



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



Vol. 29 No. 1 January/February 2022

<https://www.ne-rugsociety.org>

February 12 Webinar Preview Tom Hannaher, “Painting with Scissors: Mola Art of the Kuna Indians”



Webinar Details

Date and Time: Saturday, February 12
1 p.m. Eastern Time

Venue: Your desktop, laptop, or tablet

Directions: If you are an NERS member or have registered for a previous NERS webinar, you will receive an email invitation to this one. To view it, you must register beforehand via the link in the email. Non-members who have never before attended an NERS webinar should email jean.hoffman@jeanhoffman.com to get an invitation.



1. Tom Hannaher

In our first webinar of 2022, co-sponsored by the Textile Museum Associates of Southern California, Tom Hannaher (1) will present “Painting With Scissors: Mola Art of the Kuna Indians.”

Molas are panels used in blouses (2) worn by women of the Kuna (Guna) culture of Panama and Colombia. Employing a combination of appliqué, reverse appliqué, and embroidery, Kuna women create dazzling imagery based on Kuna mythology, customs, and daily life. They also seek graphic inspiration from non-Kuna sources, ranging from political posters to cartoons to advertising campaigns. Tom’s presentation will focus on pre-1970 examples and will include a number of unpublished masterpieces, some from the early part of the twentieth century (3).

Based in Santa Fe and Marblehead, Mass., Tom is an entrepreneur, inventor, and collector of the art of indigenous peoples. A veteran of the consumer electronics industry, he founded ZVOX Audio, a company credited with introducing the first-ever sound systems with built-in hearing-aid technology.

Tom started collecting rugs and textiles in the 1980s and exhibited his collection of pre-Columbian coca bags at

2. Kuna mola blouse with sea-urchin design



3. Early 20th-century mola featuring abstract men or lizards

ACOR in 2006. An avid collector of molas, he has probably the world’s largest collection of vintage art by the Kuna culture of Panama, including molas, carvings, ledger drawings, and jewelry. He is the founder of the Kuna Art Society, which has over 2,000 followers on Facebook, and is the author of the forthcoming book *Kuna Art*.

March 26 Webinar Preview: Alan Rothblatt, “Rare Turkmen Asmalyks”



1. Presenter Alan Rothblatt, holding a Tekke “bird” asmalyk

Of all Turkmen weavings, asmalyks—trappings that adorn the flanks of the camel carrying the bride on her wedding day—have been the most captivating to collectors. This webinar, “Rare Turkmen Asmalyks,” will present a selection of the best asmalyks from the various Turkmen tribes and will provide insights into some of these highly desired items.

The majority of Turkmen collectors share a well-developed trait: the ability to focus on the tiny details of Turkmen rugs that help determine age and tribal origin and that distinguish the greatest examples. Alan Rothblatt **(1)** refined this ability during his medical career as a minimally invasive surgeon. He acquired his first Turkmen weaving over thirty years ago and has been an active participant and frequent presenter at meetings of the International Collectors of Turkmen Carpets, in Hamburg, Germany, as well as at the Rug Collectors' Weekend, in California.

Alan's other passion is adventure travel. During his last sabbatical he lived with the Kazakh eagle hunters in the Altai Mountains, and then journeyed in search of the great Tekke “bird” asmalyks that he will highlight in this webinar.

Webinar Details

Date and Time: Saturday, March 26
1 p.m. Eastern Time

Venue: Your desktop, laptop, or tablet

Directions: If you are an NERS member or have registered for a previous NERS webinar, you will receive an email invitation to this one. To view it, you must register beforehand via the link in the email. Non-members who have never before attended an NERS webinar should email jean.hoffman@jeanhoffman.com to get an invitation.



2. Chodor asmalyk, 18th century, de Young Museum, Gift of George and Marie Hecksher, 2000.186.8



3. Details of Tekke “bird” asmalyk (l) and Chodor asmalyk (r)

As Precious as Gold: Exhibition of Ballard Carpets at the Currier Museum

by Julia Bailey



1. Museumgoers view Gördes and Kula prayer rugs in the foreground and a Qajar tent and Tekke main carpet in the far gallery



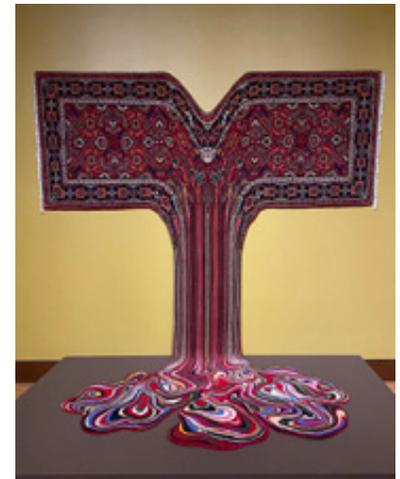
2. Fragmentary quatrefoil Ushak, 16th century



3. Medallion rug, probably Konya, 17th century



4. Prayer rug, Central Anatolia, late 18th–early 19th century



5. Faig Ahmed, *Siddhartha Gautama*, knotted pile, 2017

The Currier Museum, in Manchester, N.H., has seeming acres of gallery space available for special exhibitions. Through February 27, in a boon to New England rug lovers, these galleries will continue to be graced by an outstanding selection of carpets, plus a Qajar Persian pavilion tent (1), that famed collector James F. Ballard and his heirs donated to the St. Louis Art Museum. (They're all catalogued in Walter Denny and Tom Farnham's 2016 *The Carpet and the Connoisseur*.)

Ballard's preference for Turkish carpets is evident at the Currier. A so-called small-pattern Holbein, three Lottos, and a spectacular quatrefoil Ushak fragment (2) are among the "classical" Turkish offerings. The many prayer rugs include top-notch examples from Gördes and Kula—types that Ballard favored in his early collecting days (1). Less stereotypical and more entrancing to contemporary eyes—mine, at least—are two Central Anatolian rugs: a small but radiant medallion rug (3) and a powerful if decidedly

eccentric prayer rug, its plain (and much-restored) mihrab nipped by triangular indentations and its spandrels harboring wonderfully weird horizontal motifs (4).

But Turkish rugs aren't the only attraction: a fifteenth-century Spanish "large-pattern Holbein" carpet fragment, Damascus "chessboard" and Cairene Mamluk rugs, and a beautifully rendered if reduced Kirman "vase" carpet widen the geographic scope of the show. Although they were little favored in his day, Ballard even bought Turkmen rugs; his lush-piled Ersari rug and Tekke main carpet (1) are also on view.

Complementing the Ballard rugs are two of the Currier Museum's own holdings: a 1669 painting by Dutch artist Jan de Bray that depicts a long-unidentified type of rug only recently assigned to southern India, and a newly acquired and freakishly inventive "melting" pile rug, titled *Siddhartha Gautama*, by the Azerbaijani designer Faig Ahmed (5).

For museum hours, directions, and further information, see <https://currier.org/visit/>.

Webinar Review: Brian Morehouse on Yastik Designs

by Julia Bailey



Twenty-five years ago, in 1996, attendees at the eighth International Conference on Oriental Carpets (ICOC), in Philadelphia, saw a first-of-its-kind exhibition

consisting entirely of small-scale, purpose-woven Turkish pile rugs called yastiks. Both the exhibition and its companion catalogue, *Yastiks: Cushion Covers and Storage Bags of Anatolia*, were the work of Brian Morehouse. On Sunday, November 7, viewers from thirty countries joined a New England Rug Society webinar titled “Yastiks: A Comparative Study of the Designs of Published and Unpublished Examples,” in which Brian revisited and updated his past research.

For those unfamiliar with yastiks, Brian first reviewed their form—small pile rugs, usually measuring a bit under 3' x 2'—and their use—most commonly in Turkish domestic interiors, covering cushions placed horizontally atop *sedir*,

or sitting platforms **(1)**. (The Turkish word *yastik* means “cushion.”) He noted that, among old yastiks, he had found no two that were precisely identical. Throughout Anatolia, yastiks were woven by women of different ethnicities and socio-economic status.

A feature of many yastiks, particularly those from Central Anatolia, is a series of lappets—arched projections—running across each end. Although the original source of these motifs remains unclear, Brian pointed out similar motifs on a Mamluk embroidered cushion cover **(2)** and a Gujarati block-printed cotton fragment **(3)**, both acquired from Fustat, Egypt.

Some knotted-pile yastiks adopt their designs from the luxurious velvet cushion covers made for wealthy Ottoman clients from the seventeenth century onwards. For instance, one arguably old yastik **(4)**, recently on the market, shares telling features with a velvet **(5)** that the Metropolitan Museum dates to the eighteenth century.



1. Franz Hermann, *Turkish Harem Scene (det.)*, 1654, Pera Museum, showing velvet or pile yastiks on *sedir*



2. Remains of a cushion cover, silk embroidery on linen, Mamluk Egypt, 1390–1470, Ashmolean Museum EA1984.72

3. Block-printed cotton cloth, Gujarat, 950–1400, Ashmolean Museum EA1990.1082 **4. Pile yastik, probably 18th century, sold by Austria Auction Company, Apr. 25, 2020, lot 37** **5. Ottoman velvet cushion cover, 18th century, Metropolitan Museum 91.1.41**

After this introduction, Brian turned to the main centers of Anatolian yastik weaving, moving from west to east and illustrating his tour with yastiks from his own and other collections.

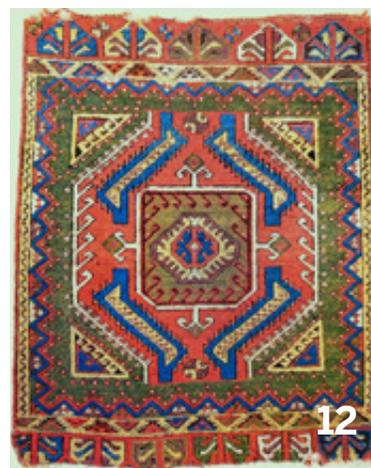
Certain yastiks from Ezine and Çanakkale, in western Anatolia, reuse segmented elements from the central medallions of so-called Ghirlandaio rugs, reconfiguring and repositioning these elements. A group of yastiks from Dazkırı and the Menderes River Valley exhibit an eight-lobed medallion with added pendants (6), as seen earlier on Ottoman velvet cushion covers (7), and have corner brackets with five (or sometimes fewer) projecting buds. Other Menderes River Valley yastiks feature corners with projecting buds, floral forms composed of back-to-back “crescents,” and prominent Ottoman carnations. A puzzling blue-ground yastik with an overall field pattern of carnations-within-tulips (8) was clearly modeled after an eighteenth-century Western Anatolian rug (9) but has end panels and lappets typical of Mucur, in Central Anatolia.

Among Central Anatolian yastiks, the one depicted

on the cover of Brian’s book (10) is an early example from a group assigned to Karapınar; Brian showed how, over time, later yastiks of this type acquire extraneous filler motifs or undergo design simplification.

Yastiks from Ayrancı, near Karaman, are identifiable by “butterfly” border motifs and central medallions surrounded, ghostlike, by second medallions (11). Another group of Central Anatolian yastiks derive their medallions from the field motifs of so-called Holbein carpets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Weavers can also borrow from the border patterns of much older Anatolian rugs: Brian illustrated a yastik whose cruciform field motifs are reconfigurations of the floral palmettes on a centuries-earlier rug.

Numerous yastiks (Brian showed several examples from the Mucur area) derive their design—a central medallion embraced by four jagged-edged, or *saz*, leaves (12)—from seventeenth-century Ottoman velvets. Mucur is also a source of yastiks with vertical, multicolored stripes (13).



6. Dazkırı-area yastik, compared to 7. Ottoman velvet cushion cover, 17th century

8. Blue-ground yastik with carnations in tulips, compared to 9. Western Anatolian rug (det.), 18th century

10. Karapınar yastik 11. Ayrancı yastik 12. Mucur-area yastik with *saz* leaves 13. Mucur-area yastik with stripes



14. Central Anatolian yastik with medallion featuring inward-pointing "arrowheads" and white "brackets"



15. Central Anatolian yastik with branching-plant medallion and differing end panels



16. Central Anatolian yastik with medallion dominated by reciprocal carnations

Weavers in different villages of Central Anatolia produced yastiks of similar design: Brian illustrated three disparate examples all featuring inward-pointing "arrowheads" and white "brackets" within medallions surrounded by hooks (14).

Probably made in a single village, however, and possibly even by the same weaver, were a pair of blue-ground yastiks with non-matching end panels and stepped red medallions containing leafy branching plants (15), as seen on Mucur prayer rugs. Prayer rugs inspired other yastik designs as well: Brian showed one example that "pilfered" (his word) its coloration, diamond-shaped green medallion, and sprouting plant from a contemporary prayer rug made in the same area.

A different group of yastiks borrow more selectively, and from a source more remote in both distance and time: the large carnations that dominate their fields (16), Brian maintained, were inspired by the carnations suspended from the central arches of older, Western Anatolian coupled-column prayer rugs.

Rugs assigned to Şarkışla, in eastern Anatolia, have a number of overall designs utilizing concentric, hook-edged medallions. Brian termed one of these designs "baklava," after its suggestion of the diamond-cut pastries, and showed three yastiks deploying "baklava" motifs in two-medallion, three-medallion (17), or multi-medallion formats.



17. Eastern Anatolian "baklava-design" yastik with its three central diamonds emphasized by color



18. Eastern Anatolian yastik with green pendant-medallion, Malatya area



19. Lush-piled Eastern Anatolian yastik with prominent cruciform motif in its central medallion



20. One of Brian's favorites: Western Anatolian yastik (cat. no. 6 in his *Yastiks* book)

Concluding Brian's survey of eastern Anatolian yastiks were other representative examples: one from the Şavak-Elaziğ region featuring four geometric hooked medallions; another from the Malatya area with a green medallion and attached pendants (18); and a third—he wasn't sure where from—with lush pile and a prominent cruciform motif at its center (19).

In a coda to his presentation, Brian invited his audience members to attend an in-person event of which he is the organizer: Rug Collectors' Weekend, scheduled for April 26–28, 2022, in Santa Ynez, California. For further information, he encouraged viewers to contact him at morehousebri@aol.com.

Following Brian's talk, Jean Hoffman ran the Q& A, posing viewers' many questions. Several concerned the origin of lappets, to which Brian—referring to a discussion with Jon Thompson—admitted that he had no definitive answer. About why lappets were less common in Western Anatolian rugs, Brian surmised that weavers of that region favored designs associated with their Greek heritage, whereas lappets might have been preferred by Turkic peoples farther east.

Are yastiks more brightly colored than rugs? Not in general, Brian replied; perhaps that impression was from their colors being juxtaposed in a small area. What was the oldest yastik Brian knew of? In his book [cat. 101], he had included an example dated 1247 (1831); there were perhaps older, undated ones.

Were yastiks woven for use or for sale? Both, Brian replied; they may first have been made for home use, but as European tourism grew and Turkish dealers migrated to the West, they increasingly became items of commerce.

Were yastiks made by nomads? Brian declared that this topic deserved its own webinar, but that in his view most were woven by villagers, whereas nomads largely produced flatweaves. Were yastiks made outside Anatolia, for instance in the Balkans? Generally not in pile technique, he replied.

Some questions zeroed in on specific designs. Were "Memling gul" yastiks woven in eastern Anatolia? Brian noted that these guls, also found in Turkmen weaving, were common only to western Anatolian yastiks. Where were the yastiks with large carnations made? By process of elimination, Brian attributed them to Central Anatolia, perhaps the Konya-Lâdik area.

Finally, what was Brian's favorite yastik? A bit like picking a favorite child, Brian said, but reluctantly settled on two in his own collection: the Central Anatolian yastik (10) gracing the cover of his book, and a thick-piled western Anatolian example (20) that he had shown at the beginning of his talk.

Brian's presentation was recorded and, like our other webinars, is available in full to all members—yet another enticement to viewers near and far to join the New England Rug Society.

Webinar Review: Jim Burns's Six-Decade Perspective on Collecting Caucasian Rugs

by Julia Bailey



In a two-part webinar, on December 4 and 11, longtime Seattle collector Jim Burns treated viewers from twenty-five countries to a survey of his Caucasian rugs, many added to his collection since his *The Caucasus: Traditions in Weaving* came out in 1987.

In all, Jim showed more than a hundred of his own rugs, plus comparative examples—far too many to describe individually, much less illustrate, in this review. Like other NERS-produced webinars, however, his presentations were recorded and are available to all our members.

Jim's collecting, he explained, is focused on rugs made in the century between the fall of the Safavid dynasty, in 1722, and the subjugation of the Caucasus by Russia in the early 1800s. During this era, semi-autonomous regional khans were the de facto rulers—and main weaving patrons—of the area.

The first session of Jim's webinar was devoted to rugs from the West and South Caucasus. Armenian rugs, he noted, can be identified by inscriptions, Gregorian-calendar (rather than Islamic) dates, the presence of what he called "lobed crosses," and in some instances the use of kermes dye. One of his examples, with a lively "marching peacock" border, was inscribed "8 1809," this date followed by the characteristic crosses (1).



1. Armenian rug (detail) with Gregorian date and lobed crosses in top border

Jim then turned to rugs from the western Caucasus, using the convenient if not entirely accurate nomenclature of Karimov and Schürmann. Among the Kazaks in his collection were two Borjalus, with traditional wide, latchhook borders; two Fachralos, with boxy central medallions; and a spacious Karachov with the characteristic "2-1-2" design: four small rectangles, each containing nine stars, surrounding the large central medallion (2). Having acquired this superb early specimen, Jim noted, he sold off two lesser Karachovs that he had previously collected.

Because of its border, Jim considered his Star Kazak to be a Karachov, and to be a tribal rather than a workshop rug.

Sewan Kazaks have blue cotton or wool wefts and garden-derived designs; showing three of decreasing age, Jim lamented the loss over time of their "archaic flavor."

Rugs from the South Caucasus tend to be longer and narrower than those from the West Caucasus, and to have shorter pile. Jim's earliest example was a fragment from a carpet once of palatial size, its large medallion so "raw" and "archaic" that he thought it must date to the sixteenth century. A somewhat later fragment had a workshop version of this medallion, plus a "sunburst" or "eagle" device inherited by many nineteenth-century rugs.



2. Green-field Karachov Kazak

Jim's other South Caucasian rugs included an apparently unique prayer rug with rare forms that he read as eagles and scorpions (3); a craggy Kasim Ushag; a Persianate rug with horizontally oriented lotus flowers; two cotton-wedged triple-compartment rugs; and a dragon-variant sumak, its field replete with tribal ornaments. By their border motifs, Jim identified as Kurdish two rugs from the South Caucasus (4).

Following the Russian conquest, he then explained,

much of the populace of Moghan emigrated south to northern Persia and joined the Shahsavan. Of Moghan rugs, the most typical have yellow fields with flower-filled lattices and distinctive border devices (5) that help identify Moghans with other field designs (6).

Jim began the second session of his webinar, on rugs of the eastern Caucasus, with a historical introduction to Shirvan—a wealthy, non-mountainous, and much-contested province. Among its luxury products was saffron, which Jim



3. Early and apparently unique South Caucasian prayer rug



5. Moghan floral-lattice rug (detail) with characteristic border motifs



4. South Caucasian rug (detail) with border motifs favored by Kurdish weavers



6. Moghan rug (detail) with animal and human figures in the field and a typical Moghan border



7. Silk-foundation palmette-and-arabesque carpet, ca. 1700



8. Marasali prayer rug, with border detail (inset)



9. "Traditional" Shirvan (detail) with excellent colors

said was used as a carpet dye. The "golden era" of Shirvan, at least for rug weaving, extended from 1735 to 1815. But among Jim's rugs, a glorious arabesque-and-palmette carpet with a silk foundation, carbon dated to 1697, was his lead-off example (7), followed by a fragment that echoed the medallion and borders of a sixteenth-century central-medallion carpet in the Bardini Museum.

Of the three white-ground prayer rugs Jim showed, two had flower-filled lattice designs—reflecting, he maintained, Caucasian weavers' love of nature. One of these was a fine, silk-wuffed Marasali (8)—Jim declared it "best of type"—with the characteristic yellow-ground border containing motifs he interpreted as geese (8, inset).

A "traditional" Shirvan with latchhook medallions (9) displayed the superb colors indicative of expensive dyes; another, whose large-blossom field design would reappear throughout the nineteenth century, had an intricate border pattern absent from later, commercialized Shirvan rugs.

An Akstafa boasted open-mouthed peacocks, camels with saddlecloths and standing riders, and abstract, square motifs enclosing outward-pointing arrows, which Jim identified as "heraldic device[s] of the khans." The same devices recurred



10. Kuba village rug with *harshang*-pattern elements

in two more of his Shirvans. Three Bijovs—a pile rug and two sumaks—all had wide, ascending designs.

Moving north to the Kuba district, Jim first presented a fragment of a large workshop rug with a *harshang*, or “crab,” pattern (he didn’t use either term), containing “cogged” rosettes, palmettes, and tilted trapezoids with projecting lilies. The design, he said, had migrated from Herat to northwestern Iran and thence to the Caucasus, where it inspired both khan-commissioned and village (10) rugs, examples of which Jim then showed.

A white-ground “proto-Perepedil,” with its bold and spacious ram’s-horn motifs, compared favorably to a more cramped and conventional Perepedil prayer rug of circa 1850. Likewise, a Konagend prayer rug dated 1834



11. Early Konagend rug, with field elements suggesting falconers (inset)

was rigidly stylized compared to an eighteenth-century Konagend (11); the earlier rug allowed Jim to interpret the heretofore puzzling blue-and-white field pattern as a series of gloved falconers holding their birds of prey (11, inset).

Two yellow-ground Alpan Kubas—a pile rug and a sumak—both had multiple medallions surrounded by diagonally oriented hexagonal devices with clawlike appendages (conceivably geometrized descendants of the “crabs” on Jim’s early Kuba workshop fragment).

There was a lesson to be learned from a harmoniously colored Kuba vase-rug fragment that Jim had recently bought, for a mere \$550, from a Skinner auction. With contemporary paintings selling in the tens of millions, he said, rug lovers are lucky to have their preferred (and in his mind superior) art form still so affordable.

Jim characterized the rugs of mountainous Daghestan as “rougher,” “stiffer,” and “more tribal looking” than other East Caucasian rugs. A case in point was a white-ground, floral-lattice prayer rug with an admirably tall arch: more coarsely knotted but denser than its Shirvan relatives because of its depressed warps, it had an archaic border not seen elsewhere.



12. Exceptional verneh (detail) with spotted dragons

From Baku, on the Caspian, came rugs with a distinctive palette. Their standard design elements are botchs, diagonally striped minor borders, and stepped corners. Rugs of Talish, the southernmost area of the eastern Caucasus, are typically long and narrow, with plain fields and main borders consisting of one large motif—a flowerhead in the earliest examples and the “Talish rosette” in later ones—alternating with a quartet of small floral forms. Rugs attributed to Lenkoran, the capital of the Talish province, have escutcheon-like medallions that seem to beg for zoomorphic interpretation: Jim said a friend reads them as turtles that have swallowed centipedes.

Jim concluded his presentation with a half-verneh (12). Within its intricate border, cheerily spotted dragons wrap their tails around miniature camels. In 1970, Jim tracked down this extraordinary weaving in Leningrad. “I was really fortunate to find it,” he admitted, “but if you use a lot of shoe leather, travel a lot, and look at a lot of rugs, you can be rewarded sometimes.”

Webinar attendees’ questions and comments, posed by Jean Hoffman, followed both parts of Jim’s webinar. One audience member in the first session asked why later Kazaks were “congested.” Jim suspected Russian commercialization led to design deterioration. Another questioner wondered why Jim considered his Star Kazak “tribal.” Jim thought its border was of tribal origin, and noted that its appearance and weave were different from workshop Star Kazaks.

Why did the presence of crosses—simple ornaments—imply that a rug was Armenian? Jim conceded that rugs with these motifs could have been made by Azeri Turks as well as Armenians, but that in a particular rug of his the repeated crosses in both field and border suggested that it was made for an Armenian church.

Can old Caucasian rugs be dated by their depiction in European paintings? No, Jim said; unlike Turkish rugs they don’t appear in western paintings. The Caucasus was far more closed to trade than was Ottoman Turkey.

Were the little people and animals in Caucasian rugs put there merely to appeal to Western taste? No, Jim said; although such folk figures don’t appear on old workshop carpets, village weavers liked to personalize their rugs, often adding family portraits as well as evil-eye-averting symbols.

Why, a questioner in the second session asked, did Jim think saffron was used in rug dyeing, since it was fugitive as well as expensive? Jim maintained that saffron produced a more intense and beautiful yellow than did less expensive and more widely used weld.

According to another participant, Jon Thompson had pronounced Shirvan and Kuba rugs indistinguishable. Jim, however, differentiated them by their border designs, coloration, and wool quality—Kuba rugs being more velvety.

Referring to the “geese” in the border of Jim’s Marasali, a different attendee stated that on the earliest Marasalis these motifs were directly copied from Kashmir shawl borders depicting rosebuds. Jim stuck to his guns about what the weaver of his Marasali had intended to represent.

A final question concerned the source of red dyes in Jim’s rugs. Madder, for the most part, Jim replied; master dyers could produce a host of colors from this easily grown plant. Armenians sometimes used the insect dye kermes, but that dyestuff was rarer because the bug’s range was limited to the area around Mount Ararat.

NERS thanks Jim (and his technical-support team) for a marathon webinar that let all of us, in his words, “look at a lot of rugs”—extraordinary, discerningly collected rugs—while kindly sparing us the need to “use a lot of shoe leather.”

A Verified Afshar

By Lloyd Kannenberg



1. The author's Afshar

Anatolia and Transcaucasia are the sources for most of the weavings in my collection. Persia intimidates me. It is a field too vast and complex for my underdeveloped aesthetic sense. And yet perhaps I'm not beyond hope. An Afshar (1) has completely captured me. Quite apart from how it looks (upon which I will comment shortly), it has prompted any number of questions: Who are the Afshar? Where are they? What are their weaving traditions? And so on. Since such questions

focus on a small part of the Persian spectrum and not the whole rainbow, they were not intimidating and seemed reasonably easy to answer. For me the most urgent was, how do I recognize a genuine Afshar? A crash course in Afshar rugs was a must.

My main tutors were Parviz Tanavoli ("The Afshars," *HALI* 37 [1988]: 23–29, and *HALI* 57 [1991]: 96–105); Murray Eiland ("Rugs of the Afshari," in *Oriental Rugs from Pacific Collections* [1990], 67–70), and James Opie ("The

Afshars," in *Tribal Rugs* [1992], 212–25). Quickly I skimmed through the articles. Here are my notes:

1. The best place to hunt for Afshar weavings is Kerman Province, and in particular Sirjan County, where weavers of a dwindling number of Afshar clans still produce fine-quality rugs.

2. The worst place to buy Afshar weavings is Kerman Province, and in particular Sirjan County, where the weavers of Iranian tribes (which vastly outnumber the Turkic Afshars) produce rugs that are marketed as Afshar to ride on the Afshars' reputation.

3. Since Afshar and Persian weavers borrow designs from each other, there is no consensus on which, if any, of the large number of "Afshar" designs are indigenous. Eiland says none. Since Afshars are a Turkic people, Opie sought Afshar echos among Turkmen motifs and claims to have found a few, for example the *ertman* guls of the Chodor (Opie, p. 216).

4. Afshar rugs are squarish, except for those that are rectangular.

5. Afshar rugs have kilim ends, aside from those that have none. This is also true for rugs of other tribes.

6. Afshar rugs are woven with symmetric or asymmetric knots.

7. The foundation of an Afshar rug may be wool or cotton, sometimes both.

8. Afshar weft shoots are single or double. Sometimes they are dyed red.

Distressing, to say the least. For a rug to be an Afshar, you would think it must have been woven in a traditional Afshar design by an Afshar weaver using traditional Afshar materials and weaving conventions; but according to my tutors it is not possible to establish beyond a reasonable doubt that any given rug meets those criteria. What to do?

Two possibilities suggest themselves. The first might be called the Puritan School: since a definitive identification of an Afshar is not possible, no weaving should be labeled "Afshar." Eiland adopts this convention in his book, as does Jenny Housego in hers (*Tribal Rugs* [1978]).

The more widely accepted alternative is the Big Tent School, which holds that the above definition of an Afshar rug is too strict. Carefully relaxed, it can serve as a practical rule of thumb for identifying Afshar weavings based on the preponderance of evidence. Among the developers of the Big Tent School was no less an authority than A. Cecil Edwards (*The Persian Carpet* [1953]), which almost certainly accounts in large part for the popularity of this alternative. To be sure, what qualifies as a "careful relaxation" is the detail wherein the devil hides. There

have been changes over the years; for instance, Edwards originally included single wefts as an Afshar criterion, but further research has led to its being withdrawn. A simplified version of the Big Tent's fundamental assumption reads something like this: *Any symmetrically knotted Kerman-Province rug qualifies as an Afshar.*

In honor of the author of *The Persian Carpet*, I will call this rule of thumb ACE's Law. It immediately provides an accessible database of qualified Afshar rugs, and coincidentally a broad range of "Afshar" designs. Moreover, it does not automatically exclude any rug from the accepted Afshar gallery, but it does present a challenge to the rug's "Afshariness" that can only be overcome with acceptable positive evidence.

Now the rug that captured me (1) has been unequivocally identified as an Afshar, and so whoever did the identifying is not a Puritan, but almost certainly a Big Tentist. Nevertheless, it is a good idea to make sure that this rug is consistent with ACE's Law. What is that old Russian saying?—"Trust but verify." So I decided to verify the identification by applying ACE's law. At the very least it will be good practice for dealing with those sharks who market dubious rugs in Sirjan County.

The first step was easy: The pile is wool, the knots symmetric, about 35 per decimeter (4 in.) horizontally, and 45 per decimeter (4 in.) vertically. While we're at it, we can flesh out the data. The rug's width is about 110 cm (44 in.), its length 128 cm (50 in.), giving it a "squareness"—"squareness" being the ratio of width to length—of 0.86. (A perfectly square rug has squareness of 1.00; the more rectangular, and therefore less square, the rug is, the smaller its squareness.) The warps are undyed, ivory-colored wool, moderately depressed and not surprisingly Z2S spun and plied. I didn't test the fiber of the wefts, but they are Z spun and red (except at the kilim ends). There are two weft shoots between knot rows.

All well and good, but only one condition of ACE's Law—symmetric-knotting—has been met. Is this also a Kerman Province rug? Photographic evidence might provide a definitive answer, but nothing of the sort is at hand. All we can do is present whatever additional "acceptable positive evidence" we can find. To this end I have gathered a small gallery of certified Kerman-Province weavings (2–7) for comparison. All have the same "shield" design: staggered rows of alternating chevron flower stalks and palmettes (as identified by Peter F. Stone in *Tribal and Village Rugs: A Complete Guide to Pattern and Motif* [2004]). Here they are, with their original captions (slightly edited):



2. Nomad rug from Kerman Province, 102 x 127 cm (40 x 50 in.), third quarter 19th century, design likely based on an urban model. Warp: ivory wool, Z2S. Weft: medium brown wool, Z2S, two shoots. Knot: symmetrical, H 35/dm (9/in.), V 47/dm (12/in.), 1645/dm² (103/in.²). Ends: 5 cm (2 in.), multicolored kilim. (From Eiland, *Oriental Rugs from Pacific Collections*, pl. 42)



4. Afshar rug, 119 x 147 cm (47 x 58 in.), late nineteenth century. (From Opie, *Tribal Rugs*, p. 225)



3. Afshar rug, 130 x 170 cm (51 x 67 in.). Baft area, Kerman Province, 19th century. Warp: wool, natural ivory, Z2S. Weft: wool, red, Z, 2 shoots, 1st straight, 2nd sinuous. Pile: wool, Z, 4–5 mm (0.16–0.20 in.). Knot: symmetric, 40 H x 36 V = 1440/dm² (90/in.²). (From Tanavoli, "The Afshars, Part 2," fig. 10; previously published in Eberhart Herrmann, *Seltene Orientteppich X* [1988], cat. 80)



5. Afshar, Persia, 19th century, minor border missing at top and bottom. Wool warp, wool weft, wool pile, 104 x 135 cm (41 x 53 in.). (From Austria Auction Company, *Fine Antique Oriental Rugs III* [Sept. 16, 2014], lot 26; previously published in *Antike Orientteppiche aus Österreichischen Besitz TKF* [1986], pl. 95)



6. Afshar *masnad* (sitting rug), 109 x 120 cm (43 x 47 in.), Bardsir region, Kerman Province, mid-19th century, rare design. (From Brian MacDonald *Antique Rugs and Carpets*, <https://www.brianmacdonaldantiquerugs.co.uk/>)



7. Afshar, South Persia, Kerman region, 105 x 129 cm (41 x 51 in.), 2nd half 19th century. (From Rippon Boswell, *Major Autumn Auction* [Dec. 5, 2020], lot 78)

Although Eiland's identification of (2) is consistent with his Puritanical principles, the caption validates it as an Afshar according to ACE's Law. As for the others, I assume the caption authors are Big Tentists. It is then easy to tabulate a comparison with (1):

Figure	Squareness	Size (W x L)	Field	Ends	Main Borders
1.	0.86	1.41 m ² (15.2 ft ²)	dk. blue	kilim	2
2.	0.83	1.30 m ² (14.0 ft ²)	dk. blue	kilim	2
3.	0.76	2.21 m ² (23.9 ft ²)	red	kilim	3
4.	0.81	1.30 m ² (14.0 ft ²)	dk. blue	kilim	3
5.	0.77	1.40 m ² (15.1 ft ²)	dk. blue	missing	3
6.	0.91	1.31 m ² (14.1 ft ²)	dk. blue	kilim	2
7.	0.81	1.35 m ² (14.6 ft ²)	dk. blue	kilim top, tassel bottom	1

According to this table, (3) is something of an outlier: the biggest and most rectangular of the lot, with the sole red field. On the other hand, (1) fits in comfortably with the others. That would seem enough "acceptable positive evidence" to verify (1)'s Afshar attribution.

Before I leave this exercise there is one curiosity that deserves mention. As shown in the image, the field of (1) is oriented consistent with those of (2–7), but in this orientation its pile is directed upward. As a consequence, assuming the orientation shown is upright according to the weaver's intent, she must have woven (1) upside down. Rugs woven upside down are of course well known—the so-called Transylvanian prayer rugs are notable examples—but is this technique common outside Anatolia? In Kerman, for instance?

It would be helpful to know in which direction (2–7) were woven. Unfortunately, it seems that the only way to find this out is by examining each rug "in the wool." Since that is unlikely, the question remains unresolved. In any case, I do not think it is enough to deny (1) its pedigree.

So, after all that, we have a Verified Afshar, surely the least surprising identification in all rugdom. Unlike me, Dear Reader, you may have recognized it at once, having seen it before on rugrabbit.com or Facebook or in some book. (I cannot speak about Facebook, since I shun it as a matter of principle.)

But its pedigree is one thing, the rug itself quite another. For me, seeing it in person for the first time was a revelation. I was struck dumb by the borders. The white-ground, descending-leaf meander has relatives in (2) and (3), but what a difference! In (2) the meander is descending on the left while half ascending and half descending on the right. In (3) it is ascending on both left and right. I should also mention the abrash in the upper leaves on the left, which

is delicately carried into the ground. I can see nothing equivalent in the others. Even more striking is the contrast between the border's white ground and the yellow(ish) grounds of (2) and (3). That white ground has another virtue, for which you will have to take my word: it is undyed camel wool, soft as a kitten's fur. Truly remarkable. The red ground of the inner border is shared by (2) and (4–6), but its geometrized Z-blossom meander is unique. I suppose, if you squinted and used your imagination, you might perceive a distant relation to certain Bijar borders, but for me that is a considerable stretch.

To conclude, perhaps you will permit a few opinionated comments by a verified non-expert. First, were it not for the attached names of two genuine experts, I would have tossed out (3) altogether. At least it should not be classed as a *masnad*. To me the “barber pole” borders in (4) and (7) suggest a later date, as do the tassels on (7). The missing ends of (5) are unfortunate, but their presence could only make it more rectangular, and thus call into question its inclusion as a *masnad*. Lovely (6) is a worthy partner to (1), but I am still hung up on (1)'s borders. Best of type? You decide.

Upcoming Rug and Textile Events

Auctions

Jan. 22, Vienna, Austria Auction Company

Collector Rugs No Reserve VIII

<https://catalog.austriaauction.com/en/132-collector-rugs-viii>

Jan. 30, Boston, Grogan & Company

The Fine Oriental Rugs Auction

<https://www.groganco.com/auctions/upcoming-auctions/>

Feb. 28, Mar. 31, Apr. 4, Philadelphia, Material Culture

Oriental Rugs from American Estates 50; March Estates incl.

Oriental Rugs; Oriental Rugs from American Estates 51

<https://materialculture.com/auctions/upcoming-auctions/>

Exhibitions

Dates TBA, Washington, D.C., GWU/Textile Museum

Indian Textiles: 1,000 Years of Art and Design

<https://museum.gwu.edu/indian-textiles-1000-years-art-and-design>

Until Feb. 27, Manchester, N.H., Currier Museum

As Precious as Gold: Carpets from the Islamic World

<https://currier.org/exhibition/as-precious-as-gold/>

Until May 15, Washington, D.C., National Museum of Asian Art

Fashioning an Empire: Safavid Textiles from the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha (includes carpets)

<https://asia.si.edu/exhibition/fashioning-an-empire-safavid-textiles-from-the-museum-of-islamic-art-doha/>



Future NERS Webinar

April 9: Michael Rothberg, “Nomadic Visions: Antique Saddlebags and Trappings from Persia and the Caucasus”



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Editorial contributors to this issue:

Julia Bailey (Editor), Lloyd Kannenberg

Distributor:

Jim Sampson

NERS 2020–21 Steering Committee:

Jim Adelson (President), Julia Bailey, Yon Bard,
Richard Belkin, Joel Greifinger, Jean Hoffman,
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NERS has moved to a calendar-year schedule. If you haven't already paid your 2022 membership dues, please do so now; your membership will extend through December 2022. You can pay online: go to <https://www.ne-rugsociety.org/NERS-paypal.htm> and follow directions. Alternatively, you can mail a check, payable to NERS, to our Holliston address.

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. Our webinars and meetings are held seven or more times a year.

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The New England Rug Society

P.O. Box 6125
Holliston, MA 01746

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