* There many were donated to Protestant churches and, suspended from second storey balconies above the nave, they became a major element of interior décor. Circular, lobed and star-shaped medallions continued to offer favoured layouts for many kinds of commercially produced Turkish carpets. After the Ottoman conquests of Safavid Iran in the sixteenth century, the floral and curvilinear Persian carpet styles were copied in Turkish workshops as seen in the products of Hereke, Kum Kapu and, more recently, Kayseri.

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Certain historical styles of Turkish carpets reflect the Turkic heritage from the steppes of Central Asia, exhibiting visual relationships* to ancestral products with interlaced patterns and archetypal motifs. Nomadic populations in Turkey persist in making rugs with bold and graphic designs, favouring red and blues with white and yellow highlights, that continue to draw upon their age-old tribal heritage.* Rugs produced by the Turkmen and Salor in Anatolia, and those produced by so-called Yörüks (nomads) fit this category, although the latter appellation* has at times included non-Turkic Kurdish groups who have inhabited the Anatolian plateau for several millennia.

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Settled populations weave rugs that tend to combine elements of different traditions, reflecting a diversity of urban and rural designs. There is, therefore, great variety in the rugs we attribute to production in Turkish villages. These rugs tend to be coarser, and woven with lower knot density than their commercial counterparts. And they tend to be smaller formats, generally manufactured to the specifications of a village loom, the breadth of which corresponds roughly to the arm span of village women. In the commercial city of Ushak in Central Turkey looms were constructed of enormous size, where in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century huge rugs were manufactured for export to Europe and America.

Persian Carpets

Persian carpets are famous for their curvilinear designs and rich variety of floral forms. Most typical perhaps in the Western mind is a symmetrical layout with central medallion and corner quarter medallions,* usually overlaying a repeated design of scrolling vines with leaves and blossoms. Reminiscent of an everlasting garden that blooms in all seasons, such carpets have captured the fantasy of poets and romantics around the

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20 globe. They are often considered to be visual metaphors of heavenly perfection and Paradise. But in reality, the categories of Persian carpets represent far more diversity in terms of social origin than most other traditions.

For not only are there the carpets woven for the use of the Safavid court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and those of equally elevated sophisticated tastes that found their way to the royal courts of an emerging Europe.* But there are also the large numbers of commercial rugs that were produced towards the end of the nineteenth century, often financed with foreign investment for export. And then there are the rugs* of many different tribal groups that have historically lived on the Iranian plateau and subsisted alongside of the urban and rural populations. It is the vast diversity of styles in tribal weaving that particularly distinguishes the carpets of Iran from those of other areas. Each tribal category has its own traits, evident in the uses of dyes, designs and weave structures.

46 While many of the court and high level commercial carpets utilise an asymmetrical knot (often called Persian), many of the tribal carpets utilise the symmetrical knot (often called Turkish). The Persian knot is sometimes also called a Senneh, after a small town to the west of the central plateau. But many of the rugs from Senneh are flatweaves, the designs of which are executed in a tapestry weave without the use of pile.

Caucasian Rugs

Rugs from the Caucasus are widely known for their bright colours and bold designs.* Produced in towns and villages, these rugs reflect a richness of patterns that resulted from the comings and goings of peoples from east and west, north and south, who came through the Caucasus and settled there. Halted by the barrier of great mountains, many people of diverse origins remained in the mountainous regions between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Others passed through on mercantile business through the ages, sometimes leaving an imprint of their own regional traditions in the arts. For these reasons, Caucasian rugs, which were primarily woven for commerce and export, probably represent more distinct and disparate design traditions than rugs from any other rug-producing region of the world. Among many designs, the four most frequently encountered in older carpets from the Caucasus are stylised dragons,* blossoms,*12 sunbursts* and medallions, the latter enjoying even wider popularity in Turkish and Persian carpets. Caucasian rugs typically have a knot density falling relatively into a medium range between 80 to 160 knots per square inch. Rugs with depressed warps and more curvilinear designs usually fit into a category of higher density.

Central Asian Rugs

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 way of life to accommodate pastoral pursuits and to maintain their political autonomy, withstanding central authority in both Iran and Russia. Their weavings* often serve utilitarian functions as containers for storage and transport, as well as to ornament and decorate their *yurts*. Familial and tribal affiliation are reflected in their rug-weaving traditions. It is said that a Turkmen, upon seeing a distant caravan, could



43 Dragon carpet, Caucasus, 17th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 491.5 × 225 cms. The Textile Museum R36.1.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1916

identify who was passing by recognising the woven patterns.

The designs of Turkmen weavings, passed on from generation to generation, are generally small and often repeated.* The favourite motif, called *gul* by the Turkmen, is a stylised floral form or emblem, which shows innumerable variations in type. Typically, Turkmen rugs have a red ground.* Reds of many hues, ranging from oranges to browns, and pinks to deep reds, result from the use of a ubiquitous dyestuff called madder. This dyestuff is obtained from the root of the

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plant; it is dried and pulverised, then boiled in water with a mordant. The mordant, a metallic oxide, enables the chemical bonding of the dye and the fibre that results in stable colour. The resulting colour depends on many factors, including the fineness of the ground-up madder root, how much is used in solution and for what length of time the yarn is submerged. Impurities in the water supply and the composition of the dye pot, as well as the mordant, will affect colour.

Turkmen rugs are extremely rugged, well-made, and often exhibit a relatively high knot density (often more than 240 knots per square inch). The many different formats are indicative of the many uses to which rugs were put: particular shapes were made to suit special needs such as the storage and transport of household effects including bedding, bread, spoons, personal effects, scissors, each of which has a specially designed bag shape. There are also a variety of covers and containers to carry tent poles and equipment, as well as door rugs, bridal carpets, animal trappings, and felted and appliqué roofing materials. Attribution to different groups (e.g. Saryk, Yomud, Tekke, Chodor, Ersari) is generally based upon pattern and colour in relation to physical characteristics of construction and weave structure.

49 A Chodor carpet in The Textile Museum's collection is one that Myers acquired in 1914, long before this type of rug was attributed to a sub-category of Turkmen tribal groups. He recognised it at the time as an exceptional example of pilc weaving. Research and understanding of Turkmen rugs advanced dramati-

cally in the early 1980s as a result of The Textile Museum's exhibition and publication *Turkmen: Tribal Carpets and Traditions* by Louise Mackie and Jon Thompson (1980). Since then, numerous additional fine examples of Turkmen weavings have been donated to strengthen this area of the collection.

Attracting more recent attention among collectors are the non-Turkmen weavings of Central Asia.

Carpets from India

The early history of carpet-weaving in India is not sufficiently studied. With comparisons to architectural monuments of the fifteenth century, several fragmentary carpets suggest an earlier industry than is yet postulated for Indian production. But by the height of the Mughal Empire, Indian carpets had a style and a place of their own as palace furnishings.* Carpet-weaving in India is generally credited to the transport of master weavers from Iran during the reign of Akbar. Indeed, Indian carpets share many stylistic features with their Persian cousins, particularly in the stylisation of floral forms. And there are several groups of carpets* whose origin in India or Iran is yet indeterminate. But there are also differences that may be recognised in the use of colour and in weave structure. Indian carpets often use a typical combination of reds, greens and blue-greens, and whites, with motifs delineated with dark brown or black outlines.* Overall repeat patterns are developed using medallions, compartments, and ogival units forming diagonal lattices

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44 Polonaise carpet, Iran, 17th century. Silk pile and metallic-wrapped silk on cotton warp, cotton and silk weft. 203 × 139 cms. The Textile Museum R33.5.4. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1953



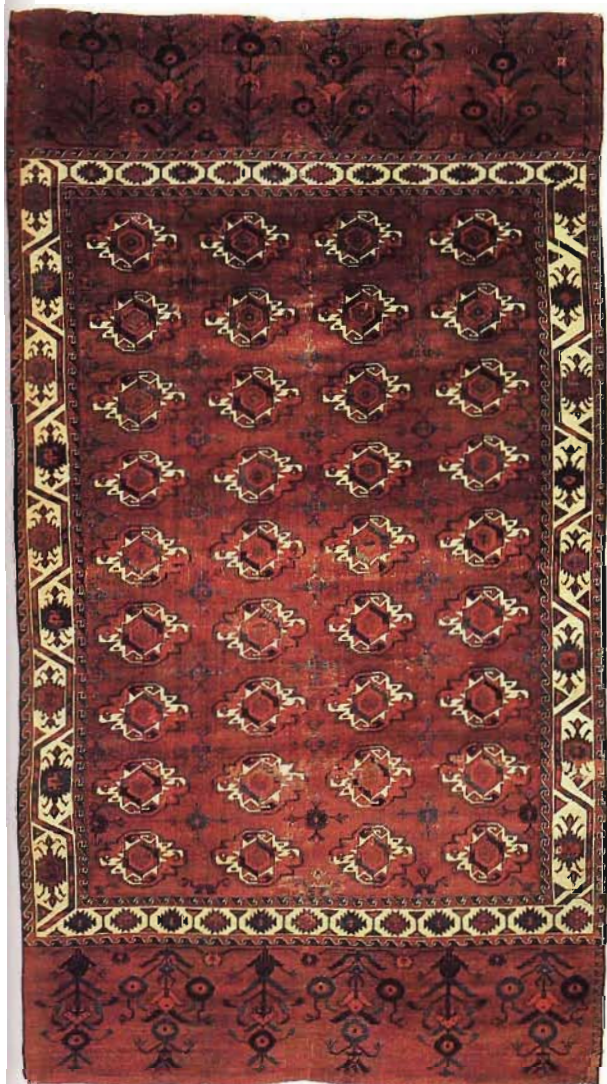
45 Carpet, Iran, 19th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 219.5 × 155 cms. The Textile Museum R33.7.2. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1914



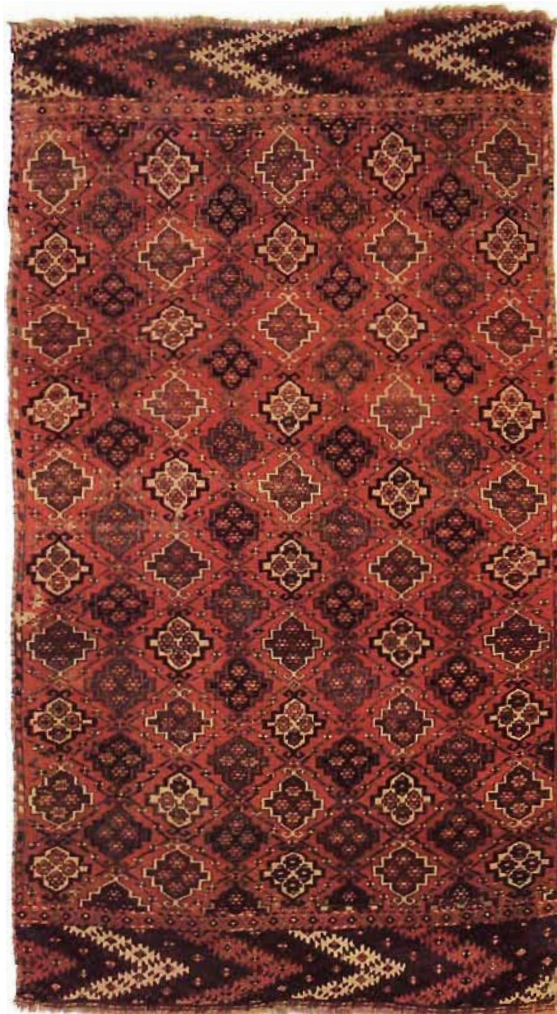
46 Flatwoven rug, Iran, Senneh, 19th century. Wool tapestry on wool warp. 155 × 117 cms. The Textile Museum 1979.35.1. Gift of Arthur D. Jenkins



47 Bread carrier, Central Asia (Turkmen), 19th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 101.5 × 107 cms. The Textile Museum 1980.13.12. Gift of Arthur D. Jenkins



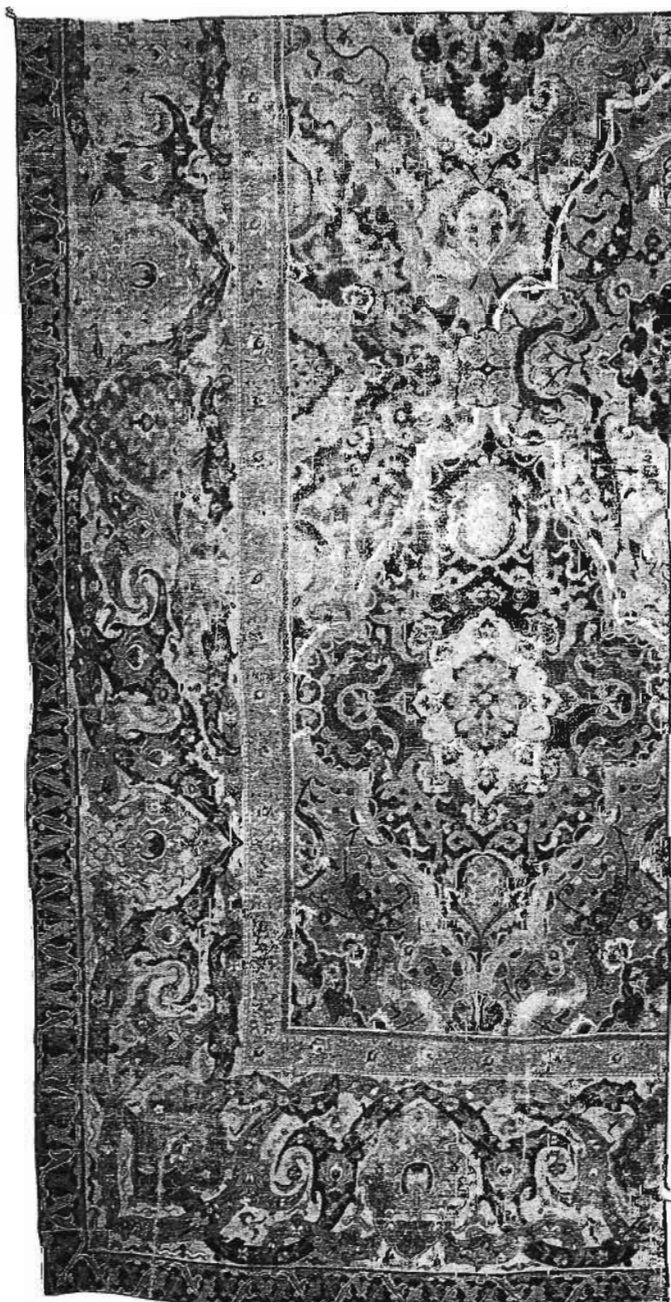
48 Main carpet, Central Asia (Yomud), 18th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 319 × 176.5 cms. The Textile Museum R37.5.2. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1914



49 Rug, Central Asia (Chodor), 19th century or earlier. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 207 × 113 cms. The Textile Museum R37.6.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1914

sometimes with leafy scrolls. Typically woven with wool pile on a cotton or a cotton and silk foundation, they are all products of commercial and court manufacture. Knotting is generally tighter than that of neighbouring regions, with carpets exhibiting a knot density often higher than 300 knots per square inch. A recent acquisition by The Textile Museum* exemplifies a very high level of production that may have been destined for the Mughal court in the seventeenth century. The English and Dutch commercial presence lent support to the development of production for export with the result that many large Indian carpets have been treasured for centuries in European households. And Indian carpets, like other Indian decorative arts of the seventeenth century, reflect strong European influences in the naturalistic rendering of leaves and flowers, as well as in the depiction of animals and human figures. But the pictorial carpets of Mughal

*cover, 28



50 Carpet fragment, Iran or India, 17th century or later. Wool pile on cotton warp and weft. 304 × 165 cms. The Textile Museum 1976.37. Gift of Richard Ettinghausen



51 Carpet, India, 17th century or later. Wool pile on cotton warp and weft. 335.5 × 167.5 cms. The Textile Museum R63.00.4. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1924

India, like those of Safavid Iran, are reflective not of carpet-weaving traditions but of the courtly art of manuscript painting and book production.

Rugs from China and Inner Asia

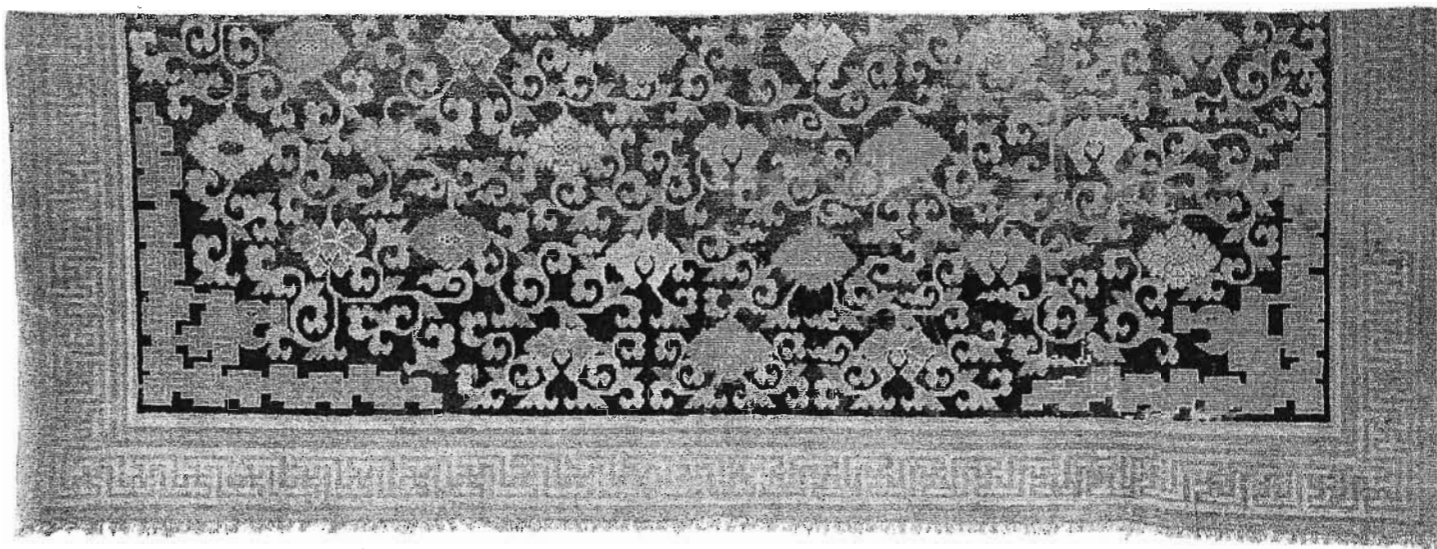
Produced in Tibet, Mongolia, Ningxia and Xinjiang, rugs in the Chinese tradition draw upon the visual repertory of Ming and Qing China. Favourite design elements include fretwork based on a square grid,* which is used for borders and ornamental brackets, and lotus, peony or chrysanthemum scrolls. Formats and sizes differ from those of other rug-weaving traditions because they are designed to suit Chinese furnishing requirements. These include chair seats and backs, and *kang* covers* (to be placed over the raised heating area in a Chinese home). Many carpets and pillar rugs* bear designs that are related to Imperial imagery of dragons, earth, water and sky. From the region of Ningxia, older carpets frequently show sculpted pile which has been cut to differing heights, colour shading (especially of blues and reds), and a wide brown unadorned border that typically today has deteriorated. Older rugs tend to lack stable red dyes.

Chinese rugs are constructed of wool pile on a cotton

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52 Carpet (half), China, Ningxia, 19th century. Wool pile on cotton warp and weft. 121 × 333 cms. The Textile Museum R51.1.10A. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1949

foundation of warp and weft. Typically utilising an asymmetrical knot, Chinese rugs occasionally show the use of symmetrical knots near the border. Knots are sometimes set in clusters to achieve particular design effects (such as the naturalistic eye of a dragon). This characteristic is not seen in other rug-weaving traditions.

Apart from format and the obvious considerations of style, what distinguishes Chinese rugs from all other traditions of Oriental carpets is the specificity of symbolic patterns. Whereas carpets from other rug-producing regions of the world express an aesthetic of colour and pattern, rugs in the Chinese tradition rely upon a vocabulary of forms associated with specific meanings. Groups of images form rebuses that play upon homophonic words that sound alike although they may be written with different characters. One of the loveliest old chair seats in The Textile Museum's collection* depicts an egret in a lotus pond which forms a rebus for "Wishing you success in an ever upward journey".

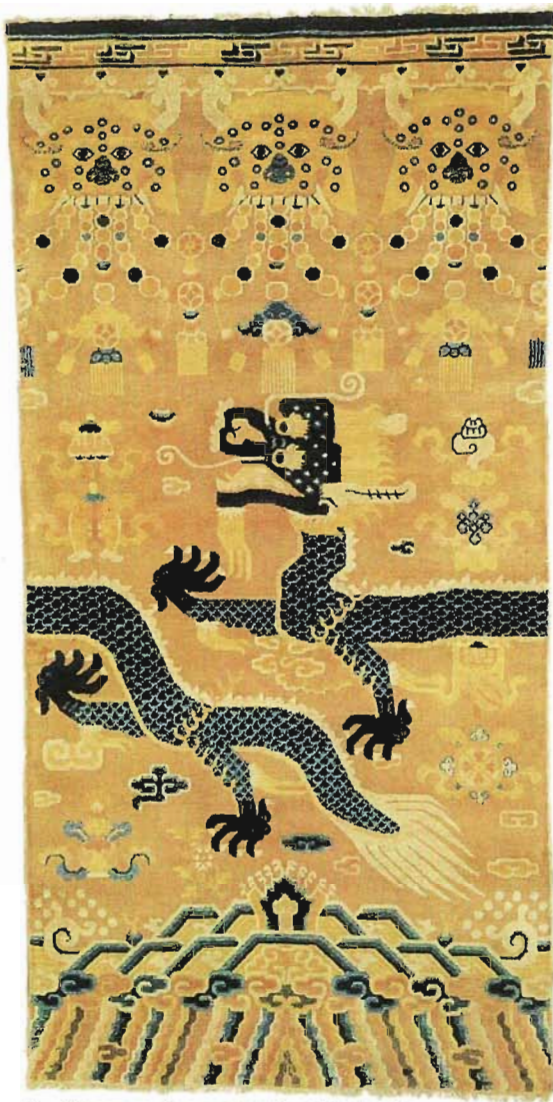
Many of the images in Chinese rugs relate to the Imperial arts in other media. On the great monumental carved stone staircase at the Forbidden City, above which the Imperial palanquin was carried, is a pattern familiar from Chinese rugs. It shows a cosmological progression from waves and mountains with a dragon in the sky above, scattered with clouds. The same imagery is repeated on summer and winter robes of the court, and on richly ornamented ceramic vessels. The use of such elements as wave-and-mountain patterns, sky and cloud motifs, dragons, and auspicious symbols such as bats, dice and pearls, reflects the crossovers of Imperial designs with religious and popular usage in rugs and other decorative arts.

56 Carpets from the autonomous region of Xinjiang, or eastern Turkestan, show affinities with the rugs of western Turkestan in qualities of wool, uses of colours and patterning. The designs, however, are more closely related to Chinese textiles and rugs.

There is controversy as to the history of rug-weaving in China. Recent research into provincial gazetteers listing local products provides evidence that the terms used for rugs, mats, and such covers are words of



53 Kang cover, China, Ningxia, 19th century or earlier. Wool pile on cotton warp and weft. 268 × 163 cms. The Textile Museum R51.1.5. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1920



54 Pillar rug, China, Ningxia, 19th century.
Wool pile on cotton warp and weft. 241
× 122.5 cms. The Textile Museum R51.2.1.
Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1927

Mongolian or Turkic origin, supporting a thesis for non-indigenous origins for rug-weaving in China. Rather, rug-weaving (and the use of wool, in general), may have been appropriated as a Chinese technology only after the westward expansion of the Qing Empire into wool-producing regions of Inner Asia.

Today in the Middle East and Central Asia, rugs are still made in nomadic tents, in rural houses and urban households, and in city workshops and factories. Some are made by special commission; most are sold in the bazaar or exported. In India, China and elsewhere, handmade Oriental carpets with wool pile on a cotton foundation are produced primarily for export. In Europe and America, older rugs may be purchased from dealers or galleries, while new rugs are available as well from department stores which regularly receive large shipments from wholesalers. Because of the long history of collecting and trade over the past centuries, rugs here are also sold through the major auction houses. Others may still be found unexpectedly at estate sales, country auctions and swap meets.

The Textile Museum continues to acquire Oriental carpets by gift and bequest, and draws upon opportunities for purchase as appropriate to its mission, priorities and resources. Held in October nearly every year, The Textile Museum's Rug Convention is an educational event designed to bring together individuals interested in rugs and textiles in a setting which promotes scholarship, camaraderie and the informal exchange of ideas. Utilising the collections for exhibitions, publications and public programmes, The Textile Museum continues to provide a stimulating environment for audiences from around the world to learn more about Oriental carpets and the cultures from which they derive.

Several periodicals present articles of interest to rug collectors and enthusiasts: The Textile Museum Journal, Hali: The International Magazine of Oriental Carpets (London), Oriental Rug Review (Meredith, NH), and Oriental Carpet and Textile Studies. Auction house catalogues provide additional useful information with price estimates.



55 Chair seat, China, Ningxia, 18th century. Wool pile on cotton warp and weft. 101 × 107 cms. The Textile Museum R51.1.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1949. Formerly in the collection of Friedrich Sarre



56 Carpet fragment, Central Asia, Xinjiang, 19th century or earlier. Silk pile on cotton warp and weft. 86 × 133 cms. The Textile Museum R56.1.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1927

Suggested Readings

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|---|---|---|--|
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