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Cicero said "All the arts affecting culture have a certain common bond and are connected by a blood relationship one to the other".

With this letter I propose to take you on a small journey to bring to you some of the glories of the weaver's art and to share with you the pleasures, delights and beauty in Oriental rugs. I warn you that exposure to Oriental rugs can only result in addiction and bring delight and beauty to your lives.

The pile carpet is a modern amenity in the West. It was almost unknown in the 17th century and even in the 18th century. Not until the 19th century after the power loom was thoroughly established, had the pile carpet been considered a necessity by poor and rich alike.

But in Persia, rugs have been in common use for centuries. At what point in history man first tied wool to warp threads and left two ends protruding to form the pile is not known with certainty. Xenophon, in 400 **B.C.** referred to carpets the Persians placed under their beds for softness. Other references exist, placing pile carpets back as far as 529 **B.C.**, the time of Emperor Cyrus.

Archeologists recently found a magnificent carpet in the ice covered grave of a Scythian Prince in the mountains of Eastern Siberia. This carpet, about **2' X 2'**, is certainly from at least the third century **B.C.** and is said to display a technical and artistic skill that is most amazing in a 2000 year old textile. The realism of the animals, the balance, the symmetry of all the elements of the design from the border to the central panel, prove that a long history of carpet weaving preceded this prehistoric example.

Persia in winter is a very cold country and rug weaving may have developed almost as a necessity by the Nomads that traveled through Persia with their flocks of sheep. Persians, by nature, are highly skilled people and are most artistic craftsmen. They would not have been long content to merely cover the floor of their tents with animal skins

to ward off the cold and damp, but would have soon fashioned a floor covering closer to the need, more varied and more colorful. The hand knotted carpet may very well have been evolved by art, from the sheepskin rug, the primal floor covering of the Pastoral Nomads of the Plateau that runs from Asia Minor through Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan and ultimately to the Gobi Desert in China

The principal countries that continue to produce rugs today are on this plateau: China, India, Turkistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Baluchistan, Persia and the Caucasian countries. All of these are contiguous and although there is much diversity in their countries, there is much in common. From the earliest time in recorded history, this part of Southeastern Asia has been subject to invasion and to constant struggles between the different races in the area for ascendancy. From the Gobi Desert, the Altai Mountains, the Deserts of Arabia, waves of the Mongols, the Turks and the Arabs have in turn devastated the land.

One victor after another has extended its power from the banks of the Indus River to the Mediterranean and has brought the conquered lands and people its art, its skills, its influence and has taken to its home some of the same from the conquered. The result is that Oriental textile art today is of a composite character and widespread throughout this entire area.

As was the case with the earliest shepherd weavers, many Nomads today living in remote parts of Asia, spin the wool from their own flocks, then color it with dyes brewed from herbs, roots insects that they personally gathered and then finally weave it according to well known patterns into fabrics.

However more commonly in large communities today the weaving of Oriental rugs involves a division of labor.

- (1) Shepherds provide the wool.
- (2) Professional dyers color the yarns.
- (3) Artists conceive the designs and the colorings.
- (4) Weavers produce the carpets.

The materials used in Oriental rugs are almost wholly of plant or animal origin. The piles of almost all are made of the wool of sheep, although goats and camels, yak and even human hair have been used. Some of the finest and most desired are made with a pile of silk. The warp and weft have been made of wool, cotton and jute. Since all materials are native to the country where they are used, they are affected by the climate, humidity, altitude and fertility and these factors impart to rugs their distinctly local character.

Sheep's wool has been preferred for the pile of rugs because of its warmth, the facility with which it can be spun and tied into knots and also to the fact that since the time of Abraham, the inhabitants of these areas have been shepherds and have followed their calling from Asia Minor, Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, India to the Steppes of Tartary in China. Those areas have vast pasture lands that are better suited than other parts of the world to nourish sheep with exceptionally fine fleeces. In fact, these districts appear to be the natural habitat of bands of magnificent native sheep with enormous horns and grey-brown wool from which the flocks that cover the hills and mountains of Western Asia seem to have descended. Centuries of care have brought about an evolution in this native stock; in no other parts of the world are there sheep with longer or more silken fleeces.

And as with most things there are different grades of wool. The nature and quality of the fleece depends on the climate, the pasturage, and the care the sheep receive. The fleece of mountain sheep differs from that of the same strain from warmer desert areas.

Of all fibers, wool requires the greater care in preparing for use. In some remote areas of the Orient, the lustrous colors are attributed to the fact that it is dyed in its naturally greasy state. In others, grease and dirt are carefully removed. Proper cleansing is a craft passed from parent to child and is practiced in different ways depending on hardness or alkalinity of the available water supply.

After thorough washing, the wool is sorted, picked and combed by hand and finally spun into yarn. Spinning wheels are used and in remote areas primitive spindles or stones are employed. Spun yarn is washed and rewashed and left to dry in the sun and then it is ready for dyeing.

The most pleasing effect of Oriental art in any field has been associated with color. Without it, the beauty of the tiles of Persia, the porcelains of China, the magnificent textiles of Asia would all fade into insignificance and oblivion.

If we praise the artist that combines different colors to create the art that delights our senses, then we must also praise the craftsmen, the artisan who creates the color with his knowledge of the secrets of dye and their proper application; the beauty of the finished product is more dependent on the dyers skills than on any other. The knowledge of dyeing is passed on from father to son for generations. Which particular vegetable, which root, which leaf, which fruit, which insect, which combination will produce the desired color, shade, tint is a closely guarded secret. Some blues come from the leaves of the plant indigo. Some reds come from the roots of the plant, Madder, other reds from the insect Cochinal. Some yellows come from berries, some from the Sumac leaves, some from the roots of the Turmeric plant.

DYEING

In a book on Oriental rugs, I chanced on a formula; really a recipe purported to have been in a manuscript owned by a dyer who claimed to be the descendant of 20 generations of dyers from Tabriz in which instructions are given for making different colors. "To make Birbuls Blue: take Cinnabar, Indigo and Alum, grind and sift lighter than the light dust of the high hills, soak for 10 hours, keep stirring, put in the wool and soak for many more hours. Boil for 3 hours, wash in curd water, water in which curds and whey have been well beaten up, leave for 3 hours and then wash and beat again in water". As you can see, dyeing is just partly craft, actually it's mostly art.

To this day, yarn is dyed using materials and techniques that seem almost like Alchemy. In addition, much yarn is now dyed using modern chemical aniline and chrome dyes that are faster and less complicated in application.

WEAVING

Oriental rugs are generally woven on an upright loom. The loom has an upper and lower beam, around which are wound parallel warp threads that are kept under tension. As the weaving begins, a short webbing is woven at the lower end to protect the tufts from wear and to provide a foundation on which to weave the balance of the carpet. The weaving of the pile begins - one horizontal row of pile tufts is knotted in place and then this row is combed or pounded down to make it tight. A shuttle with a weft thread is passed from one side to the other, the heald rod is moved to change the position of alternate warp threads, the shuttle is passed back, weft threads are combed down tightly and the horizontal row is tied. In this fashion, the entire carpet is woven.

The number of weavers at the loom varies according to the number of wives and children in the household and the size of the carpet. The length of time necessary to weave a given area of carpet varies with the skill of the weaver and the tightness of the weave, but measured with our western notion of time, takes eternity.

DESIGN

However well woven, however magnificent in color, Oriental rugs would soon lose their fascination for us if the designs and patterns were not at least partially an expression of

the simple lives of these people, their religious feelings, and the mysticism that pervades the thought and the philosophy of these Eastern races. Even Nomadic rugs frequently have many reminders of everyday life. Whether it's the outline of a goat or camel, or a realistically drawn-flower, they are all suggestive of day to day association.

Religion has exercised an important influence also. Some designs transmitted from earliest times are associated with idolatry. Some are attributed to Zoroaster, the Parsees, Buddhism, Mohamadenism and even Christianity. The designs and symbols can also be interpreted as an expression of the vague philosophic teachings of the Ancients. It would be only natural for a weaver seated at a loom day after day tediously tying knot after knot to not only express artistic taste, but also the spirit of his inner thoughts. Thoughts that today may be poorly defined and little understood but nonetheless, expresses his feelings and his attempt to understand the meaning of his universe.

The patterns of most Oriental rugs are chiefly decorative. In virtually all, a border of few or many stripes surrounds a central field. The border serves the same purpose as a frame surrounding a Rembrandt or a Degas. Border designs can be geometric, solid or floral, can be elaborate or simple. The central field designs are even more diverse. They can be a mass of unrelated and detached figures as in some Nomadic rugs or can be repetitive designs as in some Turkomans. They can be intricate floral patterns, or can be formal designs with magnificent medallions and large open areas.

Oriental rugs are classified according to the country, the district, and villages in which they were woven and since there are hundreds, if not thousands of these villages, there is an honest difference of opinion as to the origin of many pieces. Fortunately or unfortunately rugs from a specific area generally have a strong resemblance and the exception proves the rule. However if you agree that a rug is a rug is a rug, or more pointedly a rose by any other name is as sweet, then you will surely agree that a Kerman, a Khorassan, a Kashan, a Kazvin, a Kula, a Kuba, a Kabistan, a Kazak, a Kurdistan, a Karabagh, a Khiva, a Koradja by any other name can be just as lovely, as beautiful, as delightful to behold, to enjoy, to possess.

Yours truly,

Ara K. Pridjian