

TURKMEN CARPETS. A NEW PERSPECTIVE

By Jürg Rageth, in collaboration with Hans Christian Sienknecht, with contributions by Georges Bonani, Jan Wouters and Ina Vanden Berghe
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 Reviewed by Ulrich Schneider

Jürg Rageth has worked for almost two decades on this seminal publication in a specialist field of oriental weavings—Turkmen carpets. Having previously worked with Anatolian kilims, his analysis of scientific data from radiocarbon dating of wool samples and thin-layer chromatography testing for dyestuffs, considered in the light of extensive studies on the history of Turkmen rug designs, allows the ‘new perspective’ of the title.

These last twenty years have been a propitious time for a new approach to works of art previously thought ethnologically inferior to those produced by advanced European and Asian cultures. The 1995 London exhibition ‘Africa: The Art of a Continent’ opened eyes—often clouded by a colonial view—to the high cultures of this southern world. At the same time, Jacques Kerchach managed to persuade Jacques Chirac, the mayor of Paris and later French president, to pay tribute to African, Asian, Australasian and American art, and even to have masterpieces of *L’art premier* included in the Louvre. Chirac immortalised himself by establishing a new art museum by the Seine, which brought together the collections of several ethnographic museums. It is revealing that in 2006, the only name that could be found for the building shaped like a massive container vessel simply echoed its location, Musée du Quai Branly.

This was a time when European cities made a clean sweep of old names such as ‘Ethnology Museum’ or ‘Museum of Ethnography’; Munich now has its Museum Fünf Kontinente, Frankfurt a Weltkulturen Museum, Basel its Museum der Kulturen, and Vienna, inevitably, a Weltmuseum. In 2003 Neil MacGregor created the Enlightenment Gallery, a huge museum within the British Museum displaying the history of man’s efforts to put the world in order. The Louvre, in turn, opened a very large Islamic department in 2012; under a high-tech nomad tent, it presents the art of the Near East in a meaningful setting incorporating Late Antique,

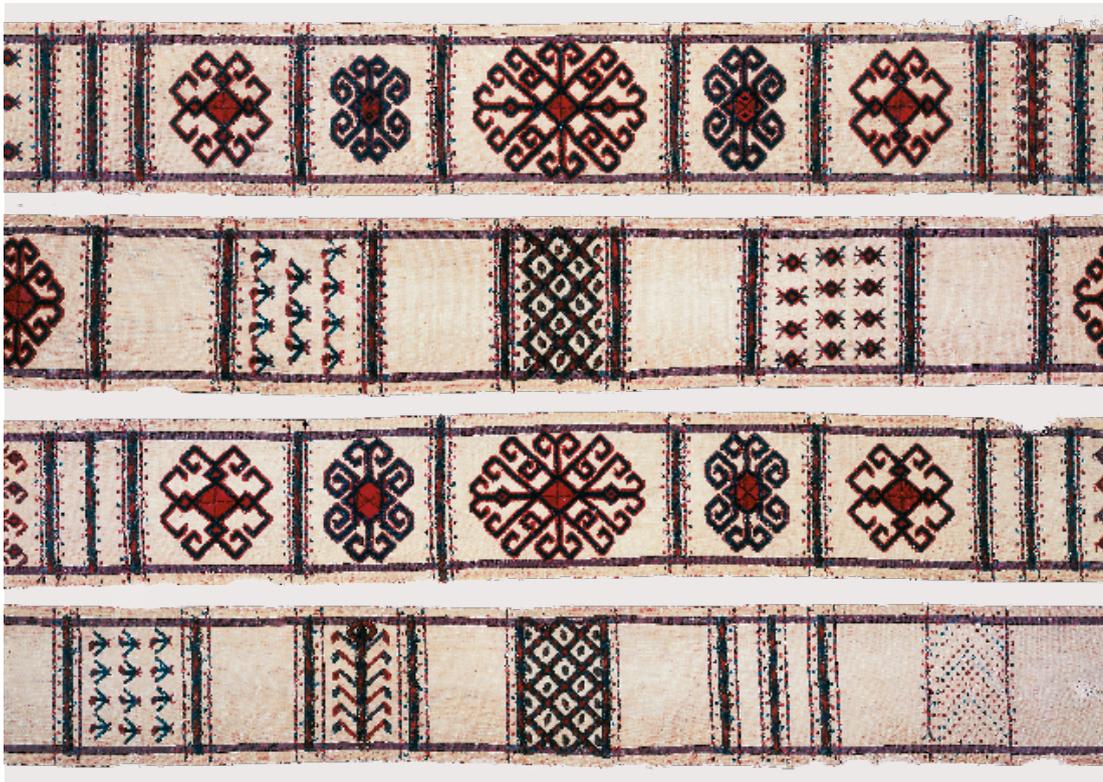


Jewish and early Christian cultures. Berlin is currently building the Humboldt Forum—a prefab city palace—in a highly disorganised way, and we can only hope that MacGregor, appointed in haste to head the founding directorship, and his co-directors will soon break their hermetic silence and tell the world how they intend to present non-European cultures.

In his introductory essay, Rageth follows recent research in tending towards the view that Turkmen tribes began to settle in Central Asian oases during the 16th century. Based on recent finds of a very early date, he proposes that the art of the pile rug developed there in the pre-Christian era. During the 10th century, this multicultural blend of peoples was united from the Caspian Sea to the Pamir Mountains under the umbrella of Islam, a process that also changed the designs of their rugs. However, the only surviving Turkmen rugs date from the 15th and 16th centuries, following the return of the tribes from exile after successive invasions.

This comprehensive study begins with a basic introduction to the working materials. 26 private lenders, and eight institutions in Russia, USA, Qatar and France, submitting their works to scientific testing, must be lauded. Rageth illustrates 128 items in excellent colour, and 39 objects in black-and-white. They are grouped into the familiar Salor, Saryk, Tekke, Ersari, and later Chodor and Arabachi tribal groups. He draws on the latest insights to subdivide the so-called Yomut family into the Yazir-Karadashli, Yomut, and other groups known by names of convenience (‘eagle-göl’, ‘P-Chodor’). His reference pieces are further organised within tribal groups by object type.

Individual descriptions are organised using the same, highly objective system of tribal names and geographic classification as well as types of object, including their designs, structures, sizes and dates. These are followed by provenance, primary literature and comparative pieces, with detailed citations. Rageth then gives



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1 Salor Turkmen kapunuk, second half 17th or 18th century. 1.30 x 1.30 m (4' 3" x 4' 3"). The use of metal threads, here for the fringes, is very unusual for Turkmen piled weaving

2 Turkmen 'Eagle-gul' tent band (detail), first half 17th century. 18.5 cm x 12.70 m (7" x 41' 8"). In this tent band, C-14 dated between 1520 and 1670, the use of Mexican cochineal on tin mordant limits the C-14 dating range to the 17th century. Tin mordant with all probability was not in use before 1610

Overleaf

3 Ersari Turkmen chival with *ikat* design representing a garden, 18th or early 19th century. 1.60 x 0.74 m (5' 3" x 2' 5"). The highly stylised landscape design copies Uzbek silk-*ikat* designs, which may in turn look back to the designs of Sogdian *ikats*

technical analyses including materials, weaving and knotting structure and side and end finishes. When available, these are followed by dye and physical analyses to determine age. He refrains from discussing their condition, perhaps because of the detail illustrations provided. Tested dates range from 15th century (1), 16th century (12), 17th century (40), 18th century (40) and 19th century (34), to the 20th century (1), with most dating from well into the 17th century to 1880. This is significant because the textiles were produced when the speed of travel averaged less than 25 kilometres per day. In the study of dialects, this is not considered a factor that favours intermingling. We may thus assume that the rugs were produced using autochthonous techniques and design principles.

In the past three decades, science has found entry into international art history. Advanced materials science has helped gain an insight into the trade in raw materials, and of course that same science has led to the recent exposure of forgeries. In his analyses, Rageth

relies on the expertise of the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage in Brussels (KIK-IRPA) for dye analysis and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich

(ETH) for C-14 tests. Lending institutions also supplied their own analyses. Furthermore, he maintained a constant dialogue with scholars at the Abegg Foundation, Riggisberg.

Jan Wouters lucidly introduces the subject of dye analysis using high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) with diode-array detection (DAD), allowing complex dye mixtures to be separated in a short space of time. He explains the dyestuffs appropriate for different materials such as wool and silk (proteins) or cotton and linen (carbohydrates). In Turkmen weavings, it is especially useful to look at the

shades of red. Methods for analysing these reds are complex, so the large number of rugs of fairly similar age proved valuable for compiling comparative statistics. The biological sources available in a specific area can thus be determined with relative certainty, while at the same time verifying the trade in dyestuffs with neighbouring regions.

Wouters finds that the red dyes used in the Central Asian region originated not only from the tribes' own territories, but from an area ranging from China to the Mediterranean. Precious red dyes were obtained from female scale insects, supplemented by so-called Mexican cochineal from Central and South America, traded in Asia since 1580. Armenian, Polish, and

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Ekin cochineal were also used, as well as kermes and Indian lac. Madder and sappanwood provided red vegetable dyes. It is possible to separate the various red dyes with a fair degree of certainty. Ina Vanden Berghe then explains how this is achieved.

A difficulty is encountered in the use of mordants, as these change the dyes and must be separated. The 126 wool and silk samples examined produced varying results. While it was possible to determine the species of cochineal in all the wool samples, it could not always be established with certainty for the silk. Additional semi-synthetic and synthetic

dyes were found in late 19th-century pieces.

The reports have resulted in insights enabling attribution to tribes based on dye analysis. In particular, Salor-Saryk-Tekke weavings can be narrowed down according to the materials used. Intense shades of red were achieved by mixing Mexican and Armenian cochineal as well as lac. This study is the first to provide evidence of Mexican cochineal in Turkmen textiles.

The Salor only used lac. From the 17th century, intensity was enhanced by a tin mordant.

Dye research is particularly effective when combined with radiocarbon dating to determine age. Georges Bonani explains the procedure. All living beings take in C-14, so their time of death can be determined by measuring the decay of the isotope. Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) has significantly reduced the sample sizes and measuring times of C-14 materials. However, the massive impact of environmental changes in the past 300 years means that the C-14 results must be adjusted and correlated to other types of material analyses as well as to historic and stylistic evidence. Only then is it possible to determine the respective time spans with varying degrees of probability.

Age determination has played a central role since Turkmen rug studies began in the 19th century. Differences in condition were sometimes misleading. Scholars were often deceived by appearance and dated the oldest pieces to the 18th century. This changed with the advent of C-14 dating for the genre in 1997. Visual assessments and design analyses remained



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inaccurate, and attempts to assume the use of silk is a more recent technique also failed. The use of synthetic dyes allows items to be dated to the period after 1880. Purchase dates are important since Turkmen rugs only came into western hands in large numbers after 1880. In conjunction with statistical evaluations of dye materials, radiocarbon testing has permitted reliable dating of a small number of Turkmen rugs.

In the second volume, Rageth devotes five themes to the tribal groups and their weavings. He outlines the history of the tribe and its homeland, then discusses their weavings: techniques, materials, dyes and designs. Next he examines individual objects. His attention focuses primarily on tracing the origin of motifs, some of which may date back to sources from the distant past.

He challenges the view that the Salor were the dominant textile artists. Rather than bringing their art with them, as usually assumed, they probably adopted it after the 10th century from a group living in western Central Asia. However, their weavings are remarkable for the precision and complexity of their designs and materials. He surmises that Sogdian or Sasanian

pieces—in effect, the works of Mesopotamian high culture—served as models, with specific designs passed on until well into the 19th century. After the defeat of the tribe, the Saryk, Tekke and also the Yomut continued to use the same designs. In the case of the Ersari, Rageth throws light on the way in which ancient eastern representations of landscapes relate to ikat designs. He also traces the origins of the *mina khani* and *senmurv* designs. His chain of evidence is convincing and substantiated by many examples.

A long chapter is devoted to the origins and development of Turkmen rug designs from the local traditions of the oases of Margiana, Bactria, Sogdia and Chorasmia. Rageth aims to show that settled population groups in those areas passed their designs to the Turkmen tribes. He proceeds by examining groups of objects. His initial focus is on *ensis*, which he identifies as symbols of power and prestige objects used by the khans. He attributes the large number of surviving *ensis* to commercial production in the second half of the 19th century.

A second detailed study considers the *ak su* lattice (see HALI 187, pp.86-7) and a third the

chajkeölbagi, an X-shaped cross seen in the weavings of many tribes. The term translates as amulet bag, and there is evidence that it was used as such by the tribes. Rageth comes up with a consistent timeline for the 'Saint Andrew's Cross', tracing it from the Neolithic to the 20th century. Even those with well-founded doubts about its continuity will be swayed by the wealth of material, extending in geographic terms from the Indus to the Danube.

At almost 900 pages Rageth's *corpuswerk* can be said to be one of the most important publications in the field of Turkmen carpets. It combines the author's knowledge with contributions by leading scientists and collectors. As an art historian at home in medieval culture, I am familiar with long lines of continuity. Rageth's work can be commended as a manual for amateurs in the field of eastern textiles. For experts and collectors of rugs of other types, it offers references and a range of new ideas. In particular, his refreshingly unclouded interdisciplinary perspective, using all available methods from linguistics to isotope analysis, has allowed him to create a treasure trove that will inspire many new approaches to research.