



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



Vol. IX, No. 6 April 9, 2002

Next Meeting: Jeff Spurr on Collecting Rugs and Textiles in late Nineteenth Century Persia: Ronald Graham's Photo Album

According to plan, Saul Borodofsky was to address our joint NERS-Skinner meeting, but due to illness in the family Saul was obliged to cancel. All is not lost, though: Jeff Spurr has volunteered to present a talk that he summarizes as follows:

"In 1897, a young British diplomat was posted to Tehran, where he stayed through 1899. He brought a Kodak camera with him and proceeded to document the various aspects of his experience at the British Legation and of Persia in general, augmented by 101 commercial photographs and 32 professional photographs commissioned by the Legation and perhaps by him personally. Upon leaving Persia for good, he arranged over 400 of these photographs in a complex and telling way in a large and handsome album, which is presently to be found at Harvard's Sackler Museum. Like many European visitors of the era, he accumulated numerous rugs and textiles and his photos document the process and the results, plus a visit he made to Zeigler & Co. manufactory and depot at Sultanabad. The object of this brief talk is to

Next Meeting Details

Date: Friday, April 19

Time: 7 PM. **Please note early start!**

Place: Skinner, Heritage on the Park,
63 Park Plaza, Boston, MA

Pkng: Street and neighboring lots and garages

introduce this album and the photographs of interest to rug and textile collectors."

Jeff is a long-time NERS member with a passionate interest in and encyclopedic knowledge of textiles of all kinds. He has often regaled us with exotic specimens at our Show & Tell meetings, and has last lectured to us on 5/22/98 on the subject of Kashmir shawls. His talk is bound to be both entertaining and informative.

Refreshments will be served and the rugs offered for sale at Skinner's next-day auction will be on display.

Last Meeting: Al Saulniers on New Opportunities in Moroccan Tribal Weavings By Jeff Spurr

Those who gathered at Bemis Hall in Lincoln on Friday the 22nd of March to hear Al Saulniers present a survey of Moroccan weavings were confronted with a whole new order of organization than we are used to: a PowerPoint presentation with customized maps, names and points spelled out, and labels for many of the exhibited rugs, tent dividers, bags and shawls. Ably assisted with some heavy lifting by his wife, Suzanne, Al provided an intriguing survey

of Morocco's diverse and often fascinating weavings. Several people commented after the lecture that they had gained a new appreciation for this tradition. Al covered a wide territory and numerous weaving areas and this writer feels somewhat apologetic about recapitulating most of the survey; however, Al touched upon specific issues as he went and this is indeed written for those who were not there, although

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Visit our website at
www.ne-rugsociety.org

ACOR 6 Registrations still accepted!
See page 7 for details



Last Meeting

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I would like to encourage NERS members to attend more of these valuable introductions to lesser-known weaving traditions.

Al's primary attention was devoted to the tribal (rural and nomadic) weavings of Morocco, predominantly Berber but with some Arab groups included, but he commenced with the only two urban centers that are known to have produced pile rugs in recent times: Rabat (probably since the eighteenth century) and Médiouna (possibly only since the nineteenth century). The former is a city on the west coast, the latter a town only fifteen miles inland from the port of Casablanca, somewhat further south. In each instance, as he pointed out, while no one knows for certain the actual mode of transmission, the influence of Anatolian rugs is clear—so obvious in fact that it seems only reasonable to surmise that actual rugs served as models at some point. The fact that neighboring Algeria was the westernmost province of the Ottoman Empire provides a possible source for those models.

Despite these Anatolian design sources, the Rabat rugs favored a long narrow form appropriate for use in local interiors, those of Médiouna being somewhat less elongated. The two typical Rabat carpets Al showed us via PowerPoint had a hexagonal open field—one with a similarly-shaped central medallion, the other crowded with two hexagonal and two diamond-form medallions, not to mention the riot of minor motifs in each instance. Those of Médiouna tended to feature three or five medallions in an A-B-A or AA-B-AA configuration. The latter rugs recall those of Bergama, among others, and the models for any of them from both places of production would not have had to antedate the first half of the nineteenth century on stylistic grounds. Al also illustrated one Rabat rug representing a type that featured a prayer niche, greatly expanded in size and length. It looked very much like it might have been modeled on a Mucur (Mudjur) prayer rug. Indeed the polychromy and fine detail of Mucur pieces provides something of an analogy to the multiple borders, multiple colors and detailed character of these

rugs. Al also pointed out the obvious: a love of madder red and its substitutes, exceedingly common in Moroccan rugs, and a fair use of indigo.

To a question about datable rugs, Al responded that he had been shown one piece claimed to be of eighteenth century vintage and he had seen a couple of pieces safely dating from the nineteenth century. Evidence of a long tradition of continuous production in the urban environment does not exist. He also said that there was no great evidence of an urban tradition of rug appreciation beyond very basic functional and decorative factors. The rugs were used up and discarded.

Al then turned to rural weavings, commencing with those of the Ouled Bou Sbaa of the southern coastal hinterland who produced flatweaves using the slit tapestry technique and bearing designs that strikingly recall some Anatolian kilims. Anyone reading the article about the Anatolian kilims found in Ethiopia (Martha Henze, *HALI* 118 page 21) should not be surprised to see examples modeled after them being woven in Morocco. He then pictured pile rugs from the same region which, though some of them are organized similarly in horizontal registers, do not betray such a direct filiation to examples from elsewhere. It does appear that some sport a common diamond form that recalls medallions in Rabat rugs and is to be found quite frequently in Moroccan weavings from a variety of locales. This case also provides the first hint of something quite remarkable in Moroccan weavings: the utter unpredictability even within one tribe or region of the styles associated with different techniques or formats, since they usually vary so strikingly.

Al proceeded to address the Boujad region of the Middle Atlas, ethnically Arab, where we were treated to some of the exceedingly bold, erratic and abstract designs to be found in the most startling of Moroccan pile rugs, the sort of thing that people seem either to love or hate. He described the women's shawls of this area as bolder and brighter than others from the Middle Atlas, but they nevertheless reveal the dramatic difference between these more finely

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woven articles of clothing and the rugs. He also illustrated a special and highly elaborate “pilgrim’s blanket” woven in a town that houses a famous shrine to the 16th century Muslim saint Sidi Mohammed el-Chergui. These particular blankets are evidently acquired as testaments to having made this pilgrimage (and, as this author would surmise, given Moroccan patterns of belief, probably considered to be infused with some of the saint’s baraka—“a beneficent force of divine origin, which causes superabundance in the physical sphere and prosperity and happiness in the psychic order” according to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*).

The Beni Guil are particularly significant due to the complementary-woven warp-faced sacks or cushion covers they weave, which contradict the widespread notion that one does not find such weavings in Morocco. Al suggested the presence of Syrian influence in these weavings although this writer did not detect any.

It was at this point that Al introduced what proved to be the most fascinating feature of the evening: his intermittent discussion of the peculiarities of Moroccan weaving—especially knotting—techniques. First he described the “Berber knot” (see illustration below), tied around two warps and displaying three wraps and the protruding ends in front and two wraps in back. It is so contrived that weavers can work on both sides of the rug on a vertical loom and simply turn the knots around to point in the proper direction. This flexibility is achieved at the cost of using lots of wool, the design being very fuzzy when seen on the front.



Berber knot
Illustration from
Peter Stone’s
The Oriental Rug Lexicon
University of Washington
Press,
Seattle(1997)

The rug is often flipped in the summer to display its back, where the design is much clearer.

With the Zemmour region, Al introduced us to Berbers and Berberized Arabs who weave all the accoutrements of the tented, nomadic life such as tent walls or dividers, flatweaves and cushions, saddle rugs, saddle bags and transport and storage sacks. Due to relatively warm weather, there is much use of tapestry weave and pile is kept low. He described a rare type of rug with black and white ground upon which the tribal chief purportedly used to dispense justice. This group also produced mats of date palm, weft twined with embroidered wool faces, and two types of fine women’s blankets, one for weddings and one used as a blanket. As with most of these fine Moroccan women’s blankets, they feature various kinds of weft bands.

Al explained at some point that those groups who live in tents are engaged in transhumance, nomadic behavior that involves a yearly round, moving with the seasons between winter lowland pastures and summer highland pastures. The typical tent had about eight to ten people living in it.

Here Al departed from his survey to point out that Brooke Pickering has described the presence of Moroccan rugs at Frank Lloyd Wright’s Falling Water house (Bear Run, PA), including two Zemmour, two Beni Ouaraine and one from the plains of Marrakesh, and the general enthusiasm for Moroccan weavings of many of the exponents of high modernism, including Le Corbusier, Picasso, Braque, Gris, Leger, Alvar Aalto, and the Eames brothers. It is quite a testimony in their favor that Wright, who was something of a control freak and believed in complete design of a house and its contents and holding its tenants to fidelity to his purposes, should depart from products of his own genius to employ Moroccan rugs in that famous house. This provides another instance where “tribal” textiles have proved appealing to the modernist sensibility, which, of course, some collectors find very reassuring.

Next came the Beni Ouaraine, Berbers of the High Atlas. Although most live a nomadic exist-

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ence, some occupy stable domiciles whose interiors are graced with dramatic painted decoration on a white ground. They create deep-pile bedding rugs in white and black, often using a weft looped technique, of such a size that a person can lie on one half and fold the rest over him or her. They also weave elaborate women's shawls, decorated with weft wrapping or floating wefts where the long ends form a natural fleece on the back. According to Al, the best use flax instead of cotton along with wool. He also introduced us to the local women's head scarf and tie, the former tie-dyed. These are rare and were evidently not worn much after 1900 and only identified after 1998. As a class, they relate to other very finely woven tie-dyed textiles (for tie-dyeing works best on fine materials) from other Berber groups.

Al then introduced us quickly to other Berber groups from the Middle Atlas, the Aït Sgougou, the Guerouane, who use a Spanish knot over two warps, and the Zaiane, who weave a type of rug with pile of two lengths (the two levels serving to trap heat better), and elaborately woven tent walls. The latter are used to separate the men's section from the women's within the tent and are suspended from the tent's low ceiling.

He then proceeded to address the Aït Ouaouzquite, Berbers of the High Atlas, weavers of a wide range of interesting textiles, including handsome and complexly-decorated flatweaves, with lots of slit tapestry weave and weft twining; finely-woven women's shawls; and that most striking and technically amazing of Moroccan weavings, the Akhnif, or man's hooded cape, with its arresting, apotropaic red eye, which Al said was worn by local Jewish and Muslim traders alike.

The Aït Seghrouchen are Berber inhabitants of the Saharan foothills who weave deep-pile bedding rugs and tent hangings with what Al referred to as "organic motifs," by which he seemed to mean that if you took the common diamond-form and other motifs from other weaving areas and proceeded to dissolve them to a greater or lesser degree, you would end up with the peculiar decorative qualities of these

rugs, which might be considered to reside at the end of a long design devolution (see illustration below).

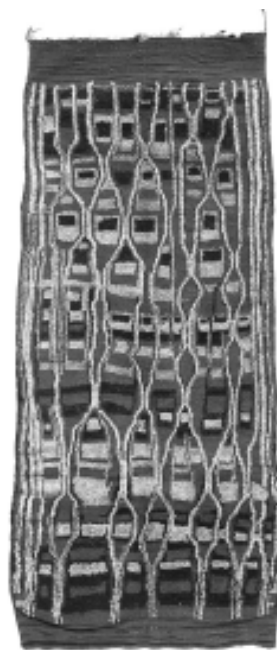
Al described one tent wall hanging in which he found a full fifteen different knot varieties. He cited a shawl woven by these people that featured a knot that is begun at one point but only completed after two weft shoots have been inserted. Later, he described a weaving with Berber knots at the ends and symmetric knots in the center. At several other points in the lecture, Al pointed out striking variations of knot types between rugs and within rugs. It appears that this is one of the truly distinctive features of this broad tradition, at striking variance to the rug-weaving heartlands of the Middle East, with their usual choice between the "Persian" or the "Turkish" knot types and local adherence to one or the other. It has been suggested that in some of the more dramatic cases, the weaver first "experiments" with various knots and then settles for one; however, according to Al the physical evidence suggests otherwise, with most such weavings exhibiting this variation throughout. Al also pointed out distinctive features such as weft banding in pile rugs, only visible on the back.

At several points Al addressed issues of dyes, stating that most natural dyes had been given up by the 1920s or 1930s. For example, the inhabitants of

the Zemmour region had employed a clear, bright yellow in their early weavings, but this slipped out of use circa 1930.

The formal portion of the lecture ended with a description of a specific group of henna-dyed veils from the

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Moroccan deep-pile bedding rug from Al Saulniers's article 'Splendid Isolation, Tribal Weavings of the Aït Bou Ichauouen Nomads,' HALI 110 pp. 106-113 (May-June 2000)



Collectors' Fragments, Part 2 Edited by Ann Nicolas

QUESTION: Can you share a memorable experience that influenced you in collecting rugs or textiles?

It was our first shopping visit to Istanbul in 1988, and we made friends with a well-recommended dealer in a tiny shop adjoining the Grand Bazaar who had old things. Over two hours and untold liters of (gag) apple tea, my wife Margie and I witnessed a panoply of fairly uninteresting things unfold only to be rejected with the assertion: "It's very nice, but do you have anything older?" Finally, the patient dealer concluded, "Perhaps if you came back tomorrow we might have something excellent to interest you." So we returned. Once again the dusty parade began and the polite objections were voiced, until suddenly I saw the most remarkable rug being unrolled before my eyes. Its price was expressed as "non-negotiable," which was of small concern to me because the figure was quite reasonable, and the deal was consummated directly. As we walked back to our hotel with the treasure tucked under my arm, Margie said, "You know, I was watching your face when they unrolled it." "So??" I said. "So," she replied, "I think it would be a good idea if you never played poker." Later we discovered that the rug had been offered to an American dealer friend of ours a month earlier for more than double the price; reinforcing Woody Allen's credo that often just showing up is all it takes to succeed. The rug, by the way, is the one that embellishes the cover of the NERS 1991 exhibition catalog *Through the Collector's Eye*.

Mark Hopkins

I have always been attracted to Caucasian embroideries, but could never quite define why—still can't really. I do seem to be drawn to the bold and enlarged graphic presentation, primarily of one element, but the colors were often not great or the drawing seemed stiff etc... I never saw one that I HAD to have even though I'd seen stunning examples at the Textile Museum in DC, in the Kirchheim Collection

in Hamburg, and in galleries in London. Many years later I had the chance to buy a large Caucasian rug found at a rural auction in New England and sold to Tom Caruso. It was woven without any border design and similar to one other in the V&A. It is a powerful piece with a close affinity to the embroideries I so enjoy. I could not have guessed that my first "Caucasian embroidery" would be a rug!

Judy Smith

A few years ago I bought a small yellow Chinese mat at a Skinner auction for a very reasonable price. This Ning Hsia seat cover has a large blue dragon in the middle with four smaller dragons in the corners. It looked splendid draped on the back of my living room chair.

Two days later while browsing through the remaindered table at a Harvard Square bookstore, I found George O'Bannon's book on oriental rugs. Leafing through it, I found a picture that was very similar to my new Chinese seat cover. I brought the book home and began comparing my piece to the picture. Detail after detail, they matched even to the raveled threads on the ends. When I called Skinner they confirmed that my purchase had been published in the O'Bannon book.

What are the chances of buying a new piece and then accidentally finding its picture in a book two days later? And both at a good price too!

Gillian Richardson

At the 1990 ICOC in San Francisco there was an exhibition of oriental rugs in a cavernous old building at Fort Mason. We were just beginning to collect and here in one place were hundreds of good and great collectable rugs categorized by origin. We spent several afternoons going through the exhibit again and again. We marveled at the diversity of the patterns, the intensity of the colors, and the expressive graphics. It was overwhelming.

We left San Francisco knowing that rugs and

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Collectors' Fragments

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textiles were for us. But we needed to focus our collecting efforts—our nineteenth century worker's cottage is not as large as Fort Mason. We have since become avid collectors of small South Persian pieces, which cover much of our available wall space.

Richard Blumenthal and Ann Nicholas

In 1973, Kate and I had been in Newburyport for two years restoring antique homes. During that time, we became friendly with Bob Adamsky, an ex-NASA scientist who also restored antique homes. He had a broad interest in antiques that ranged from architectural elements, to American furniture, to oriental rugs. It was Kate who first wanted an oriental rug, and we naturally went to Bob. Our first purchase was a rather awful 8 x 10 Shiraz with blurry colors. This took care of the living room floor, but I became fascinated with a stack of 4 x 6 rugs with clear, crisp colors and fine drawing. With each thin rug laid out flat, the stack still reached my thigh. The prices ranged from \$25 to \$175. I purchased sev-

eral. I learned that this stack was of 19th century Shirvans.

John Collins

Editor's note: John Collins went on to become an eminent dealer in antique oriental rugs.

My parents always had wall-to-wall carpeting in all our houses when I was growing up. When they retired, they bought an old home in North Carolina with beautiful wood floors—not the thing to cover with carpeting. They began shopping for oriental rugs for the new house. One day while shopping with them, I saw a small rug with deep reds and blues that “spoke to me.” The dealer assured me that it was an antique Kurdish piece, and I happily bought it. Sometime later I realized that it was of modern-day Pakistani production.

I now collect Baluch rugs, but I've kept that first purchase. It's a reminder of what first dazzled me about oriental rugs—the wonderful deep colors and the fascinating patterns.

Ed Berkhoff

NERS Items

NERS Website Update. New material continues to be added to the NERS website. A “members only” section that requires a user ID and password to gain access has been opened. This private area includes an NERS-Leads Forwarding Program, assorted web server statistics, and an NERS website search utility. This area of the website is also used to experiment with new features and to demonstrate them to NERS members prior to adding them to the “public” site pages. An “NERS Member Login” icon can be found at the bottom of the NERS website “Home” page. If you are interested in accessing the members only area, please send an email to webadmin@ne-rugsociety.org and you'll be provided

with a user ID and password.

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Upcoming Rug Events

NERS 2001/2 Meetings:

5/18: Picnic and Show & Tell.

Auctions:

Skinner, Boston, 4/20

Nagel, Stuttgart, 5/7

Rippon Boswell, Wiesbaden, 5/11.

Conferences:

ACOR 6 is scheduled for 4/25-28 in Indianapolis. **Registrations are still being accepted!** Refer to www.acor-rugs.org for information.

The tenth **ICOC** is scheduled for 4/17-21/03 in Washington, DC. See their website at www.icoc-international.org.

Tours:

St. Petersburg, Russia, sponsored by the Textile Museum, 5/7-16. Tour of the city's many historical buildings and museums, including carpet and textile collections. The famous Pazyryk carpet (ca. 400 BC) will be seen. The trip leader is Elena Tsareva, the internationally renowned expert and curator of Central Asia collections at the Russian Ethnographic

Museum, and recent NERS lecturer. Contact the Textile Museum at 202-667-0411 or email www.textilemuseum.org/trav.htm for information.

Exhibits and Fairs:

Challenging Assumptions, the Rugs of Women from the Villages of Hamadan Province, at A. E. Runge, Jr. Oriental Rugs showroom, 108 Main Street, Yarmouth, Maine, 6/8-29. This exhibit and sale will highlight the 75 village rugs illustrated in NERS member Tad Runge's recently published book *One Woman One Weft*. This exhibition is the first of its kind in the US to display this well known but unheralded category of oriental rug. It is the largest exhibit of Persian Hamadans ever undertaken. Its goal is to prove that the poor village women who wove these rugs, in their homes, to supplement their families' meager earnings, created imaginatively designed and very attractive high quality rugs during the period from the late 1800s until 1940. For additional information call 207-846-9000 or visit Tad's website www.rungerugs.com.

HALI Antique Carpet and Textile Art Fair, London, 6/6-9.

Do you need a ride to ACOR? Tad Runge is driving to ACOR in his Company vehicle. He has a second seat and would like to offer a ride to an NERS member to be picked up somewhere north of Boston. Leaving early on April 24th, arriving about noon on the 25th. Call 207-846-9000.

The New England Rug Society is an informal, non-profit organization of people interested in enriching their knowledge and appreciation of antique oriental rugs and textiles. Its meetings are held six to eight times a year. Annual membership dues are: Single \$45, Couple \$65, Supporting \$90, Patron \$120. Membership information or renewal forms can be obtained by writing to **New England Rug Society, P.O. Box 582, Lincoln, MA 01773**, calling Mark Hopkins at 781-259-9444, or emailing him at mopkins@netway.com.

Website www.ne-rugsociety.org

NERS 2001/2 Steering Committee:

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Bob Alimi

Julia Bailey

Yonathan Bard

John Clift

Tom Hannaher

Sheryl Read

Gillian Richardson

Janet Smith

Jeff Spurr



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Anti-Atlas, with their elegant and unpredictable designs, augmented by the introduction of lines of dye-resisting cotton into the wool weave. Although these were new to the market as of about 1995, their popularity with collectors has already led to fakes being made for sale to the unsuspecting.

With most of these mainly Berber rural and nomadic weaving traditions we have moved outside any obvious external influence, where only the occasional stepped diamond form reminds us of a possible connection to Rabat or, at least, a participation in a common tradition. The commonalities are relatively clear: typically fine women's shawls and woolen garments in general; frequently elaborate flatweaves, more often than not featuring a variety of weft and extra-weft manipulations, typically of a very disciplined nature; and uninhibited, sometimes seemingly randomly-decorated pile rugs at striking variance to the control exhibited in many of the other weavings.

Some of this has to do with what technique permits and denies, but these Moroccan traditions seem to take delight in pushing the limits.

Al was at pains to say at several points that interest in Moroccan weavings has exploded in just the past few years, particularly in Europe, and that several obscure types of shawls, head scarves and other weavings have been recognized by collectors and dealers only very recently. One result has been a significant rise in price for many of these items, although Al considers many of them to be as yet undervalued.

After the lecture, we were treated to an impressive show and tell, with many weavings having been laid out beforehand on tables so that the audience could circulate and read the labels associated with them. This portion highlighted the sheer size and weight of some of the pile pieces and the great effort that our speaker and his wife had gone to in order to make the evening the highly informative success that it was.

