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## STATEMENTS FROM THE LOOM AND THE NEEDLE: WOVEN AND EMBROIDERED ANATOLIAN TEXTILES IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

With their innovative images and messages, Anatolian textiles bring statements from history and witness social change as well. This conversation with the past appears on embroideries (isleme), weavings (dokuma), flat woven carpets (kilim), rugs (hali), needlelace (oya), or a variety of other artifacts from the loom and the needle. They take their impetus from Turkish culture and traditions. However, they extend well beyond these, into the lives and roots of the many peoples of Anatolia who have left their marks on the multi-cultural urban, rural, or semi-nomadic environments. Since their themes and motifs appear on architecture and artifacts alike, they address questions which should be within the scope of both architectural and social history.

Collective and social memory helps develop our understanding and experience of the present which is largely dependent on the knowledge of the past (Connerton, 1989:2). This, however, has been fairly difficult in the Anatolian setting due to: 1) the general indifference historians have shown for the lives, dwellings, and belongings of the ordinary people; and, 2) the rejection of some traditional elements by the people due to the massive political and socio-economic changes that have taken place recently.

### HISTORIANS VERSUS HISTORY

Traditionally considered to be much less glorified than the houses of gods, kings, and the dead, dwellings of the "people" have been greatly overlooked since architectural history has chosen the study of temples, palaces, and tombs as its field of inquiry. While a large amount of detailed information and evaluation on the monuments of the past have been carefully gathered, little has been preserved from the architecture of the people: vernacular architecture. Still less have historians cared about the interiors of the dwellings people inhabited, their daily lives, and the artifacts they used.

In recent years, through documentation and investigation, some ground has been covered on the habitats of the peoples of the world. Likewise, Anatolian dwellings have been studied within the parameters of the vernacular language of architecture, in their cultural and physical settings. However, our collective memory of interiors, the objects/artifacts that have contributed to spatial definition, and the significance and value of their aesthetic aspects is still poor. Documentation on this is in progress, yet incomplete. A closer look into the living patterns of the dwellers and how they, themselves, may have evaluated their own habitats and all that have made life meaningful must also be part of the architectural historian's inquiry. Only then our social memory will be inseparable from architectural history, to verify the significance of such artifacts in houses.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper includes the second portion of a research, documentation, and collection of woven and embroidered 18th and 19th century Anatolian textiles. The first portion of this study was presented by the author in a paper entitled "The Vernacular Language of Artifacts," at the Built Form and Culture Research Conference: Intercultural Processes, at A.S.U. in Tempe, Arizona, 9-12 November, 1989.



Among the artifacts in the Anatolian home environment, textiles have been the objects that have given meaning to interiors. They have been indicators of territory or makers of space. Their traditional significance has been in their symbolic value (protective, representative, informative...), in their functional value (indicating territories for eating, living, sleeping...), and in their aesthetic value (color, brightness, emphasis...).

## ARTIFACTS, TRADITIONS

Knowledge on artifacts is necessary to complete factual studies on life in buildings. Specifically for dwellings, objects of everyday use will help bring to light the clues that are needed to recreate the living patterns and the traditions involved. With regard to the buildings themselves, any study on construction, structure, and planning concepts would be more comprehensive if enhanced by a search into interiors, furnishings, and the objects that were part of life in that environment. Material-color-texture studies, together with the related utilitarian and aesthetic factors, would help in understanding the patterns of adaptation of the inhabitants to their built environment.

Artifacts, then, are such material objects that are transmitted from one generation to another by tradition. They may be changeless themselves, while traditions may be subject to alterations and shifts, in time. They represent the preferences of a society at a particular time and place. In Shilz's (1981:2) definition,

"Tradition - that which is handed down - includes material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions...It includes all that a society of a given time possessed and which already existed when its present possessors came upon it and which is not solely the product of physical processes in the external world or exclusively the result of ecological and physiological necessity".

The material objects in dwellings, which are included in the vernacular traditions, and the buildings themselves could be regarded as interdependent. However, life in the dwelling is better understood with respect to such objects; and spatial characteristics of interiors become more meaningful with reference to the physical features of the objects or surfaces that define them. As Shilz (Ibid: 77) also notes:

"The stones, bricks, wood, mortar, metal, canvas, paint, parchment, papyrus, ink are all material things, dead matter formed by human action into buildings, roads, machines, statues, paintings, and books. They are dead matter infused with spirit by being formed or arranged under the guidance of the mind".

Such dead matter gain specific identity by design, as they are molded into recognizable artifacts. Their function may shift from utility to aesthetic or they may become obsolete in time. Yet, they always represent the control of the 'mind' and the 'hand', as they are shaped into usable objects with reasons for their creation. In turn, artifacts are interpreted by the very public that has created them as part of that culture (Maquet, 1986:60). Their symbolic worth becomes their value. In this process, artifacts, then, transmit these values as objects that provide for the communications of their inherent meaning to later generations, regardless of practical use.



## THE ANATOLIAN STORY

In their own lives, Anatolian textiles have contributed to the home environment in three major areas:

- 1) They have helped define functions and special areas in house interiors and modified residential architecture.
2. They have become tools of communication, with use of a rich language of signs, symbols, and meanings attached to them.
3. They have marked a change of outlook during the westernization process from abstract to figurative and from an inner focus to an outward view of life and environment.

Therefore, within these architectural, social, and aesthetic contexts, textiles have been the utilitarian, symbolic, and artistic indicators in history.

### 1. The Architectural Context

In the specific case of Anatolian vernacular architecture, the exterior is generally strikingly simple and modest. However, the inner surfaces (walls, ceilings, floors, cupboard covers, sitting areas) may be highly ornamented with colors and woodwork patterns. In addition to such architectural treatment, if any, the artifacts in the house (rugs, kilims, cushions, drapes, towels, wrappers, spreads) all contributed to spatial qualities with their lavish use of color, texture, and pattern. These varied by region, tradition, and choice. They also became the witnesses to the material culture of Anatolia, with a variety of motifs, symbolic tribal or regional references, technique of production, as well as according to changing fashion choices.

The placing of various textiles or spreads as floor and settee covers inside the rooms established the way different surfaces and levels could change their use at various times throughout the day (Günay, 1981: 80-82). Such changes were indicated by the placing and removal of fabrics, kilims, smaller carpets, cushions, and other textile objects such as runners. Thus, activities like walking/circulation, sitting/socializing, eating, sleeping, praying were designated by the use of these artifacts. They helped, or even provided the means for, the functional definition for spaces and surfaces which would otherwise be architecturally unspecified for these daily activities (Denel, 1989:60).

These artifacts are movable and perishable objects. Without them, interiors would be devoid of color, texture, and meaning. A sitting area or part of a settee, for example, could easily be converted into an eating area by the placing of a fabric spread and a large dinner tray which rested on a low stand, and, later, to a sleeping area. Or, the placing of a set of richly colored cushions indicated that special care was given to a guest area or pointed to the place reserved for the head of the family. Decision for colors and patterns, as well as quality and refinement of the work, were indicative of status, making the interior very much a woman's domain. Because of their uniformity and clarity of design and execution, the houses of Safranbolu (Western Black Sea Region) and their interiors have been selected as reference for this study (Ibid.:49-63). They further show how the traditional house in its own setting gains its interior flexibility with use of textiles and by the changes in them. Thus, flexibility, which is an architectural quality, is in fact provided here by way of textiles.

(See: Figures 1, 2, 3)

### 2. The Social Context

In the long history of social changes from its Seljukid and Ottoman heritage, and its before and after, to modern day Turkey, the loom and the needle never ceased in Anatolia, and weaving and embroidery never disappeared. Created for a girl's trousseau or for special occasions, as well as pastime, textiles were continually in production, as they were created and modified in homes. However, there is also indication of organized activity, such as embroidery production in Royal workshops of the Ottoman Court (Rogers, ed., 1986:160). In the more popular realm, in a society in which women did not speak freely,



these became tools of communication. In the absence of other means of expressing their emotions, wishes, aspirations, frustrations, joy, or anger, women chose to communicate these in a visual form. By the knot and the stitch, they sent messages to the men and the older women in the household or among acquaintances. These were messages in a language of signs and symbols, based on a store of references to traditional geometric or floral images, sometimes with allusions to folk poetry (Tansuğ, 1988:15). The fresh spring flower at the edge of a towel carried good wishes and news. The scorpion on a carpet was woven in to protect the household. A flower motif within a circular composition may have announced pregnancy, while red peppers in needle lace along the edges of a scarf could have been there as bad news for 'burning' with anger or frustration (Onuk, 1981:XV, 20, 28, 36, 54).

Widespread until the earlier part of this century, such traditions are now visible in smaller rural communities and disappearing. Historically, embroideries are traceable to the sixteenth century while woven fabrics, or rugs and carpets may date back to the thirteenth century (Rogers, ed., 1986:164; and Denny, 1982:131). In general, floral and geometric patterns dominated the designed and built environments from such textiles to glazed tiles and masonry relief work on buildings, from the home environment of the vernacular to monumental architecture. That is, this was the general trend until about mid-eighteenth century.

(See Figures 4, 5, 6)

### 3. The Aesthetic Context

Significantly unique among these textiles is a set of woven and embroidered artifacts with depictions of the built environment: houses and neighborhoods, gardens and landscapes, rivers and ponds, kiosks, pavilions, palaces, castles, tents in gardens, mausolea among trees, villages, towns, mosques, and churches. There are also some identifiable monuments, views of the Bosphorus, and the great mosques of Istanbul. Other than such figurative representations of architecture, there exists groups of other textiles with motifs of ships, birds, fruits and fruit bowls, flower pots, trees, other recognizable objects such as teakettles, and a series of men and horses, patterned as recognizable designs, some in great detail, as well as totally imaginary scenery (Rogers, ed., 1986:166). Such representations appear largely on embroidered towels, scarfs, cushions, etc., after mid-eighteenth century. The shift from the repetition of traditional geometry and flower shapes to such architectural motifs coincide with the instigation of the westernization process.

Westernization in Ottoman society was an elitist act, imposed from the higher echelons of the administration down. Its effects were first seen in architecture as baroque ornaments after the first quarter of the eighteenth century, later developing into dynamic elliptical forms. These effects shaped the royal palaces and the public buildings and remained mostly limited to the official architecture of the Empire until the nineteenth century (Goodwin, 1971:381). In time, this trend influenced the houses and the mansions of the elite, remaining at that level mostly, since westernization was neither fully understood nor desired at first by the general public. Thus, in its initial stage, it only touched the public in terms of the changes in codes of law and building regulations they had to abide by and with the changes of style in the built environment.

Westernization was a complex process that triggered many other movements in the Ottoman society. Among these is the sudden shift towards pictorial representation in or movements along with, and sometimes, in place of the traditional abstract floral and geometric surface decorations. It opened the way to extensive application of figurative wall paintings inside houses. Furthermore, as if a window had opened to a new world, landscapes and buildings appeared on cupboard covers, writing desks, chests and drawers, on furniture, in the capital city and then in the provinces (Renda, 1977:77-78, 171). With



roots in folk art and in miniatures, this practice was highly nourished by the introduction of western style portraiture and painting.

Westernization thus helped to introduce a new world view that reversed the planning concepts from an inward focus to an outward orientation towards nature and life outdoors. (Ibid.:31; and Arik, 1976:147-149). Attention shifted from humility to a more material view of life. Abstract repetitions left their places to more concrete things - things, monuments, buildings. 'Picture-making' became the new outlook unto the environment, as a breakthrough for women to find an outlet with new subject matter, in addition to the endless variations on traditional motifs. New themes were invented; new compositions started trends that became the new traditions in time. Istanbul, the city, its beauties and wonders, with its surroundings, was the source not only for the people who lived there, but also for all who lived elsewhere and had enough imagination to visualize the city. (See: Figures 7, 8, 9)

Rows of houses along the Bosphorus mimicked the existing buildings and their linear natural setting on textiles. Tents, kiosks, river compositions recreated the 'Sweet Waters of Asia', a favorite outing area on the Asian side, or 'Kagithane', a unique recreation place on the European side. Orientation to outdoors spread from Istanbul to the fringes of the Empire, with similar garden settings, ponds, and kiosks in landscape, all embroidered in harmonious color patterns. One question on the appearance of strong similarities of pieces from two distant locations can be answered by tracing the original production of these items. Rather than copying, a practice was inviting embroiderers from Istanbul who were good at the 'art of the needle' to stay with the household to help with the preparation of a girl's trousseau. (Gürsoy, interview, 1976; also see: Gentiles, 1964:17) Thus some Turkish island embroideries, from the Aegean island Mytilene, for example, may have the same technique and an almost 45° axonometric set-up with distorted perspective view, though in varying color patterns, spreading the "style" to a location fairly distant from the capitol. (See Figure 9) The lush landscapes emphasized how nature took over both lives and imagination in an overwhelming way. Royal or otherwise, pavilions of Istanbul were also some of the direct sources for compositions with buildings in garden settings.

Such image making has always been in the definition of 'tradition' in Anatolia, as the Turkish word for tradition (*görenek*) implies things or behavior observed, derived from the verb 'to see'. Likewise, the motif that signified a tribal symbol in the flatwoven carpets is also called 'gorenek' -- tradition. The vernacular language of artifacts, in their long traditions in Anatolia, is a visual language.

## INDICATORS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Traditional artifacts in Anatolia have endured several political and subsequent social changes from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic within the last 200 years. While some were in continuous production, others became proofs of a response to westernization after mid-eighteenth century, especially in Istanbul and at the Provincial centers. During the first forty years of the Republic, a neglect, rather than a rejection of the past, dominated until about mid-1960's, trying to intentionally sever ties with the religious dogmas of the Ottoman past. Recently, however, traditional arts and crafts have come back to public view. During the 1970's while this was a more nostalgic look into the past, in the early 1980's the trend became a more conscious concern. Textiles started to become a part of the economy, however small, making a come-back into the home environment -- this time, as art objects.

Within the course of history, in their traditional, neglected, and re-instated stages of acceptance, textile artifacts such as embroideries, carpets, rugs, makrame weavings,

needlepoint lace, etc., have recently become popularly accepted mostly in the more socially dynamic environments of towns and cities. This popularity is regardless of the symbolism or intent, or the origin of the works. There is a marked preference of handmade ones over machine produced objects or artifacts.

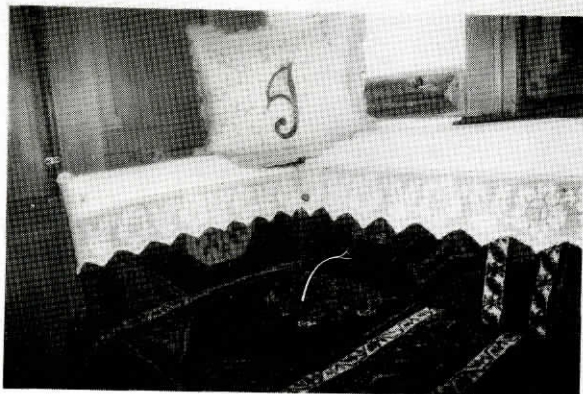
Ironically, the newer house or apartment is in the Western sense and does not need any help from textiles or other things to function properly. Each section is a clearly built room. In a 'changing' society, the flexibility of the older traditional plan is lost, leaving no room for ambiguity. In turn, the design approach with its strict codes and regulations has brought a marked rigidity. Textiles, as much as other traditional artifacts, have now become status objects. They are expressive of the sophistication of the inhabitants demonstrating their ability for art appreciation, like paintings hanging on walls or figurines on a mantle.

The message of love on a belt wrapper, the wish for fertility on a carpet, or the plea for protection on a needlepoint lace 'oya' have been removed from social memory. No longer bearing their previous meanings, these are now used out of context. In this, we may yet witness new traditions to be formed and new meanings to be established. Until then, Anatolian textiles will still be a significant part of the architectural environment since they will continue to be indicators of social change in the home environment.

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- Interview with Sezer Gürsoy, Istanbul, 1976.





## FIGURES

The Architectural Context

Safranbolu, Interior

Figure 1. Sitting,  
Area Definition

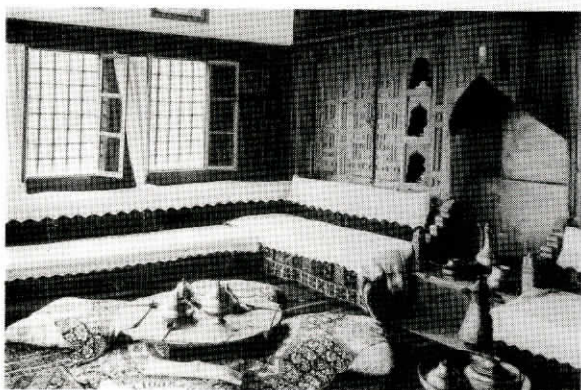


Figure 2: Eating,  
Area Definition

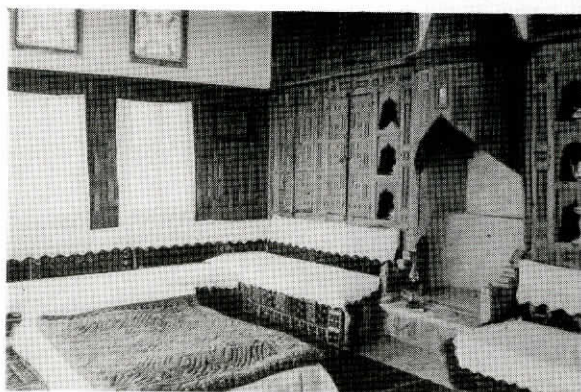


Figure 3. Sleeping,  
Area Definition





The Social Context

Communications Symbols

Figure 4: Needle Lace,  
Bursa  
Informative

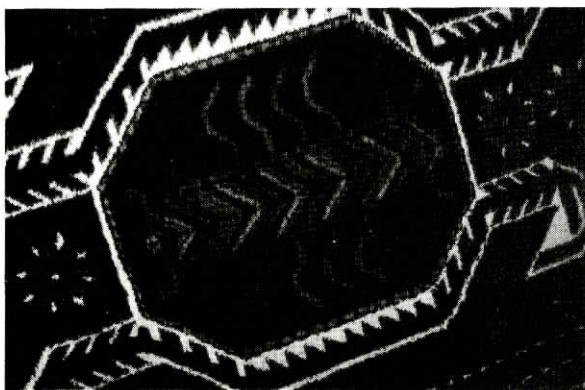


Figure 5: Rug,  
Protective

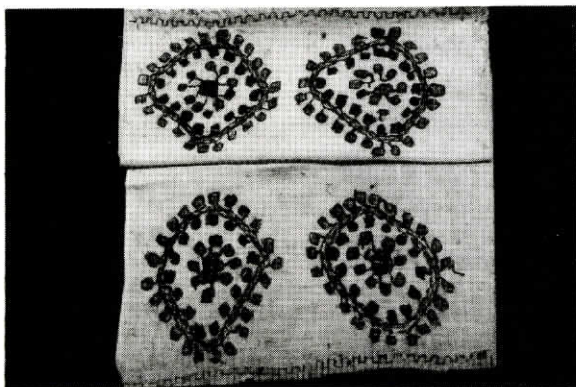
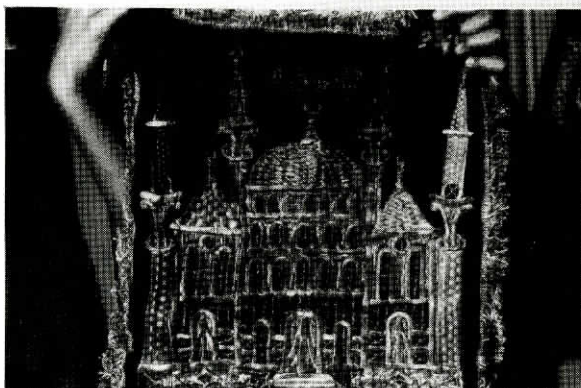


Figure 6: Embroidery,  
Bursa, rural  
Informative



The Aesthetic Context

Figurative Representation

Figure 7: Embroidery,  
Mosque, Istanbul

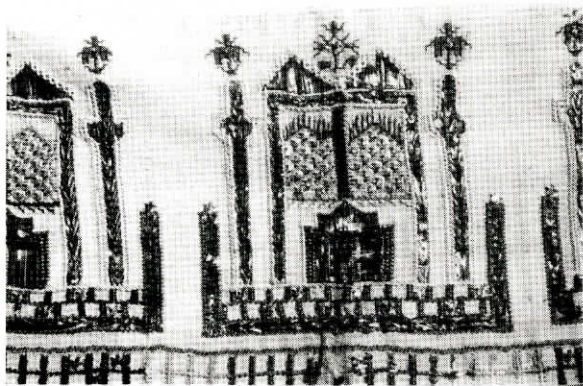


Figure 8: Embroidery,  
Mosque, Bergama

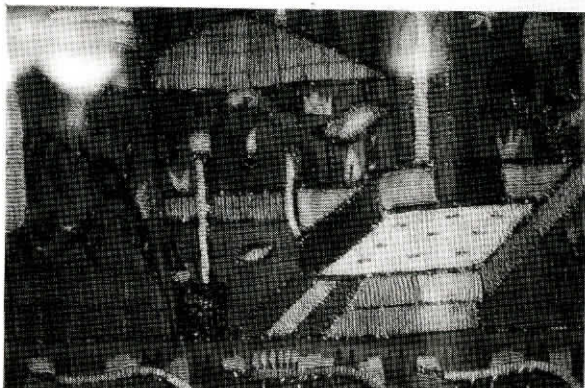


Figure 9: Embroidery,  
Garden, pavillions, ponds  
Mytelene/Istanbul



