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The Power of Color: Anatolian Kilims
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The kilims of Anatolia are great contemplative and minimalist works of art as stated by a kilim enthusiast.¹ Created by women who had a magnificent eye for design and an awesome sense of color, these textiles are prized for the purity and harmony of their color, the integrity of their powerful overall design, their masterfully controlled weave structure, and their fine texture.

The kilims are large tapestry-woven textiles. The visually stunning and colorful Anatolian kilims communicate the aesthetic choices of the village and nomadic women who created them. Yet, while invested with such artistry, Anatolian kilims first and foremost were utilitarian objects. Although employed by nomadic families for a host of uses, they were primarily used for covering household items and furnishing the tent interiors.

The Textile Museum collections received a gift ninety-six artistically and historically significant Anatolian flatweaves from the Estate of Murad Megalli in 2013. The practical and analytical study of these textiles is on-going in order to contribute to the expansion of knowledge of the Anatolian kilim weaving tradition. The research will address several questions that surround Anatolian kilims. But the fundamental question to be answered is “what is there to see when you look at a work of art, such as an Anatolian kilim?”

Of the ninety-six flatweaves, forty-three are kilims are attributed to central and south Anatolia, thirty-eight to western and northwestern Anatolia, and fifteen to eastern Anatolia. Three of the flatweaves were woven with supplementary-weft wrapping. The other ninety-three are kilims made using slit tapestry weave technique.

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Anatolian women and their lives

The weavers of Anatolian kilims were descendants of Turkmen nomads and their settled kin. The way of life in nomadic communities in Anatolia has changed dramatically, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Only the kilims are left as enduring records of that life, although it is extremely hard to decipher their meanings. Their history spans at least five centuries and they present an extremely wide stylistic variety. In addition, they were created by societies where oral tradition is the norm rather than the literary tradition of urban societies. All these factors make the analysis of kilims and the weaving tradition associated with them far more complex.

The Anatolian kilim is a composite of powerful cultural and personal influences. We know that kilims are a potent expression of the nomadic and peasant culture in Anatolia as well as a highly personal expression of rural women. This expression was molded by a profusion of aesthetic influences originating from the many ethnic groups that make up the Anatolian culture. The influence of the high Ottoman culture is also evident on many kilims. Although work on deciphering the meaning of Anatolian kilims is ongoing, there is no denying that Anatolian kilims, with their bold but simple coloration, large scale, and skillfully balanced designs have a very strong visual power for contemporary eyes. The beauty and mystery that surrounds their origin, history, and design serve to amplify this aesthetic power. Created by women who had a great eye for design and an awesome sense of color, designs of the Anatolian kilims are unpretentious, pure and essential shapes inviting deep meditation and contemplation.

*Kilim* is a term used in Turkish-speaking parts of West Asia, especially in Anatolia, for large slit tapestry-woven textiles. The visually stunning and colorful Anatolian kilims communicate the aesthetic choices of the village and nomadic women who created them. While invested with such artistry, Anatolian kilims first and foremost were utilitarian objects.

Anatolia was a crucial transitional point between the weaving regions of Europe, Asia, and Egypt. Its history is one of ancient, continuous interactions between West Asia, Arabia, northern Africa and Central Asia as well as the Caucasus and Balkan regions. Turkmen—ethnic Turkish nomads from further east in Asia—began to arrive into Anatolia in the tenth century, adding further diversity to already ethnically diverse area. The lands they passed through on their way from Central Asia to Anatolia were occupied by two different religions—Islam and Eastern Orthodox Christianity—and two distinct cultures—Persian and Byzantine/Greek.

While the settled, Anatolian village women also wove kilims, their weaving tradition was rooted in the weaving practices of Anatolian nomads. Two major but distinct activities dominated the life of the nomads:
1. Migration to winter pasture, called *kisla*, and to summer pasture, called *yayla*
2. Pastoral life

Nomadism is a lifestyle in which groups of people, mostly close family members, move from one region to another to exploit local resources. Anatolian nomads’ living and economic units were predominantly groups of families (*kabile*) or of extended families (*aile*). They were
generally herders and depended on large flocks for their livelihood. Some nomadic groups, such as those in Anatolia, were pastoral nomads, or semi-nomadic, meaning they moved between two pastures, one for winter and one for summer.

During these semi-annual movements, camels carried the family’s belongings and tent, while the family, except the youngest members, walked alongside the camels. In this setting, textiles, especially kilims, functioned as showpieces displaying the family’s wealth and the women’s skill to everyone they encountered on the road.

Once at their destination, nomadic women could devote time to weaving their textiles—the only artistic output of these communities which survives today. Although utilitarian, the textiles were carefully woven and intricately decorated. One reason for this care was that for the nomads, textiles had artistic, social, and religious importance beyond their pure functionality, although it is hard for us to perceive the specifics of these aspects today, because of our distance from those societies in time and space.

Textiles were prominently displayed when the family reached the pastureland and set up tents. Each tent formed a single open space often with a wooden post in the middle. The large transportation bags that carried family’s belongings during the migration were turned into storage bags and placed in a row in two different areas of the tent. One set of large bags was used to create two separate sides to the one-room tent: the public seating area for guests and family and the more private cooking area. The other set lined the back of the public area of the tent, creating a decorative back rests for sitting. Both of these lines of storage bags were covered with long kilims that were previously used as covers during migration. Occasionally these long kilims served as wall hangings, reducing dust, wind, and glare when the tent walls were raised during summer heat and providing extra insulation in winter months. The tent interior was all-purpose space and successively became the place for working, eating, sleeping or other social activities. This was accomplished by rearranging kilims and other textiles, defining the common space for different functions.

The practice of using textiles to delineate living spaces continued when nomads permanently settled in villages. Many village houses were one-room spaces. By arranging kilims and other textiles in this room, village women converted spaces for various social activities. When settled, former nomadic women continued weaving their kilims and bags for couple of generations, though storage bags and other textiles gradually disappeared from their weaving repertoires. Only the kilim weaving appears to have continued. One reason for that might have been that kilims were flat rectangular textiles and could serve multiple functions as wall hangings, bedding covers, and even floor covers.

Kilims also were used to honor the deceased. When a member of the family died, especially a male, the body would be wrapped in a kilim and carried to the gravesite. The kilim was not buried; however, it would be washed and presented to the mosque at mevlut ceremonies—gatherings to honor the deceased held forty days after their burial.
Anatolian kilim weaving

Anatolian women were masters of two distinct weave structures: tapestry weave, more specifically slit tapestry weave, and supplementary-weft patterning. They used these two weave structures for two different functionalities. Supplementary-weft patterning in its various forms was used 90 percent of the time for weaving transportation/storage bags. Slit tapestry weave was used exclusively for kilims.

Slit tapestry weave is an inherently limiting technique restricting the creation of curvilinear forms unless weaver has the equipment, time, skill and material fine enough to do it correctly. The technique creates crisp vertical definitions between color areas. Often weavers incorporate the slits into their overall design. A structural weakness, however, results from such openings. To alleviate this weakness, the slits can be sewn up after weaving. Alternatively, the weaver, can keep vertical openings between the color areas to short lengths, as Anatolian weavers did, to avoid compromising the overall structural integrity of the textile.

Kilim, central Anatolia, 18th century, wool, slit tapestry weave, The Textile Museum 2013.2.13, The Megalli Collection. 314 X 102 cm (123.5 X 40 inches), warp horizontal

Anatolian weavers seemed to accept the technique’s natural limitations and created designs that fit within the structural constraints of slit tapestry weave. They developed a design repertoire that was essentially rectilinear, geometric, and nonrepresentational or abstract, while the original inspiration for the designs came from the natural world around them. Anatolian weavers stylized and geometricized them, absorbing them into their own rectilinear grammar.

Textile researcher Marla Mallett has mentioned that it is important to consider the critical relationships between what she calls “weave balance” and patterning. This relationship is a vital part of the aesthetic development of tapestry woven textiles in general and in Anatolian kilims specifically.

Three aspects of weave balance pertain to the Anatolian kilim. The size relationship between the warp and weft yarns is one aspect; in most old kilims, the weft is less than half as thick as the warp, and is usually loosely spun and not plied, while the warp yarns are 2-Z spun yarns S plied.

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In many cases they were twisted very tightly. Another applicable weave balance aspect is the necessity of achieving a balance between using enough slits to create motifs and limiting the length and frequency of slitting in order to maintain structural integrity. This has had a profound influence on the character of kilim designs.

Another technical factor that affected Anatolian weavers was the size of what they could weave with looms that needed to be collapsed and moved when the group moved. A weaver could weave up to 90 cm width with ease, but anything wider (160-180 cm) was woven in two panels. That is why many long kilims woven by nomadic women had narrow widths and why nomadic women often wove their designs in the half. The weavers’ expectation appeared to be that they would weave the other half during the next available weaving season and would connect it to the first one if they needed a larger textile to complete the design. Meanwhile, the long kilim with its half design was still pleasant to look at and good to use. Most likely two weavers wove any single-panel kilims wider than 90 cm, in a wide loom, which was built in place and could not be moved, such as a village home where such loom could be set up.

The creation of Anatolian kilim was, from start to finish, the work of a single weaver or family group. The same group of people completed the full production cycle. They sheared the sheep, chose the wool, prepared the yarn, dyed the yarns, dressed the loom, decided on the design, and wove the textiles.

The weavers had total control over the selection of their raw material. Although the supply was not unlimited, wool was readily available for the nomadic families. Regardless of the breed of sheep the wool came from, the weavers’ involvement from the beginning in choosing, cleaning, and combing the wool to make it ready for spinning was an important factor in achieving the high weaving quality seen in the kilims. Kilim designs that are clear and precise and colors that are luminous and bright are almost always made with high quality wool.

Nomadic and village women were not only involved with weaving, but essential part of the procurement and processing of raw material for textile production. The total involvement with raw material and control over raw material selection and yarn preparation, however, did not translate to total freedom of design. Anatolian women designed their kilim, but they wove from a rigid traditional design repertoire. The young weaver was expected to use the designs that were accepted by her community as their own—their artistic tradition. Only after a weaver had assimilated and internalized these designs and the mechanics of weaving them to such a degree that she was a skilled master could she become comfortable introducing variations and minor innovations to the traditional design. Even the skilled and experienced weaver could do so only as long as she maintained and did not displace the accepted form. An Anatolian kilim could not be considered the overt self-expression of one individual, but rather an expression of the collective, the tradition.

Conversely, each kilim was different from the other. Even in this restricted environment, individualism was manifested in minor details if the weaver followed the expected traditional forms. The introduction of new design elements had to start with minor design elements, such as border designs, before moving slowly to the main design elements considered the most important.

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signifiers of tradition. Later on, the weaver could take the same design element from a minor element status, enlarge it, and artfully make it into a main design element that dominated the whole kilim.

Kilim, central Anatolia, early 19th century, wool, slit tapestry weave, The Textile Museum 2013.2.74, The Megalli Collection. 445 X 94 cm (175 X 37 inches), warp horizontal

Kilim, western Anatolia, second half 18th century, wool, slit tapestry weave, The Textile Museum 2013.2.71, The Megalli Collection. 364 X 90 cm (143 X 35.5 inches), warp horizontal

Kilim, western Anatolia, Aydin, first half 19th century, wool, slit tapestry weave, The Textile Museum 2013.2.9, The Megalli Collection. 362 X 78.5 cm (142.5 X 31 inches), warp horizontal

Many factors influence the uniqueness of each kilim: the weaver’s individual personality, her understanding of colors, ability to design, weaving skills, and level of expertise/experience in weaving all played a role, as did external factors. Changes in the conditions of the family group—the influx of new families into the group and inter-marriage between different nomadic groups—brought in new ideas. Chance exposure of weavers to new designs during migration or occasional visits to a mosque allowed new designs to be appreciated and memorized. Memory, rather than invention or creation, seemed to be the mode of learning in kilim weaving. This involved memorizing a small set of design elements and the mechanics of weaving this same set of elements. In other words, young weavers mastered the weaving technique and the design elements that went with it simultaneously. The learning process was both visual and tactile memorization.

Through close examination of The Textile Museum kilims, we can determine the following characteristics of Anatolian kilim design tradition:
In creating their designs, weavers depended on repetition and variation of a relatively small number of motifs, although the motifs themselves might not be small in size. Weavers expanded the design repertoire through a process of elaboration or simplification. This was done by presenting the same motifs in different sizes or by presenting motifs in varying degrees of distortion and regularity. Weavers created design fields with design elements of equal or fluctuating emphasis, in which what was dominant and what was recessive remains unresolved. Weavers juxtaposed colors, especially contrasting colors, to create dramatic effects. Weavers enhanced visual impact with the exploration of spatial possibilities. The relationships between positive and negative space and between foreground and background have been important in kilim weaving. Using minor designs or manipulation of the weave structure, weavers created designs that are visible and powerful from a distance, but also are engaging at close proximity.

All of these characteristics were also present in other Turkish textiles, including products of urban workshops.

Studies such as Patricia Daugherty’s fieldwork published in 1999, in which she interviewed contemporary village weavers to assess village weavings help us to comprehend the aesthetic choices Anatolian kilim weavers might have been making a few centuries ago and the criteria they used to judge their work.  

It appears that weavers preferred:
- clarity and continuity in their designs, achieved through clearly drawn design elements and color harmony inside and outside a motif or design area;
- logical layout of the design and logical relationships between design elements;
- the presentation of one large coherent statement instead of small scattered design elements floating incoherently in the field.

The creation of color aesthetics and harmony is innate as much as it is learned. That is why one weaving tradition uses certain colors while others use different colors. This distinction benefits the recognition and separation of each culture’s weaving, but does not mean that there is no principle that connects diverse weaving traditions. There are common-sense approaches that may be considered innate, such as the desire to achieve legibility through a high contrast between design element and ground. For instance, on the one hand a weaver may want to avoid big contrasts of both lightness and saturation in favor of pleasant, easy-on-the-eyes blend of colors, while realizing that on the other hand, limited areas of sharply contrasting accents bring visual interest.

In tapestry weave, the relationship between positive and negative space created through color is always important. Besides the mechanics of how a design is created, the use and variation of colors is an important consideration because color transforms the overall sense of the textile.

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Anatolian kilim weavers were deeply aware of this and took advantage of it. They wove the same design with different colorways, creating kilims with entirely different feelings and looks. Until the late nineteenth century, they had to work within the confines of a very limited palette based on available natural dyes. But they still could produce unsurpassed effects of color. They did so by exploiting to the fullest the color potential of this natural palette through using the dyes on their own, in combination, or in different concentration, and using different mordants. Red, blue, and yellow were the primary colors upon which kilim weavers built their vocabulary. Purple and light orange-pink were two very characteristic colors in old Anatolian kilims.

The uncompromising and uncluttered design seen on many early Anatolian kilims leaves large areas of plain color exposed. The kilim weavers worked skillfully with this aspect. They emphasized the color combinations and juxtapositions in the outlines of the individual design elements and the negative space around design elements. They employed the contrast of light and dark in the design of kilims as a device for giving emphasis to the principal motifs. Using a thin outline of another color that is distinct from both neighboring colors emphasized the demarcation between two color areas; this in turn enhanced the contrast between the adjacent area of colors. Unfortunately, yarns used for outlines in many old kilims have disintegrated with the passage of time, making it more difficult for us to appreciate the total effect without close examination.

**Anatolian kilim: symbolism, origin, and dating**

We can posit that the designs on long kilims were expressions of weavers’ personal histories. A weaver might have related important events in the life of her nomadic group through these intimate expressions. It is almost impossible to know how to interpret or unlock these expressions without having been a part of the community when the textile was created or without directly communicating with its weaver. A textile can function as a document of the weaver’s memory, a host of symbolic reminders of her family and friends, an abstract portrayal of social affinities she developed during the creative process of weaving. Since the associational meanings died with the weaver and her family, it is impossible to rebuild the personal meanings invested in a given kilim.

The two major questions that occupy Anatolian kilim studies are when and where kilim weaving began in Anatolia and when and where Turkmen started weaving kilims.

The earliest use of the term *kilim*, which we assume to be referring to tapestry-woven utilitarian textiles, appears to be traceable to the beginning of the thirteenth century when Anatolia was under the control of Selçuk Sultanate of Rum. If the kilims were being woven in Anatolia in the thirteenth century, when and where did they first appear in the region?

There are two theories about the origin of the kilim weaving in Anatolia. One is the Turkmen theory, which argues that kilim weaving and its designs were brought from Central Asia with Turkish migration. Anatolian kilim tradition was an outgrowth of a cultural continuum which, while it might have also included other influences, had at its center the culture of Turkic people.

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The second origin theory is the goddess theory, which argues that kilim weaving and its designs are native to Anatolia and predate Turkish migration. Adherents to this theory believe that despite all of the cultural transformations Anatolia passed through over the millennia, the kilim weaving tradition indicates the survival of indigenous populations who preserved the old beliefs and ways.

There are still myriad questions to be answered before either of these theories can be proven correct. Many of these questions surround the Turkmen migration to Anatolia and the origin of all kilim weaving: Exactly what kind of weaving technology, technique, and design tradition did Anatolia have by the time of the great Turkmen migrations? What kind of weaving tradition did the Turkmen carry with them when they migrated? Was there in either population a kilim tradition that could be regarded as the ancestor of what has become known as the Anatolian kilim? How did these two traditions interact in Anatolia once the various nomadic groups began their long process of assimilation and coexistence?

Although concrete evidence is scarce, the history of the region pre- and post-Turkish arrival has been reconstructed slowly in the past few decades with revived interest in the pre-Mongol history of Anatolia.\(^6\) We know very little about the Turkic nomads that migrated into Anatolia. Their histories, were written primarily by others—mostly by Persian and Arab bureaucrats and scholars, if written at all—and the elite urban literati exhibited little to no interest in the social or artistic output of the nomadic groups moving through Iran and Anatolia.

In terms of tapestry weaving, there is clear evidence that it was carried out in West Asia long before the Turkish nomads arrived. This evidence includes early Islamic textiles as well as much earlier late Roman and Byzantine textiles. Although the technique was not foreign to the region when the Turkish nomads arrived, there are no surviving example with designs that could be considered clear precursors of Anatolian kilim designs. There also is no surviving conclusive evidence of the types of designs and weaving techniques used and brought by the Turkic nomad weavers into Anatolia in the tenth century.

It is extremely hard to establish the date and provenance of Anatolian kilims, especially ones predating the 1870s. These difficulties arise because these are traditional textiles, are woven by nomads, and are used in very harsh environments preventing large survival rates.

Anatolian kilim weaving is a traditional weaving, which meant that it was highly conservative, utilizing the same designs over multiple generations. The relative isolation of nomadic groups from mainstream cultural and aesthetic events of the Ottoman Empire was another important reason for this conservatism.

Many surviving kilims in collections date to the period from the late seventeenth century to the early twentieth century. Although some experts have tried to place surviving kilims in time

through radiocarbon dating, these attempts have had limited success, as kilims were made relatively recently and are not good candidates for this technique.\textsuperscript{7}

This kilim was Carbon 14 dated and the results indicates that it was 54.1\% likely that it was produced between 1712 and 1821, AD 1661-1708 (18.6\%) and AD 1835-1880 (8.2\%) likely. Overall calibrated age has 95\% confidence limit. Kilim, southern Anatolia, early 18th century- early 19th century, wool, slit tapestry weave, The Textile Museum 2013.2.57, The Megalli Collection. 385.5 X 155 (151.5 X 61 inches), warp horizontal

The reasons for the small survival rate of this material are threefold. Firstly, kilims were used far more heavily than carpets, which survive in abundance. Secondly, the environment in which kilims were used was exceptionally harsh on the textiles. Thirdly, slit tapestry weave creates a lighter fabric that could be carried around easily, but it is not sturdy enough to withstand continuous heavy use.

In terms of giving provenance to these textiles, the difficulty arises from the way nomads live. They move continuously, sometimes splitting into smaller groups and sometimes reconnecting. There are very few nomadic groups in Anatolia whose centuries-long movements were accurately documented. Because of these movements, we can identify various communities across Anatolia weaving very similar designs that are considered part of one or another group’s design repertoire. This makes it very hard to provenance kilims accurately when they are collected out of context.

We know that kilims are a potent expression of the nomadic and peasant culture in Anatolia as well as a highly personal expression of rural women, but they also were molded by a profusion of powerful aesthetic influences originating from the many ethnic groups that make up the Anatolian culture. Although work on deciphering of Anatolian kilims is ongoing, there is no denying that Anatolian kilims, with their bold but simple coloration, large scale, and skillfully balanced designs have a very strong visual power for contemporary eyes. The beauty and mystery that surround their origin, history, and design serve to amplify this aesthetic power.