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Carpets For Commerce: Rug-Weaving In The Caucasus

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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 20th century, Caucasian carpets were in great demand among burgeoning European and American middle-class markets. With a history of carpet production going back at least three hundred years, rug-weaving in the Caucasus soared at the turn of the 20th century, first with economic incentives and the encouragement of czarist regimes, later as part of the Soviet economic system. Today, in an age of perestroika and glasnost, rug-weaving in the Caucasus for commerce and export lends itself readily to individual initiatives and private enterprise. Commercial production of carpets continues to be recognized as a means of generating both income and hard currency.

Drawing upon inferential, internal, and external sources of information, this paper seeks to identify and analyze three categories of carpets produced in the Caucasus for commerce. What distinguishes these categories is the nature of the evidence for their identification and interpretation.

"Dragon carpets" comprise the first and earliest known group of Caucasian carpets. Physical features of the carpet suggest commercialized production. "Dragon" carpets, so-called because of the representation of pairs of dragons as one element in a complex composition of design and pattern, may have been directly influenced by the economic policies of the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas in the 17th century. The interpretation of "dragon" carpets as commercial products relies upon inference.

A second category of carpets are those for which evidence for identification is internal, based upon the relationship of structure and technology upon design. Carpets in this category exhibit designs which betray a stylistic influence that is derived from other textile technologies. This group may be subdivided, based upon the identification of influence of indigenous traditions of embroidery, slit-tapestry, dove-tailed tapestry, and supplementary weft-wrapping (soupak). Many of the commercial rugs from the Caucasus, produced in the 19th century, seem to fit within this category.

Thirdly, a category of Caucasian carpets may be described based on historical records of the kustari industry, which was promulgated by the czars in the 19th century. This
the Caucasus, however, as rich and diverse as they are, is
that one is rarely, if ever, able to attribute a particular
group of carpets or textiles to a particular group of people
who made them. There are instances where we can identify
who used them or who commissioned them but we have very
little evidence really to provide ethnic identification of
the carpets.

THE STUDY OF TEXTILE ARTS OF THE CAUCASUS

For anyone who delves into the subject of Caucasian rugs,
there is almost necessarily a sense of bewilderment. First,
because of the turbulent history of the region with its rich
ethnic and linguistic diversity, this coupled with rich
stylistic diversity among the weavings and the lack of any
apparent congruence between stylistic and ethnic/linguistic
groupings. Secondly, because of the profusion of designs
and patterns, and their apparent intricacy. Thirdly,
because of the vast literature on Caucasian rugs, compiled
during the past century of Western scholarship, which
presents many difficulties for the student, including
confusing names, conflicting attributions, and inconsistent
(if not incomprehensible) terminology. General misnomers
may reflect misunderstandings or cultural insensitivity; in
several cases, these are simply indicative of faulty
thinking. Two examples will suffice: the so-called "wine-
glass border" as perceived by some Western commentators, is
actually a border of tulips, each blossom flanked by a pair
of stylized leaves, each leaf shared by adjacent tulips.
[The evolutionary development of this form may be traced
through Ottoman art (see W. Denny 1973, "Anatolian Rugs: An
Essay on Method," Textile Museum Journal III/4, pp. 9 -
11)]. Likewise misinterpreted in Western literature is the
presence of many types of crosses, which are an easily
replicable geometric form that is well-suited to the
rectilinearity of weaving. Only occasionally do crosses
specifically signify a Christian intent. When a cross is
used as a religious symbol, it is nonetheless difficult to
interpret its meaning as a referent to a concept or entity,
to an ideal, to the maker or user of the carpet, or to its
place of use. Furthermore, there are several different
Christian churches that have been active in the Caucasus for
many centuries, so it is not immediately clear that one or
another is indicated.

TEXTILE ARTS OF THE CAUCASUS: AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES

What characterizes textile arts of the Caucasus in the
broadest general terms is bright color and bold designs
combined with an intricacy and complexity of pattern. As in
other weavings, the bold graphic quality and intricacy of
design are two-dimensional in appearance, yet arrived at
through the three dimensional interaction of the elements
used in the construction of the textile itself.

First, is the use of bright primary colors, and a careful
selection in the juxtaposition of colors. In addition to
red and blue and yellow, is the occasional use of green, and
an approximation of black and white. A second
characteristic is the prominence of axiality, frequently
indicated by a vertical central axis. Then there is
symmetry, or at least an intended appearance of symmetry,
achieved by the visual juxtaposition of the design on one
side of the central axis flipped over and repeated in
reverse. In textile arts of the Caucasus, this reverse
repeat is usually approximate rather than accurate. For
often, when a pattern is examined in detail, or analyzed, one finds not only color alternations but minor design changes as well. This may seem all too obvious, but it is nonetheless an important characteristic of Caucasian textile arts, and perhaps one important aspect of traditional textile arts that distinguishes them from those that are less traditional. It is, in part, what makes classical examples so much more interesting than those that are copied from cartoons or textile classical examples. It is, in part, what makes their descendants that are copied from cartoons or textile classical examples so much more interesting visually than those that are lacking in the individual creativity. There’s a spontaneity in the design that is carried through in this appearance of symmetry, but in actuality expressing a lack of symmetry.

Related to the use of symmetry along a vertical and horizontal axis is the superposition of a second orthogonal axis, which subdivides a quadripartite division and creates conceptually segmented and called “rosettes.” These are stylized floral forms viewed from above, which are among the most popular decorative elements in Caucasian design.

Another aesthetic principle is a clear preference for overall repeat patterns. Again, quite frequently in the textile arts of the Caucasus, designs are repeated not in a precise manner, creating a pattern of unusual visual interest that both confounds and delights the viewer. Alternation of color is another aesthetic principle evident in Caucasian rugs and embroideries. In contrast, at first glance, the embroidery (fig.4) gives an impression of symmetry, but upon analysis, the presence of symmetry is evident in an overall pattern of the embroidery (fig.4) gives an impression of symmetry, but upon analysis, the presence of symmetry is evident in an overall pattern of symmetry. However, upon close analysis, it becomes apparent that symmetry is obscured by the presence of color alternations.

The principles of aesthetics I have identified within textile arts of the Caucasus are also evident in architectural ornamentation and decorative arts.

CARPET-WEAVING TRADITIONS IN THE CAUCASUS AND ELSEWHERE

Beyond an initial inquiry into the aesthetics of Caucasian textile arts, my research for the exhibition, "Dragons, Blossoms, Sunbursts: Textile Arts of the Caucasus" (held at The Textile Museum in 1989) has led to the identification of visual similarities, which may be seen by comparing embroideries and flatweaves with pile carpets. Such similarities suggest that rug-weaving has a derivative relationship and has relied for the inspiration of its designs upon different technologies.

My sources for this study have been primarily the textile arts themselves. The range of written sources that may shed further light on this subject is limited (nearly non-existent), but it may be ascertained and is by no means established (Wright 1983 - ). Wright has begun to compile translations of travelers’ accounts (both European and Russian); however, these are not well-known; often they are not otherwise easily accessible for Western scholarship. But I have found that by studying the carpets, embroideries, and flatweaves themselves (looking at them, analyzing them, trying to interpret them), a categorization of what sources might be available led to a categorization of carpets during the process of my research. What distinguishes these categories is that we are not always left with the evidence for their identification and interpretation. Our understanding of them may be derived from internal, external, and inferential sources of information.

The critical assumption that underlies my assertions and conclusions is as follows: What is visually evident may be significant; it is up to us to explore the ways and whys and hows, and this notion leads the interpretive process.

Before setting forth the categories of commercial carpets from the Caucasus that I have identified, it may be helpful to explore briefly other paradigms of court and commercial production of carpets, so as to contrast the Caucasian experience. Caucasian carpets are not like those of the Mughal court of India, which are often woven in odd shapes to fit designated spaces within palatial complexes. Nor do they share the pictorial aspect of Indian or Persian rugs that rely on court traditions of pictorial representation as developed for book illustration and wall painting. Caucasian carpets are not like those of the Ottoman or Safavid courts, which share in the rich vocabulary of other Ottoman and Safavid court arts. Nor do Caucasian carpets have the strength of simplicity of repeated designs retained in the memory of generations of nomadic pastoralists, passed on from mother to daughter. There was not, to my knowledge, the presence in the Caucasus of foreign capitalization by the English and others, such as was present in Turkey, Iran, and India (Oriental Carpet Manufacturers of London, Ziegler & Sons of Manchester, among others) during the second half of the 19th century and into the early 20th century. Yet from early photographs, and the paintings of French Orientalists, we are aware of the sale of carpets from the eastern Caucasus by rug merchants in Tiflis and Cairo. From historical accounts we also know the sale of Caucasian rugs in Istanbul, and in many Western European capitals and trading centers. During World War I, as European demand...
waned, that of American markets proportionately increased. Major retail centers were Boston, Philadelphia, and New York. Today, carpets of the Caucasus are marketed through Moscow, and abroad directly only through Hamburg via Moscow. [During the past year through active encouragement of private enterprise this situation may have changed].

CARPETS OF THE CAUCASUS: Category One "Dragon" Carpets

"Dragon" carpets (fig. 5a/b) comprise the first and earliest known group of Caucasian carpets. Stylistically they relate to carpets of 17th century Persia. Their broad width implies the presence of long beams for the loom, and a large covered space for weaving. The amount of wool required for each carpet (for warp, weft, and pile), as well as the quality of materials and the range of colors also implies the need for high levels of capitalization. This is reinforced by the unusual knot density, which is increased by the use of depressed warps. The repetitive character of the designs, the abutment of horizontal and vertical borders, and the apparent use of stock patterns, all hint at the possibility of commercialized production. This group of carpets, distinguished by the representation of pairs of dragons as one element in a complex composition of design and pattern, may have been directly influenced by the economic policies of the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas in the 17th century. The nature of the evidence for identifying "dragon" carpets as commercial products is inferential.

The most important and the most enigmatic of all of the Caucasian textile arts is this group of rugs. Comprising the earliest historic rugs preserved for us to view, they number in the forties, preserved in museums and private collections in Turkey, Europe and America. The dragons are seen in pairs, and are displayed in patterns that adhere to the principles of symmetry, axiality, color alternation, and overall repeats cited above. In addition to the paired dragons, there are pairs of stylized leaves forming overlapping ogival lattices, which also share in the use of these principles. Furthermore, there is the presence of ambiguity, for the pairs of dragons may be addorsed, or confronted, depending upon the lattice within which they are viewed. The ogival lattices consist of pairs of leaves that form infinitely repeating patterns, arbitrarily cut off by the borders of the rug.

The dragons ultimately derive from Chinese art, where they carry specific meaning. But visually similar dragons appear clearly drawn in the arts of Safavid Iran, where they retain a representational quality which is absent in the rugs of the Caucasus. It is tempting to speculate, given the realities of the 17th century, that the dragons of Caucasian "dragon" carpets derive from China through the medium of Safavid art in Iran in the 16th and 17th centuries.

In light of political history, the part of the Caucasus where we assume the "dragon" carpets were woven (Karabagh) was conquered by the Safavid rulers in the 16th century and became the northwestern extension of their realm. Shah Abbas I, moved his capital from Tabriz to Isfahan in 1598, retreating from Ottoman advances eastwards. From Isfahan, he established commercial weaving centers for the weaving of large court and high level commercial carpets in Kirman, Tabriz, Kashan, and probably Isfahan, too. It is very likely that it was his economic initiatives that established this kind of rug weaving in the Caucasus in the 17th century, but for which we have at present no firm evidence.

No one argues with a 17th century attribution for the "dragon" carpets. A lack of consensus surrounds the questions of who produced them and why, and whether they are derivative of Safavid court styles or whether they influenced Safavid court styles. That remains an open question. Purely from inferential information, however, it seems most likely that they resulted from an economic initiative of Shah Abbas I: Not only because his initiative elsewhere is documented, but because of their monumentality, and both the quality and quantity of materials, "dragon" carpets would have exceeded the capability of any type of low-level production. "Dragon" carpets required major capitalization for their production; they represent a monumental effort on the part of someone, and there simply was no court with that kind of wealth amassed in the Caucasus in this period.
CARPETS OF THE CAUCASUS: Category Two
Commercial Rugs of the 19th Century (to c.1880)

A second category of carpets are those for which the evidence is internal. Carpets in this category bear designs that exhibit stylistic influences which derive from other textile technologies. This group may be subdivided, identifying and documenting the influence of indigenous traditions of embroidery, slit-tapestry, dovetailed tapestry, and supplementary weft-wrapping (soumak). Many of the commercial rugs from the central and eastern Caucasus produced in the 19th century before c.1880 seem to fit within this category.

Several types of embroidery produced in the Caucasus share the aesthetic principles that are present in carpets. The wide proportions and single narrow borders so characteristic of traditional embroidered covers may suggest this as a source of influence when they appear in carpets, whose proportions otherwise are more often longer and narrower, with multiple borders. Embroideries of the Caucasus are executed in either one of two counted thread techniques: cross stitch (which creates a square grid matrix well suited to transferring the design to rug-weaving), or in a type of running flat stitch.

Some Caucasian carpets exhibit what appears to be a geometricized pattern with short horizontal and vertical steps in the design. This style seems to reflect an origin in the copying of patterns executed in slit tapestry, for which the technical requirements of weaving with discontinuous wefts leaves a slit at each color juxtaposition, obviating the possibility of a long vertical line. Short verticals are required to maintain the integrity of the fabric; this results in a stepped effect that approaches the diagonal line, or a jagged effect that approximates a vertical line.

In dovetailed tapestry the discontinuous wefts wrap around the same warp rather than adjacent warps so there is no slit between colors. Rather this tapestry technique yields what is called a dovetailing effect that lends itself readily to patterning on the diagonal as well as vertical lines enabling strong vertical lines. Again, this flatwoven structure seems to be present in certain Caucasian rug patterns.

Another technique of traditional weaving in the Caucasus is called soumak. It is a means of weft patterning achieved by wrapping primary (foundation) wefts, or supplementary wefts, around successive warps in a sequence of forward and backward movements that also lends itself to diagonal pattern and allows the construction of vertical lines.

What becomes apparent on analysis is that there are many Caucasian rug patterns that betray a reliance for their designs upon textile arts executed by other means, the structural features of which are evident in the design. By such analysis, we may see the influence of embroidery on rug patterns, the influence of soumak patterning on rug patterns, the influence of dovetailed tapestry on rug patterns, and the influence of slit tapestry on rug patterns. This is all probably indicative of commercialized processes of rug-weaving in the Caucasus in the 19th century. What we see in the commercialized rug patterns seems to be a reflection of what I presume to be the more indigenous traditions of flatweave and embroidery in the carpet-weaving industry. This interpretation is in sharp contrast to that more usually cited in the rug literature, where such patterns when they are seen in embroideries or flatweaves are referred to as rug patterns.

CARPETS OF THE CAUCASUS: Category Three
Commercial Rugs at the Turn of the 20th Century

Thirdly, a category of Caucasian carpets may be described based on external information, specifically, historical records of cottage industry production stepped up by government support, referred to in Russian literature as kustari (Shelley and Wright 1981; Wright 1989) and promyshlenniki in the second half of the 19th century. Government industry support took the form of providing materials (wool, dyes, looms), organizing exhibitions, awarding prizes, and establishing specifications and production quotas for local districts in the Caucasus. This effort was promoted through the establishment of regional and imperial expositions designed to generate and support the local crafts, to provide a means of marketing, and to offer the local population a means of annual economic enrichment that relied on an enterprise which would not interfere with the agricultural cycle.

CARPETS OF THE CAUCASUS TODAY

In contrast to the categories delineated here, carpets being produced in the Caucasus today are made in factories according to centralized planning from Moscow. Designs are generated annually by appointed artists, and all materials are provided to the factories. The carpets are hand-knotted according to traditional methods. Wool is prepared, and then dyed using synthetic chemicals; it is provided to the factories by centralized distribution. The carpets have a medium-long pile (of wool provided by the central government), depressed warps, and a very high knot density.
While ideally suited to the portrait carpets designed by artists, which effectively portray in a painterly three-dimensional style images of important personages, these technical qualities vastly exceed the need for labor and materials for the geometric and stylized floral patterns of historical carpets that are reproduced in quantity. What may be projected for the future in this age of perestroika and glasnost is a response in the product to the political and economic restructuring that takes production into the market economy. Cost reductions of labor and materials will no doubt yield a more economical carpet that is able to compete in the international market.

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