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Weaving In Taspinar:
A Case Study of Using Samplers in Carpet Weaving
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The Textile Museum

The functions of samplers in needlework, as records of patterns and educational exercises, are well known. But the uses of samplers in carpet weaving have not been subject to serious study. This paper based on a case study conducted in the region around the town of Taspinar in Central Anatolia, will describe the appearance of carpet samplers, the role they play in carpet weaving, how they serve the weavers, and why they are important to weavers.

The field research conducted in the village of Taspinar was a result of responsibility undertaken in early 1996 of documenting a small group (15) of carpets in The Textile Museum collection, which are donated to the museum in 1991 as Taspinar samplers. Before the research trip to Taspinar village in Turkey, it was a struggle to find and to extract the right information on function and use of samplers in the books which the samplers from Anatolia receive only brief mention. Many questions on processes of weaving, design making and designing of oriental carpets by using samplers was left unanswered or never adequately addressed in the literature.

The village of Taspinar which gives its name to a specific style of carpet woven locally, is located on the southeast corner of the Central Anatolian plateau where the Eastern Anatolian mountain chains start. Under the impressive presence of volcanic Hasandag, Taspinar spreads on the sides of two small hills. A main road divides the village in the middle. The location of the village is very close to the main historical commercial routes of Anatolia as well as well-known carpet weaving centers such as Aksaray, Nigde, Yahyali, Avanos and Kayseri where large quantities of workshop carpets are produced¹.

Taspinar carpets contain clearly and distinctly drawn curvilinear floral designs rather than the geometric designs seen on many village carpets. Their elongated, almost oval, floral medallion compositions are also not characteristic of other village weavings. The reason for this is probably the fact that Taspinar is located close to big weaving centers that designs on Taspinar carpets remind us of workshop carpets, although they are village woven (figure 1).

Due to changes in secondary design elements, Taspinar carpets appear to have more than one style. Except the prayer carpets, characteristics of Taspinar style carpets are their concentric floral medallions with dark blue, white and red fields set on a plain dark blue ground. The ground is decorated with branches and flowers at the four corners. Thin columns sometimes border the whole main field. Narrow leaf-scroll panels, inserted at the both ends of the ground before the borders start, always complete the main field design². There are three more designs woven in the Taspinar, but majority of the carpet woven contains the design described.

The size of these carpets vary from the *seccade* (prayer carpet) (110-150X170-200 cm) to large room size carpets (larger than 6sq.m).

Taspinar carpets are in many ways identifiable as village carpets. They have a low knot count (56 knots per square inch) and fewer colors. Their designs are bigger, less ornate and less curvilinear than those of workshop carpets.

Taspinar weavers use vertical looms and sit on a bench of fixed-height in front of their looms. The loom is constructed of metal or made out of solid, rough-hewn wood. It has a rectangular frame with two parallel upright beams supporting two horizontal roller beams that hold the warp threads under tension. Both types of loom are manipulated the same way. By inserting levers a weaver can unlock the roller beams so that they turn freely and allow a finished section of the carpet to be rolled onto the lower beam. Thus, the weaver remains level with her work without needing to adjust her sitting position. This type of loom also accommodates longer warps, so two carpets can be woven on the same warp³ (figure 2).

Terms design, design element and design sub-element were used with specific meanings in this paper. The term design is used for overall appearance of the carpet, and design element for the parts of a carpet design, such as inner and outer borders, rectangular area on narrow ends, medallion. The weavers may combine put these design elements or parts, to create the full design of a carpet. Design sub-elements are representations of design elements in the smallest possible way and can be seen only on samplers. These sub-elements are always large enough to be recognized as representations of design elements and they enable weavers to reconstruct design elements by means of rotating or reflecting them (figures 3 and 4).

In carpet weaving, the term sampler is often used for the identification of a small carpet containing an assembly of design sub-elements out of which the weaver can compose a full design for a carpet. The physical sizes of samplers vary due to the sizes of the full carpet designs presented as design sub-elements on them.

When it comes to the arrangement of sub-elements on a sampler, there is no integral order that we can see. This means sub-elements are combined on a sampler without regard to the eventual relationship of one to another on the full size carpet.

There are several suggestions in the literature as to the possible uses of carpet samplers. They are variously described either as "catalogs" for orders from dealers, learning tools for little girls, sketch pads for trying out new colors or designs elements, or tools for design transfer.

When we talk to weavers and investigate the purposes samplers serve, we realize that samplers actually serve more than one function. First of all, they are memory aids. Secondly they are economical records of carpets' design elements, although not the their design arrangements. And when the full carpet is not available, these samplers are sketchpads to try out new color combinations or to design additional secondary design elements, or practice new design elements. Samplers are also templates allowing more than one woman to work on the same carpet⁴.

Although the overall design in Taspinar carpet appears to be strictly prescribed, the combination of secondary design elements to create that overall design is generally up to the individual weaver. At this point samplers are used as a selection board for design elements.

Once the design elements are decided on, the weaving can start, and use of the samplers as a template begins. As needed the weaver can count the knots that form each individual motif. For this she uses the back of the sampler and transfers each knot on the sampler to the carpet on the loom, one by one. To turn a design sub-element on the sampler to a design element and weave that element into the carpet, the weaver has to count and multiply her knots continuously, as well as manipulate sub-elements by flipping and/or rotating them (figure 5).

Why do weavers endlessly count knots from samplers as they transfer them to their carpets? What is the ultimate goal? Weavers, certainly Taspinar weavers, always prize and delight in clearly drawn medallions and well-balanced (symmetrical) designs and use samplers to create them. They also have to learn and try new designs, if the carpet is destined for the market. An undeniable influence encouraging the weavers to work in this way is buyers and their preferences for carpets with well-balanced designs.

In the case of Taspinar, we can discuss the reasons for using samplers under three sections, in conceptualizing medallion designs, executing them, and weavers' preferences.

To begin weaving a medallion design, a weaver has to perceive the finished product in her mind's eye. She must have an idea of the kind of design elements and motifs she can use and how she can combine them to create the most pleasing end product. Weaving a medallion design means the whole rug must be woven to create an integral design. The medallion design is not a repetitious design. In a repetitious design repeating same motif over and over again creates the design, a weaver could stop whenever she wants and still has a pleasant effect. A good medallion design also requires being well balanced, meaning symmetrical on all four sides. The only way to achieve this symmetry is to weave using precise knot counts for the design. Samplers provide the weaver exact knot counts for her to match the bottom half of her design with the top half (figures 7 and 8).

During the weaving process, a weaver should also overcome certain constraints the loom imposes. As explained earlier, Taspinar weavers use the vertical loom with two big horizontal beams. Because the carpet is rolled on the lower beam as it is woven. Only a foot or so of what has been woven is visible to the weaver preventing her from referring to the work she has completed, as a guide. She cannot copy any design element from what she has woven. Remembering every single knot she has woven so far would be considerably easier if the design were based on the repetition of same motif. Instead, she must refer to an aid, in this case, to a sampler to see the flow of the design and the interaction among the design elements⁵ (figure 6).

The other important constraint encountered during the weaving process is the large size of some of the carpets woven in the area. Large carpets require two or three weavers who must together create one large unified design. Motifs must be made from the same number and color of knots; design elements must connect with each other uniformly. Samplers enable these weavers to work together in harmony and without frequently interrupting each other (figure 9).

Large-size carpets are almost impossible to use as referral tools as well. Sometimes weavers use smaller size carpets by pulling them at the side of the loom as referral tools, instead of samplers (figures 6 and 10).

Reasons related to the weaver's own preference for using samplers are varied, but I should point out the flexibility and economy samplers provide compared to other design transfer tools such as the weaver's memory, another "source" carpet, cartoons, or pictures.

Weaving from one's memory requires years of experience as well as relying on the particular weaver's skills. After weaving the same design for many years, a master weaver may know the designs sufficiently enough to create them without any reference to anything other than memory. Samplers on the other hand, provide an avenue for young girls who want to learn or try new designs at the start of their weaving career.

Spending long periods of time memorizing how to weave certain carpet designs might not be an efficient way of working if a family's income depends to a significant degree on carpet weaving. The weaver also has to be aware of the changing tastes of her customers if she is to market her products successfully. Samplers without any waste of time or resources provide weavers an opportunity to weave new motifs as well as experiment with old ones. Relying on memory when experimenting with new designs, especially with medallion designs is neither efficient nor economical.

Samplers also serve other practical functions when not used for weaving. They may be used in weavers' homes for furnishings, or as seats. They can also be sold for interested collectors to generate income.

As mentioned earlier, there are two other design transfer tools in carpet weaving: cartoons and pictures which are not used widely in Taspinar area. Cartoons are frequently used for transferring design elements in carpet weaving, especially in workshops. Workshops can supply constant demand for cartoons which are durable. In some cases, the cartoons might not be easy for the unaccustomed weaver to read. Due to this fact that the use of cartoons is not well spread in the Taspinar area where carpet weaving is generally done as cottage industry.

Pictures are generally used for production of flatweaves, not for carpets, because pictures don't allow a weaver to count the knots to get a clear definition of the boundaries of each motif or design element. Although around Taspinar flatweaves are produced, they are not the most visible products of the village

This paper stress technical as well as economical considerations that are of paramount importance in understanding and evaluating the functions samplers serve in Taspinar carpet weaving. This study may serve as a resource for future researchers who want to explore the possibility that samplers serve similar functions, due to the similar factors that affect their use, in other carpet weaving areas, as well as in textile production.

Notes

¹ Taspinar is a small village connected to Aksaray sub-province. First inhabitants of this village appears to be a group of people brought from Azerbaijan to settle in the area in 16th century (Konyali, p. 2092). Scholars argue that draught and harsh agricultural conditions forced this group to immigrate to west towards Konya region after a short stay, and they settled in Hotamis Yayla and established a new community, which is also called Taspinar. (Deniz 1981, author's correspondence with Mr. Bekir Deniz, 26 January 1997) The second immigration to the village took place in 19th century from the surrounding small villages and nomadic groups. The largest settler group from Tokariz village on the skirts of Hasandag moved to the deserted village during the Tanzimat period (1839-1876), (Deniz, 1982, p. 18-22, author's correspondence with Mr. Bekir Deniz, 26 January 1997). Although agriculture is generally counted as main source of income in the Central Anatolian plateau, main source of income for Taspinar is animal husbandry and carpet weaving.

² Column (*Sütun*) is the term weavers use for this design element. *Ayak*, *gülboncuk* and *boncuk* are used for main border, secondary border and guard-stripe; *sandik* for the rectangular area above and below the main field, *köse* for corner elements, and *sallama* for center medallion. (Deniz 1988)

³ It takes three experienced weavers about four to five hours to complete warping a loom, which is an outdoors activity. Thus with this type of loom accommodating warps for two carpets very critical and time consuming part of the weaving reduced to half.

⁴ The weavers acquire their samplers by weaving one for themselves, borrowing or buying from other weavers, or inheriting from their female kin.

⁵ We all realize how important to tie knots in correct color when weaving a carpet with medallion design, and wanting it to be well balanced. The constraint the loom brings is much evident when weaving proceeds upwards where medallion is widening and narrowing at the middle and at top of the carpet. The direction samplers generally woven are left or right lower quarter of the actual design where a weaver starts weaving.

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Figure 1

Taspinar style carpet, Alanya, Turkey, private collection



Figure 2

Loom, Aksaray, Turkey



Figure 3

Carpet sampler, Taspinar, Turkey, 20th century,
The Textile Museum 1991.25.2, From the Fred
and Carol Moore Turkish Carpet Collection.



Figure 4

Taspinar style carpet, Alanya, Turkey, private
collection



Figure 5 Sampler by the loom, Taspinar, Turkey



Figure 6
Weaver, Incesu, Turkey



Figure 7

Taspinar style medallion carpet, Izmir, Turkey,
private collection

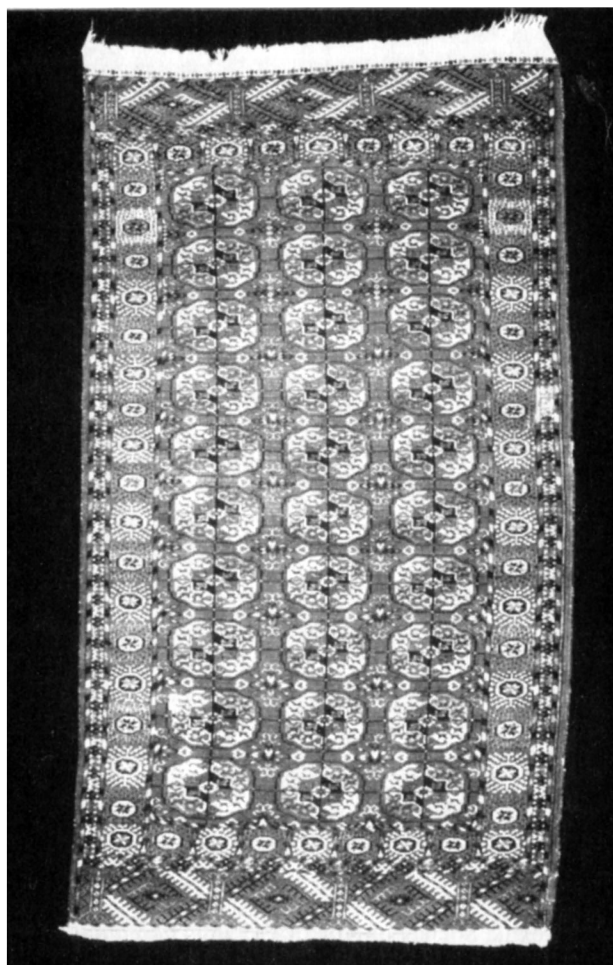


Figure 8

Carpet, Turkmenistan, early 20th century,
The Textile Museum R37.1.3, Acquired by
George Hewitt Myers in 1946.



Figure 9

Two weavers at the loom, Aksaray, Turkey



Figure 10

Room size carpet, Taspinar, Turkey