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2006

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Hardy, Michele, "Swept under the Carpet: Subtle Tales from the Back Room" (2006). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 311.

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## Swept under the Carpet: Subtle Tales from the Back Room

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According to Ruth Phillips, we are poised to enter the second museum age.<sup>1</sup> For many years now museums has been the object of serious criticism. First Nations have critiqued museums' authority to represent and possess culturally significant objects. There has also been a shift away from object-based research—undermining the very foundation of museums. They have been forced to re-evaluate who they are, whom they are for, and what to do with all that stuff in the storerooms. Since the mid-1980's there has been growing responsiveness to indigenous peoples concerns, efforts to share authority, and a re-envisioning of museums as places to enhance community relations and share different stories. The study of material culture has similarly been re-invigorated. Arjun Appadurai's now classic *The Social Life of Things*<sup>2</sup> set things in motion—literally and figuratively—encouraging an awareness of objects' social lives, how they are produced, used, and exchanged. This in turn has contributed to the telling of many tales as objects intersect with different individuals and communities. Textile studies since the 80s have generally reflected these shifts and contributed to them. The specialized field of Carpet Studies... Well that is another story.

In 2005 I joined The Nickle Arts Museum at the University of Calgary as Curator of Decorative Arts. I am primarily responsible for the Jean and Marie Erikson Rug Collection. As a cultural anthropologist with expertise in the area of South Asian embroidery traditions, rugs pose a new challenge in terms of technique, geographic area, and culture. In fact, this paper is really a reflection on the culture of rugs. It examines some of the narratives that surround the Erikson Collection—the Collectors tales, Dr Erikson tales, some of my own, and some, I hope, that allude to the weavers.

### Collectors Tales

Carpets enjoy a somewhat privileged place within the field of textile studies—since the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century they have been the purview of a special breed of collector drawn, to a large extent, from the ranks of white collar professionals. There appears to be a long tradition of psychiatrists and medical doctors who not only collect rugs but also write about them (e.g. Jon Thompson, Murray Eiland). Although hardly scientific, my observations at local and international rug association meetings are that collectors are overwhelmingly male, white, well-heeled, and aging.

Unlike other collectible textiles, carpets appear to cross the lines between the decorative, fine, and “primitive” arts—they have done very well at auction. Sotheby's, Christie's, Rippon Boswell, and Skinner's all, regularly hold auctions of Oriental carpets. The rarest pieces—especially Ottoman, Safavid, and Mamluk court carpets—are priced in the tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars. Less pricey examples are Turkish, Caucasian, Iranian or Central Asian village rugs which—depending on current taste, quality, and rarity--range in price from a few

<sup>1</sup> R. Phillips, “Replacing Objects: Historical Practices for the Second Museum Age,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 86 (2005).

<sup>2</sup> A. Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

hundred to several thousand dollars. This market is controlled by the auction houses as well as a number of influential dealers and collectors. There are trends within this market with different rug types attracting more attention (and higher prices) than others. Ghiordes rugs were highly sought after until the 1920s when other types of rugs eclipsed their popularity. Similarly, Hamadans, relatively inexpensive rugs woven in NW Persia for export were very popular in North American homes until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Widely available and affordable, they have yet to attract the attention of many, contemporary collectors.

There are numerous publications and journals devoted to carpets. *Hali*, for example, is a UK-based magazine covering carpets, textiles and Islamic arts. It features articles on various topics, opinion pieces, auction reports, and pages and pages of glossy advertisements. There are also many books devoted to the study of carpets—these too are highly collectible and fetch large sums at auction and through specialty dealers. Many of these, however, appear heavily influenced by the needs of the trade. Many published works examine the surface of carpets in intimate detail offering technical and stylistic analysis. This literature is characterized by its concern with provenance and authenticity as well as the absence of ethnographic research and critical reflection. The very fact that rugs are categorized according to town, region, country, style, motif, ethnic community, technique, designer, destination, or use suggests, at one level, the ad-hoc nature of the field as well as efforts to create distinction and new categories of desire.

### **Dr Erikson's Tales**

In 2003 The Nickle Arts Museum received the largest donation for the arts in the University of Calgary's history. Dr Lloyd Erikson, Professor Emeritus in Anatomy at the University of Alberta, donated a significant collection of carpets and textiles as well as funds to maintain it. With close to 700 pieces, the Jean and Marie Erikson Rug Collection is one of the largest, public collections in North America. It features mainly pile-woven carpets from Turkey, the Caucasus, Iran, Central and East Asia. Most of the Collection dates from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century although there are significant examples of 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century carpets.

Dr Erikson began collecting carpets in the 1940s. He has described cycling from Rochester to New York in his youth where he would comb the antique shops of Amsterdam Road seeking post-Depression-era booty. In 1949 Dr Erikson spent a year teaching in Beirut—it was here he bought his first rug. Dr Erikson's passion and commitment to rug collecting grew. His collecting was broad, unbiased, and sometimes brazen—he purchased from dealers at home and abroad, garage sales, auctions, from friends, ex-friends etc. He described a situation where he swept a shoe store's clients off their feet, purchasing a fabulous Persian runner from the shop floor. He also told me about an elderly friend in the US whose living room carpet he had admired for over 20 years. The poor woman refused to sell the carpet but Dr Erikson eventually wore down her resistance and purchased it last year. Some of the most important additions to his collection were made after his wife passed away in 1986—mainly from the larger auction houses of the US and Europe. He has also traveled extensively, purchasing rugs from dealers in Istanbul, Lahore, Karachi, and Hong Kong. Over 80, Dr Erikson's knowledge of his collection is remarkable—every piece in the Erikson Collection, all 700 of them—has a story. He can relate where and when he bought it, how much he paid, what he did to it, and why he purchased it. He is particularly interested in the diffusion of pattern—hence he collects as many examples of certain patterns as he can. He is very fond of the *boteh*, for example, a motif more widely known as the paisley. The Nickle has examples of botehs from across the rug-producing world.

Dr Erikson is an advocate for the preservation of tradition—although *his* methods and the *museum's* methods differ. It turns out collectors and museums' agendas are often at cross-purposes. At the American Conference on Oriental Carpets last April, I was taken aback by a collector who accused museums of interfering with the free market economy—his point was that museums prevent the good stuff from circulating, depriving collectors of enjoyment. Issues of consumerism aside, collectors and museums frequently differ over conservation. Museums, for example, typically emphasize preservation over restoration. Older carpets often have holes or worn spots that we attempt to stabilize—most often by couching the piece to a ground cloth without trying to fill-in missing parts. Dr Erikson, however, prefers not to leave much to the imagination. His efforts to preserve carpet traditions, save fragments and weathered samples from an uncertain fate, involve the interventions of restorers. The art of restoration is, quite honestly, astonishing—or it can be. There are good and bad restorers using better and worse materials. The Erikson Collection contains what is known as a Small Pattern Holbein rug dating from the 18th Century. Now rugs of that age—particularly Holbeins because they have always been in high demand—are well worn. Many have repairs, many have several generations of repairs—the Nickle's Holbein is no different. Some of the repairs are well done, others were done with materials that have not stood the test of time and have faded. Dr Erikson's defense for repairing his rugs is that he is preserving their aesthetic integrity for future generations. It is a compelling argument and understandable. However, I argue that re-weaving, re-piling rugs reinvents them and potentially obscures their history of use.



Figure 1 (left). *Holbein I, Small Pattern Holbein, Turkey, 207 x 157 cm, c 17th C., Jean and Marie Erikson Collection, The Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary.*

Figure 2 (right). *Holbein II, Small Pattern Holbein, Turkey, 207 x 157 cm, c 17<sup>th</sup> C., Detail of old repair, Jean and Marie Erikson Collection, The Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary.*

## Closeted Tales

Carpets have social lives—in fact they live it up more readily than other kinds of objects. As I have noted, they are highly collectible, expensive, and subject too abundant connoisseurship. One of the most popular sessions at the biennial American Conference on Oriental Rugs is entitled “Good Rug, Great Rug” and offers participants guidelines for looking at and buying “the best.” As a Curator, I cannot be uninformed about these discussions even if I am suspect about the kind of knowledge they generate.

My research at The Nickle involves working with the Dr Erikson to document his stories and collection rationale. My research also involves examining these wonderful artifacts-- recording details about their condition, their structure, and their distinguishing features and trying to sort out fact from fiction. Collections research involves the careful examination and documentation of artifacts and comparing results with known types in order to determine provenance. Within the field of carpet studies, structural analysis examines

- Knot type
- Knot density
- Material / colour / Twist of warp, weft, and pile elements
- Number of Weft shots
- Warp Depression
- Edge / End finishes

We know that certain combinations of factors are characteristic of certain productive regions—blue wefts, for example suggest the rugs of Kirshihir, while apricot pile suggests those of Milas (both villages in Turkey). This data is being collected and statistically analyzed by researchers at the May Beattie Archive at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford.

Dr Erikson and I have had our differences as is typical of other curator-donor relationships. He sees them as *rugs*, I see them as *artifacts*. He sees them from the perspective of an owner—I see *in them* the perspectives of makers and users. Although our views differ we are both entranced by the possibility of rugs to shed light on the lives of the (mainly) women who weave them. My approach involves comparing the results of my detailed, visual analysis with stories from the field. In fact, I am on my way to Turkey next spring to initiate this. I am interested in documenting not only what weavers and their families say, but what they do and the social context of weaving. Not being a weaver is actually an advantage since it forces discussion on the taken-for-granted. How tight do you pull? How hard do you beat? What is the rhythm of work? What interrupts it? How is rug weaving productively and aesthetically related to other cultural activities/objects? What does it mean? What kinds of stories do weavers/ local users tell?

Both Dr Erikson and I share an aesthetic attraction to rugs that might have been described as ‘primitive’ thirty years ago. Rustic, folksy—the problem with these terms is they imply a very limited degree of development and skillfulness. A better description of the rugs I have in mind are those that suggest the maker as opposed to those who obscure them. Most often these are village or tribal rugs—those produced for domestic consumption rather than export. They are characterized by repetitive patterning, innovation, variation, and joyfulness. Dr Erikson is not particularly attracted to rugs that obscure the maker. Persian court or workshop carpets, woven in highly organized ateliers, betray little evidence of the individual weavers who produce these magnificent rugs. Typically they are very densely woven in fine materials (including silk) and are professionally designed. Weavers have little say in the execution of the designs.<sup>3</sup> Examples from a very different productive sphere are the rugs produced by the Turkomen of Central Asia. The Turkomen were traditionally nomadic. Women weave rugs for their family’s use and rugs of various descriptions play an important role in marriage exchange. Turkomen rugs contain

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<sup>3</sup> J. Thompson, *Oriental Carpets: From the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia*, New York: Penguin, 1983.

elements that speak more to clan identity than the individual responsiveness I am referring to. Though woven in very different settings (urban workshop vs. nomadic tent), both appear to be governed by aesthetic prescriptions that encourage a level of productive anonymity.

My research at The Nickle has involved examining rugs for clues about the weavers who made them—or individuals who used them. My first exhibition at The Nickle was called *Janamaz: Prayer Rugs from the Erikson Collection*. I selected a broad range of prayer rugs and discussed their design, their symbolism, the foreign market for them and how they are used for the Islamic prayer ritual (*salat*). *Janamaz* featured a rather tattered prayer rug set on a horizontal plinth and oriented at 25.07 degrees East of North in the middle of the gallery. Although there is discussion in the rug literature that the bulk of the prayer carpets woven in Turkey, the Caucasus and Iran were made for export to Western markets—the pattern of wear on this particular rug suggests it may have been used. The rug is worn in the spots where a Muslim’s feet, knees, hands and head would have touched it—again and again. Another rug in our collection is a large Sarouk that once belonged to Dr Erikson’s mother. Mama Erikson graced her dining room with this particular piece—a small circle of wear suggests the spot where her buzzer was hidden to summon the servants when needed.

As I examine the Erikson Collection for clues confirming provenance, I also look for clues that suggest carpets’ social lives. I am interested in the people behind the objects—the weavers, the dyers, the designers, the dealers and yes, even the collectors—their interconnections and different perspectives. While it is tempting to view these objects as products of a single pair of hands—they are, in fact, jointly produced and socially constructed. Weavers work together on projects; they share designs, and they obtain materials from the same sources<sup>4</sup>—factors that contribute as much to stylistic consistency as they contribute to the development of social and economic networks.

There is a logic to practice that is reflected in the construction and style of a rug as well as other aspects of culture. Jon Thompson refers to these as ‘craft habits’<sup>5</sup> while Heather Lechtman refers to them as ‘styles of technology.’<sup>6</sup> These terms refer to ways of working and often systems of meaning that resonate between various media. Lechtman refers to pots, metallurgy, and textiles. My research into embroidery traditions in Western India has shown connections between women’s embroidered garments, jewellery, domestic textiles, and house design.<sup>7</sup> Clearly these kinds of stories cannot simply be ‘read’ off the surface of a carpet.

## Tail Ends

While waiting to get to the field, I look for evidence of ways of working that are cultural as well as technical, that are embodied and evoke weavers’ hands, bodies, and minds. Let me share some examples:

The Erikson Collection contains a carpet known as a Kirshihir (or possibly a Sivas) from Turkey and has been dated to approximately 1880. It is a joyful riot of colours and pattern. Woven without a formal pattern, most of the motifs are small, repeated, and are what Jon

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> H. Lechtman, “Style in Technology: Some Early Thoughts,” in *Material Culture: Styles Organization and Dynamics of Technology*, eds. H. Lechtman and R. S. Merrill, New York, West, 1975.

<sup>7</sup> M. Hardy, “Embroidering at the Edge: Mutwa Women and Change,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2003.





*Figure 3. Kirshihir, Kirshihir, Turkey, 182 x 113 cm, c 1880, Jean and Marie Erikson Collection, The Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary.*

Thompson would call “memory-based.” We can see into this slight variations particularly in colour. The weaver has consciously paired complementary colours or near complementaries, effectively animated the surface of the carpet. There are slight variations in form—especially above and below the mihrab where the weaver has had to alter the centre flower in order to make it fit. This also suggests that the weaver visualized her design from left to right (as it is the right side of the flower that has been edited). The piece is naturally dyed with a variety of colourants including cochineal giving it a rich vibrancy, especially where paired with indigo and green.

The next piece is a detail from the Holbein carpet I showed earlier. The field of the Holbein consists of repeated circular forms each of which contains a knotted motif in its centre. The knots are executed in various ways—some evoke three dimensions, others do not. Similarly, the weaver has played with the colours of these motifs in order, one assumes, to add variety and interest. While it has been suggested that the “poorly” executed knots indicate a rather late example of a Holbein, could it not also suggest that the weaver was more inventive than other weavers of this type of rug? Does change have to equal debased traditions?

The last example I will share is a Kymik flat-woven carpet (kilim). The Kymik were nomadic Steppe dwellers who eventually settled in the north eastern Caucasus. They are supposed to have taught the more well-known Avar to weave. Kilims frequently have what are called, inappropriately, “lazy lines.” These are diagonal lines that are formed when weavers work together. Apparently tapestry weavers use a similar technique to help keep their selvages straight. Lazy lines, however, result where one weaver’s work ends and another’s starts. Tracking the pattern of lazy lines may be a way to reconstruct the choreography of carpet weaving.



Figure 4 (left). Kymik I, Kymik kilim, north east Caucasus, 117 x 82 cm, c 1900, Jean and Marie Erikson Collection, The Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary.

Figure 5 (right). Kymik II, Kymik kilim, north east Caucasus, 117 x 82 cm, c 1900, Detail of “lazy lines”, Jean and Marie Erikson Collection, The Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary.

This paper has attempted to juxtapose some of the tales that surround carpets—stories I have had to sift through and attempt to understand in my new role as curator. Collectively they speak to how objects, in this case pile-woven woolen carpets, are both the subject and object of stories with different plots, different perspectives, different agendas, and different methods of analysis. Collectively they enhance knowledge not just of what these things are and how they are made, but how rugs are produced (broadly), their meanings, and the lives they interact with.

I introduced this presentation with some comments about how museums are shifting. As we enter the second museum age, committed to people and communities, we are exploring a whole new world of alternate truth claims. Truth has been replaced by truths, meta-narratives with multiple perspectives. And the stories that objects tell expanded exponentially.