

## Boarding at gate C14

For Jürg Rageth, over four decades dedicated to textiles have culminated in the groundbreaking *Turkmen Carpets. A New Perspective*. Markus Voigt meets the researcher, collector, former gallerist and radiocarbon-dating pioneer on the occasion of the publication of his magnum opus



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When 20-year-old Jürg met his future wife Esther he exclaimed that he must have met her before. Esther thought this a somewhat clumsy pick up line but nevertheless agreed to see him again. Still at the courtship stage, he discovered a photograph album in Esther's apartment and realised they had been in the same kindergarten class. His only problem was that in the photo Esther was hugging another boy.

I was told this charming story over dinner at his home in Riehen, near Basel, and at once a common denominator emerged. Before we had even started to talk about his life's work, Jürg remarked, 'I don't know about faces, but I have an elephant's memory for designs.'

Jürg's obsession with textiles began in 1974 when a friend took him to see 'Uzbek', a ground-

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breaking exhibition of Central Asian textiles at the Basel Gewerbemuseum curated by the German dealer Thomas Knorr. 'After twenty minutes I was heavily infected with the rug bug, I must have had a fever,' Jürg remembers. He immediately fell in love with Uzbek suzanis, but his budget led him to smaller objects. So small Central Asian embroideries were his first purchases. On a table in a corner of the exhibition was a huge pile of textiles for sale for visitors to rummage through. He found three pieces he liked, hid them and hurried home for the money. Two of the embroideries are still

in his possession. Soon after followed a charming child's dress from Hyderabad (2).

Jürg was trained as a technical draughtsman. Precise drawings of cold steel parts do not necessarily seem like a prerequisite for dealing with the soft and creative world of textiles, but his trained eye found an easy way into the inner workings of patterns. He soon came across his first kilim, and was fascinated by its design. He thought to himself, 'This can't just be decoration.' As it happened he was reading about shamanism at the time, and wondered whether the motifs in the kilim could be related to shamanistic symbols.

This idea was soon discarded, but his enthusiasm for Anatolian kilims grew ever stronger.

In 1985 a friend in Turkey asked him to write the introduction to a catalogue for a kilim exhibition in Rome. In it Jürg shared the results of his research on the possible origin of kilim designs for the first time, investigating connections to the ancient Near East, perceptions about the cosmos and primordial symbolism. 'I fell under the spell of motifs and designs,' he says, 'and couldn't stop thinking about them.' He hasn't stopped since, delving deeper and extending his ideas in other publications and exhibitions.

Jürg is a classic autodidact. He saw motifs, recognised them, researched them, found analogies and used art-historical methods to put them into long chains of evolution. Although he never had a formal education, thanks to his curiosity, eagerness to learn and discipline we can now benefit from the fruits of his unofficial dissertation, *Turkmen Carpets. A New Perspective*.

'Somehow, everything can get interesting if you start looking carefully at it,' Jürg says and Esther adds: 'When he starts digging he becomes a mole.' The 'digging' eventually turned to more eastern areas. Travels to Turkey to see and understand kilims replaced earlier trips to Spain. Visiting the bazaar, he knew exactly what he was after. Just looking at the folded backs in the piles of carpets and kilims, he pulled out what he wanted to see. More than one of the proprietors asked him if he was a dealer. 'Well, maybe I should become one,' he eventually said to Esther. Back home he took up a 'proper' job for half a year to get the capital needed for the first buying trip. This marked the start of Gallery Rageth, which between 1982 and 2000 was known for wonderful kilims.

At the same time, Jürg's search for the origin of kilim designs continued and was shared with the textile world at the ICOC and other conferences and in many publications. He is also a member of the Basel rug society, serving as



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1 Jürg Rageth at home in Riehen

2 Child's dress, Hyderabad, India, 19th century

3 West-central Anatolian kilim fragment. Published in *Frühe Formen und Farben*, Basel 1990, pl.12

president from 2001 to 2016. Since 1990 he has been the organiser of numerous symposia on topics ranging from kilims to Moroccan textiles and Baluch weavings.

In 1995 Jürg was asked by the Swiss pharmaceutical company Ciba-Geigy to examine a white-ground Selendi prayer rug in their collection. In the course of his research, the question of it being a fake came up. Gallerist Peter Bausback advised him to have the piece radiocarbon dated at ETH in Zurich. The rest is carpet history (HALI 98, 1998, cover and pp.84-91).

After the Selendi rug was proven to be genuine, Jürg came into closer contact with Georges Bonani and the Zurich C-14 laboratory, which opened a new window. At Bonani's suggestion, a first Anatolian kilim was tested. It fell into a 17th/18th-century time range, all but excluding the 19th century. This encouraging result led to a series of tests of Anatolian kilims from private collections. Already assumed by many connoisseurs, a date before 1800 for Anatolian kilims could now be scientifically proven. Some pieces proved clearly to predate 1650, but as with the first tested piece, even the post-1650 results were helpful in ruling out most of the 19th century. It is in large measure due to Jürg that radiocarbon dating is nowadays more systematically used for the testing of antique carpets and textiles.

A triumph came when the well-known collector Herwig

Bartels approached Jürg for assistance arranging C-14 dating of a Moroccan *haik*. The textile dated surprisingly early, between 1450 and 1650. Invited to Bartels' riad in Marrakesh to deliver the result, Jürg serendipitously flew from Paris boarding at gate C14.

In January 1997, Jürg was approached by German Turkmen carpet collectors Peter Hoffmeister and Hans Christian Sienknecht. They asked for assistance in dating some of their carpets, which led to the testing of some fifty weavings in Zurich. The Swiss Lottery Fund gave a substantial grant for a book in which to publish the results, as had previously been done with Anatolian kilims. As a consequence more collectors contributed their pieces to the Turkmen project, willing to bear the full costs of radiocarbon dating.

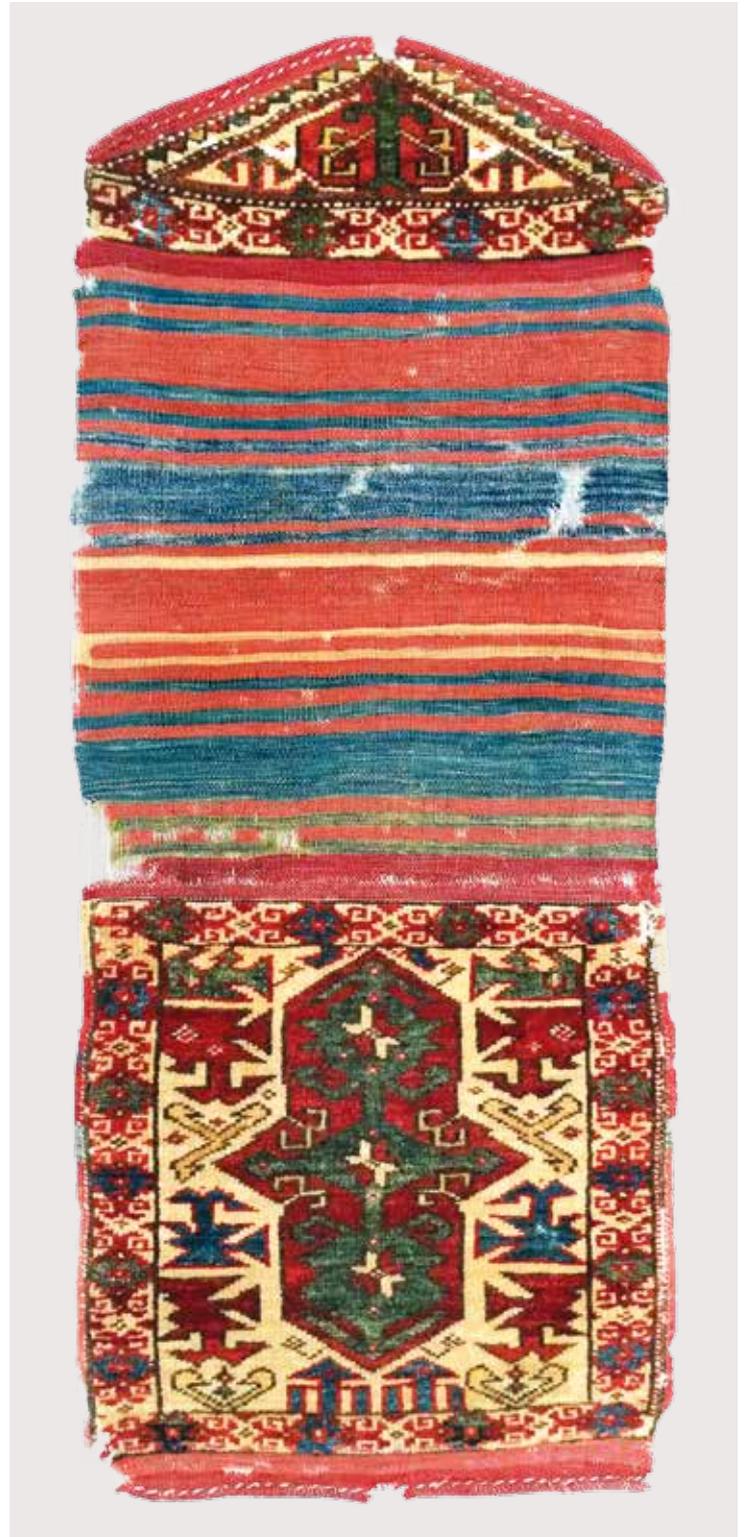
Without in-depth knowledge of Turkmen rugs, Jürg approached this challenge with characteristic determination and thoroughness. He focused on dyestuffs and mordants, historical background and of course the designs. It is here, in the search of the origin and development of motifs, that the Anatolian kilims and the Turkmen carpets reconnect. Jürg compares Anatolian kilims with the music of Mozart, and Turkmen carpets with Bach. The former is extrovert, spontaneous, emotional and flamboyant, whereas the latter is rational, introvert and intellectual, with

the beauty revealing itself only to the cognoscenti.

Over the past sixteen years the book has morphed into the major work on Turkmen rugs, featuring dye tests, mordant tests, C-14 tests, design analysis and structural analysis, but also incorporating the historical and cultural background.

During my visit to Jürg's house in Riehen, I stood in awe in front of one of his bookshelves, admiring the endless neat folders in which thousands of notes, drawings, pictures and slides are stored. Jürg closed his gallery in 2000 to focus solely on the book. I think the carpet world should bow to his wife Esther, whose job paid the bills during this time. In early 2012 Jürg decided that he had enough material. With the help of DeWitt Mallary, he started the huge project of translating the work.

When I started reading his book I was so impressed that I wrote him some 'fan mail'. Now, during the long drive along empty motorways in northern France to meet him, I was wondering if that wasn't rather selfish, amounting to stealing time from someone who has precious little left. But today I think that it wasn't like that. Jürg is more than happy to share his enthusiasm and his scholarship with us. It is an important book, a milestone in carpet literature, and I urge everyone to really read it. Too often we are 'in it' just for the pictures, aren't we?



4 West Anatolian bag, 19th century. A gift from a Turkish friend