The Legacy of Timur: A Small Rug at The Textile Museum

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CHAYKHANE

CHAYKHANE is the Persian for tea-shop. This is where people usually meet to chat and catch up on the latest news, passing judgement on what they hear. Tea-shops such as these can be found in the remotest of villages and storytellers often provide evening entertainment with their tales and adventures. Otherwise the Chaykhané acts as a bazaar to buy and sell carpets fresh off the loom. This new section of Ghereh aims to have the same role as the chaykhané, publishing whatever anyone might have to say, and provoking free discussion and debate. We welcome all contributions. Ghereh’s editorial office will do everything possible to publish comments and views (space permitting of course) although these do not necessarily reflect those of the magazine.

THE LEGACY OF TIMUR: A SMALL RUG AT THE TEXTILE MUSEUM

Curator of the oriental department at the Textile Museum of Washington, Carol Bier offers Ghereh’s readers a discussion on one of the museum’s most recent acquisitions - an old masnad.

Among the two hundred lots offered on the block by Christie’s from Bernheimer Family Collection of Rugs in February 1996, a small shaped rug with white ground was acquired by the Textile Museum. The rug was Lot 192, published in the catalogue as an East Persian saddle rug dating to the 19th century. The Textile Museum’s interest in the piece was sparked by my hunch, based upon its design, that this rug is far more significant than its published attribution might suggest. A carefully conceived trefoil scroll implies a Timurid heritage. To read the design correctly, it should probably have been exhibited and published the other way around (as seen here). The rug is small (cm 73x76) and woven to shape in the form of an extended semicircle. It has an ivory field that may have originally had three narrow yellow bands outlined in black. The otherwise open central field is surrounded by a single border of trefoils alternating with trefoil in a shield, executed in blue pile on a (faded) yellow field. The border itself is defined by a thin black outline of knots. Along the inner edge of the border are two split leaf arabesque scrolls, difficult to discern. One shows red leaves on a blue ground, the other shows white leaves outlined in black.

My initial hunch of an early date and a strong Timurid heritage is supported by my preliminary investigations, which lead me to question the attribution given this rug by Christie’s. Its size is small for a saddle rug, according to Nicholas Salgo. Its shape is also unusual; saddle covers in the shape of an extension on either side to accommodate the rider’s legs (see three published examples of Senneh saddle covers in Murray Eiland, Oriental Rugs from Pacific Collections, 1990, pls. 71-73). While East Persia can be on both sides of the political boundary today, my in-
clination is to place it further to the east (most probably Herat, or possibly Samarkand or India), based upon both stylistic and structural considerations. As to function, I prefer to think of it as a masnad, or ceremonial rug on which a ruler would sit. The design shows a clarity of the geometry underlying its conception, and an elegant simplicity, which is nonetheless evident in spite of the awkward upper corners and irregularities of the double split leaf arabesque scroll. The trefoil scroll is based on an arrangement of circles, dependent upon the radius of a single circle which determines the placement and size of the others. This design bears a strong resemblance to the stark geometry and blue-and-white coloration that are a hallmark of Timurid style. Although in this rug the design was no doubt executed by a weaver, its conception suggests that it derives from the kitabkhane of the Timurid court. In the court of Ulugh Beg in Samarkand considerable studies in applied mathematics were undertaken, most notable in astronomical observation and in the efforts to determine a more precise calculation for \( \pi \), the ratio of a circle’s radius to its circumference, a ratio understood to be unchanging. Christie’s published its structure (Catalogue of the Bernheimer Family Collection of Rugs, p.179) as having white cotton warps (Z4, Z6, Z3S2Z), considerably depressed, and cotton wefts (S6), one or two shoots, either pink or blue. One weft is undulating, the other is usually strongly undulating. The pile is listed as wool (Z2), with asymmetrical knots open to the left (H4.2xV4.4/cm). At the lower end, warps and wefts are woven to form a plain weave foundation. What is obviously unusual about this structure is the multiple strands used to construct both warp and weft. The warps are constructed of yarns spun, plied, and plied again, a process that is usually reserved for strengthening of the selvages and referred to then as cords. The cotton of the warps appears to have been bleached. The observation that warp is bleached cotton, and the weft is dyed cotton, would seem to preclude a tribal or nomadic origin, a conclusion supported by a design which derives from decorative arts of the Timurid court.
This rug has several unusual features which warrant further consideration: the colors are unusually bright and clear - notable besides the blue and white are yellow and red, as well as black - all exceptional in their clarity and apparent stability of dyes.

The colors, thus, suggest themselves to be of extraordinary quality. With a cotton foundation and wool pile, I might suggest this rug was of high level commercial, if not court production. The warps are strongly depressed (on two levels), and they are formed of cords (yarns plied together). The open white field, and the single border with yellow ground are also exceptional features.

There are no parallels for this design in pile carpets that I have yet been able to locate. There are, however, numerous parallels in architectural ornament and the decorative arts. Early examples appear in 14th-century Spain, Anatolia, and Egypt. The trefoil scroll becomes canonized within the repertory of Timurid arts designed in the *kitabkhane*, and its use proliferates along with Timurid influence in the arts of Safavid Iran, Ottoman Turkey, and Mughal India, as well as Uzbek Central Asia.

As to function, I have not yet succeeded in locating a precise parallel for this type of shaped rug. But with surprising consistency, representations of the ruler in Timurid book illustrations are seated upon a small rug or textile that is placed upon a larger rug, whereas their companions are not seated upon a ceremonial smaller rug. The fact that parallels for the design are more likely to be found in architectural ornament rather than rugs argues for an earlier date that one might otherwise assign. The *kitabkhane* served like an atelier for the Timurid court. Designs were precisely developed, to be executed in different media (metalwork, ceramic, book illumination, and architecture).

My current inclination, based upon this initial inquiry, is to consider this ceremonial rug as fit for a ruler, specifically one who ruled in 15th-century Herat, which was at the time the most cultured city of all Asia.