

SYMBOLS AND THEIR MEANINGS IN THE CARPETS AND
PRAYER RUGS OF THE TURKISH, ARMENIAN AND PERSIAN TRADITIONS

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DECEMBER 6, 1988

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Oriental carpets are more than attractive patterns and colors, they are stories, beliefs and prayers. Patterns and designs for the rugs started before there was an alphabet. The images were actually picture writings, using tribal and religious symbols, the same symbols that were used in architecture and sculpture. The artists and craftspeople chose forms that were known to them, such as clouds, stars, trees and animals. These familiar images became symbols for ideals and philosophies of life. The rugs woven with these symbols were an integral part of the history, culture and religion of the people that wove them.

There is a basic design format that is found in most Oriental carpets and prayer rugs. In general the rugs and carpets have a central area of design bordered several times with geometric patterns. In prayer rugs the center of the rug is asymmetrical. The central shape is made up of three straight sides with one of the ends forming an archway or point to symbolize the entrance way of a place of worship. The carpets that are not used for prayer have a symmetrical center section, with an all-over pattern or an elaborate motif such as the tree of life. Traditionally, the colors used in the weaving of Oriental carpets depended on what raw

materials were available to the craftspeople. Wool dyes were and still are made out of such things as berries, bugs, wood chips, nuts and vegetables.

There are three main categories of Oriental carpets. There are the rugs created out of the Persian, Turkish and Armenian traditions. The symbolism of color is common between the three groups, but the beliefs and philosophies of the Turks and Persians is very different from those of the Armenians. In the late fourth century and into the fifth century, Armenia, which was under Iranian rule, was converted to Christianity. Their religious leader was St. Gregory the Illuminator. His writings and teachings, especially his accounts of his visions, led the Armenians into the Christian faith.

Turkish and Persian rugs come out of the Islamic tradition, which was founded by the prophet Mohammed. The word Islam means "I submit to the will of God."¹ The followers of this faith, or Moslems, belong to two opposing branches. There is a fundamental difference of creed practiced by the Turks and the Persians. Because of this, the basic characteristics of their designs are different. The Turks are the traditional and conservative Moslems. They belong to the Sunnite sect. Basic to their belief is that on the day of judgment, God will require them to give a soul to the shapes they have created. Therefore, they do not make anything in the form of a living creature. In Turkish rugs and in the rest of Turkish possessions, there are no animal

or human images. The designs are are floral or geometrical.

The early Persian rugs came out of a more liberal Islamic tradition. The Persians, called Shites, delighted in their progressive ideas. "They put into their rugs in all sort of ways and places not in the least connected with the design, the forms of men, animals and birds the like of which can not be depicted in nature...Square-legged beasts and impossible winged creatures are sure signs of a Persian rug."²

The Islamic view of the world is fatalistic. They accept whatever life gives them with an 'It is written to be so' attitude. ³ Moslems approach life with an attitude that they will undertake any task, including the weaving of a rug, and that task will be completed if fate wills it. They believe that only Allah should create something perfect. "The finished rug would be as near perfect as the weaver dared go. The phrase 'as near perfection as the weaver dare go' is deliberate for no weaver would be so presumptuous as to produce a perfect work of art, for perfection by mortal hands was to invite the 'Evil Eye', and due humbling for such presumption."⁴ Somewhere in the rug there will be a break in line, or a slight change in the shape, color, size or alignment of the design.

For the Moslems there is a simple explanation for all that happens. If is is good, it was willed to be that way. If a misfortune strikes, it is the Evil Eye. Avoiding the Evil Eye is as strong now to both the nomads and the city dwellers as it was in the Middle Ages. Blue is the color to

counteract all evil influences. Blue beads are sewn on garments to ward off evil spirits that might endanger, tempt or enter the body and cause illness or death to the owner of the garment. If someone openly admires a weavers rug, to protect themselves from a curse, the weaver may sew blue beads along the edge of the rug. "Every horse, camel, donkey, or buffalo wears a string of blue beads around the neck if the owner can afford them, or if too poor to provide such a necklace, a few beads will be tied into the mane or tail of the animal or attached to the headstall. Every person in the interior of Turkey carries what is called the Evil Eye to ward off calamities. This talisman is a flat disk of blue glass pierced at the back to allow it to be strung and worn about the neck if desired. In the center on the front is painted an eye in black, white and yellow and it is the imitation of this eye which is so often seen on rugs..."⁵ There are other ways the Persians and Turks protect themselves from the Evil Eye. In some rugs a small rooster is woven in. It is so small, it often goes unnoticed. Roosters are believed to have evil with in them, so they protect against other evil. A rosette of wool resembling an eye with pupils and iris of different colors is often woven into the borders of the rugs. On some rugs the weaver will leave long colored threads extending from the selvages. "They are intended to serve as jumping-off places for any little spirit or oriental gremlin that have not already been pushed, kicked, or charmed off the rug."⁶

The Christian Armenians don't acknowledge a belief in the Evil Eye. They combine their Christian faith with their Eastern Heritage. Over the years, there has been little change in the art of the Oriental rug. This is due not only because of poor communication and means of travel, but also because the people of this part of the world have an inherent dislike of change. Most the changes that have occurred have been the result of war, invasions and missionaries. Although different in philosophy and religion, aesthetically the rugs of the Turks and Persians and those of the Armenians are similar. They have common motifs, patterns and colors. This is especially true of the use of geometric patterns.

"Geometric motifs are far and away the most common type of patterning on rugs. Geometric forms - such as rectangles, diamonds, hexagons, octagons, medallions, crosses and eight-pointed stars are used singly, in running strips, interlaced, or inscribed one within the other."⁷ What often appears as strictly a geometric pattern, is actually a floral motif or even a bird or animal.

In Oriental rugs, the bird is a common motif. It is often the symbol of the "winged soul, of spiritual aspiration and extension , as a reference to the souls of the departed."⁸ In the Iranian tradition, a large lonely bird such as the falcon or eagle is the intermediary between man and gods. The bird ensures the welfare of the righteous. The Armenians use the bird to symbolize salvation and resurrection. St. Gregory the Illuminator, in his teachings from the Armenian catechisms wrote:

The birds are nature's trumpet for the exhortation of virtue...Those who stand in this loyalty to the command of righteousness will take the form of a dove with rapid wings and will fly on the wings of the Holy Spirit to attain the kingdom of heaven, for which the saints remained yearning on earth. To this the prophet aspired and waited with desire, saying: 'Would that someone would give me wings as a dove that I might fly up'. This the blessed Paul, the fellow apostle of your apostle explained in the letter of consolation by which he comforted the Thessalonians: 'We who are alive and who remain are caught up with the dead in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall be forever with the Lord.' They will be joined to the band to Christ, flying the swift flight of shining-feathered white doves, who have taken and represented in themselves the form of the Son of God who appeared to them...He ordered them to show in themselves that He might make spiritual wings to grow on them so that they could join the divine band."⁹

One of the most important symbols used in Christianity is the symbol of the dove. The dove represents the Holy Spirit that was sent to earth to be with mankind after the ascension of Christ. The Armenians use the symbol of the dove which is drawn directly out of the Bible. Although they get most of their religious imagery from Christian influences, the Eastern tradition is still important to many of their beliefs and therefore their ways of expressing those beliefs. "The Iranian tradition is significant to the Armenian development because parts of Armenia were under its domination during the early Christian period. Probably as a result of the interaction between these cultures, Armenian historians included this Iranian concept of the Bird in their tales. It appears, for example, in stories told by early medieval historians as the protector of the royal

child...Thus, the symbolism of birds in Armenian art may carry both Persian as well as Christian meanings."¹⁰ 'Haw', which is the Armenian word for bird is related in their language to the word 'faith' or 'belief' which is 'hawak'¹¹

The eagle, often woven into Armenian rugs represents royalty and power. St. Gregory describes the eagle as a symbol for Christ who descends to the earth in the likeness of an eagle. Another image found in Armenian rugs is the image of two birds in conflict. Usually one bird is arched over a smaller bird, pecking at it. This is believed to represent the sacrifice of Christ who died so mankind could have eternal life. An example of this is an Armenian folk story of a pelican and her young. The story is interpreted as an allegory for Christ's sacrifice. "...the parent pelican kill their young who have struck at them. After mourning for three days, the mother bird feels compassion for them. By piercing her side and dropping her blood on their bodies, she brings them back to life."¹² Birds and other creatures used in pairs are common in Oriental rugs. In Armenia two birds are often placed on either side of a cross representing salvation, either side of a window representing Christ as the light or on either side of a cluster of grapes which symbolizes Christ's sacrifice.

The Persians use pairs of animals or fish also, however, they come from a very different philosophy. "An old Persian belief is that the world is flat, and rests upon the back of a huge turtle which holds it up from the depths. In the water surrounding the earth are two huge fishes, which swim

round and round the flat earth as if chasing each other. It is the momentum of their movements which causes the earth to turn around, bringing day and night, the changes of the seasons, and all other earthly phenomena...If the two fishes were ever to catch each other, or if the turtle were to be upset, the Persians believe the world would end."¹³ Inspired by this belief, weavers represent the world by a rosette surrounding two fishes. The turtle and fish pattern is often used in the border of a rug. The turtle is sometimes very clearly represented, and other times it becomes stylized and is only suggested by an outline.

More common in all Oriental rugs, and especially in Turkish rugs since they do not believe in representing animals or humans, are flower, vegetable and tree forms. One of the most common of these is the tree of life. It can be one tree growing out of the base and filling the rug or a series of small repeated trees. The cypress, which is most often used as the tree of life, is simplified by the nomads to a shape of two little leaves growing from a stem with a rosette at the top. However the tree is depicted, it is a symbol of immortality and eternal life. "To show the solid reality of life, the trees are represented with their roots firmly fixed in the ground...these trees also indicate that Man is erect, upright, and life-giving like a tree."¹⁴

Flowers which have been cut and put into a vase are woven into a rug to symbolize the transient and ephemeral nature of life. Most often roses are used. The roses in a

vase will become a pattern in the border of a rug as a secondary idea surrounding the main body of the rug. Other plant forms used are the weeping willow which expresses sorrow and the upright juniper tree, woven straight and solid represents elegance or arrogance. Prosperity is symbolized by an ear of corn or a sheaf of wheat. In the Christian tradition the Armenians wove grapes and grape vines as symbols of Christ and the body of followers of Christ.

The most commonly used symbol in the Armenian rug, and probably the most common Christian symbol, is the sign of the cross. St. Gregory had a vision involving the cross. "...he saw Christ accompanied by a host of angels descend to earth holding a golden hammer in his hand. When He struck the earth with the "great hammer of gold," Gregory saw "a circular base of gold...and on it an exceedingly tall column of fire, and on top of that a capital of cloud, and on top of that again a cross of light. He then saw three other bases and columns topped with crosses of light in the likeness of the Lord's cross..."¹⁵ The place in which he saw these visions was the place where the pagan King Trdat had the Christian woman Hrip'sime and her companions put to death for their faith in the early fourth century. The establishment of Christianity came directly from the events that followed; the punishment of King Trdat, St. Gregory's healing of him, and St. Gregory's preaching that led the King to salvation.¹⁶

Because of St. Gregory's importance to the spreading of Christianity and his visions of the cross, Armenian art is filled with images of the cross. In one passage of St.

Gregory's writings, Christ tells St. Gregory, "...all the crosses on the plains above the fiery altars signify that the holy name of Christ will be glorified in every place. And there were as many as the stars because the services of holiness will multiply like the stars."¹⁷ The cross is described in Armenian texts as 'the help of the faithful,' the 'defender of the Armenians,' the 'arm of the Holy church' and the 'guardian of our souls.'¹⁸ The cross is more than a symbol to the Armenians, it has become a sort of deity in and of itself. It is an image that may be prayed to just as they pray to God. The Armenians don't use the cross to show the suffering of Christ, but rather use it as a positive message of salvation. "For the Armenians, the cross is not just a symbol of "being a Christian," but a symbol of faith on many deep levels. It is, therefore, not surprising that crosses appear so frequently in Armenian rug design."¹⁹

The symbolism of color seems to transcend the philosophical differences between the three groups. As mentioned, the color of the greatest significance to all Eastern people is turquoise. It is used for good luck and to ward off evil. Red is the color of glory, strength and bravery. When yellow or gold are used, it is to symbolize wealth and worldly success. Black is the color of fighting and war, rose stands for dignity and blue for destiny. Green is a very important color to the people of the Islam faith and is rarely used. It is sacred to the Prophet Mohammed. White represents peace and tranquillity especially when used

in a prayer rug.

Many Oriental carpets are woven specifically for prayer rugs. To the followers of Mohammed, these rugs are intended to be used for prayer only. Five times a day the Moslem prays upon a carpet or a clean piece of cloth. The carpet is laid down so the worshiper faces Mecca, their holy city. A traditional prayer rug is woven with an asymmetrical pattern. On one end there is a pointed or rounded pattern called the prayer niche. It represents the doorway or entrance to a mosque. The shape of the point is determined by the tradition of the weaver's tribe or village or by the weaver's skill. In general, the nomads use a sharp point and the city weavers weave an elaborate domelike shape. The pointed or curved end is to be directed toward Mecca during prayers. The tree of life is often woven on the rug. Hands are represented symbolizing prayer and submission. Symbols of cleanliness are used, the comb and wash basin are important symbols of the process of cleaning oneself before prayers. A hanging lamp of candles, similar to the ones that are found in the Mosques are woven into the rugs. The worshiper kneels on the rug facing the pointed or curved end. During prayers he touches his forehead to the earth. His head comes to rest on an octagonal bit of clay from the holy city of Mecca which is placed in the prayer niche of the rug. Frequently, woven into the rug will be an octagonal space outlined in the pattern on the prayer niche where a piece of sacred earth is placed. "The prayer niche is a reproduction of the black stone of Mecca which according to Mohammedan tradition was

delivered to Abraham by the angel Gabriel. To shelter this stone, the old Hebrew temple was built. It is said to have been originally white but has been turned black by the contact with sinful men."²⁰

The Armenians have a prayer rug of their own. Being Christian, the prayer niche intended to honor Mecca is not used. However, many of the rugs are asymmetrical with a specific top and bottom. The Armenians wove their rugs as a gift to the church and as a prayer rather than to actually use them during praying. Little has been written about Armenian rugs compared to Oriental carpets from other areas because up until recently, it was believed the Armenians didn't do much weaving but were merchants and patrons of rugs. However, now historians believe there are many prayer rugs that are unmistakably Armenian because they have inscriptions on them written into them by the weaver. One weaver wove into her rug: "...I Gohar full of sin and weak of soul with my newly learned (matured) hands wove (this rug). Whosoever reads (this) say a word of mercy (to God) for me. In the year 1700."²¹

There are thousands of prayers and inscriptions on religious objects and carved into churches throughout Armenia. In the fifth century the Armenian alphabet was derived specifically to translate the Bible, the Liturgy and Christian texts into Armenians for missionary use to counter pagan influences from Iran. The inscriptions on rugs started immediately after the written language was developed. They

were used mainly to describe the gift that was being given to the church and to give the date of the gift. Other information was often added, such as where the work was created, the reason for giving the gift, an important event of the time, the people to be commemorated and the name of the king or head of the church. The patrons and craftspeople regarded their inscribed works as a prayer offering in gratitude to God for the saving for their souls. "Both patron and scribe valued the manuscript as a sacred object and regarded their participation in its creation to be a pious act which would serve as a permanent memorial to their family members, both living and dead."²² One Armenian rug has these words woven into the design, "...a prayer for my children and for the purification of my soul and that of my wife in order that we may enjoy mercy on the day of the visitation of the Lord. I plead with you who love Christ so that when you read this Holy Gospel, you will without fail beseech the Creator of everything to forgive all my sins; May The Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon me."²³

The written words themselves, much like the cross to the Armenians, became symbols of faithfulness. It is believed that the Biblical scripture, Luke 10:20, where Christ said 'You should rejoice...that your names are enrolled in heaven...', directly influenced the Armenian people making them desire that their names and the names of their families be on the rugs to be given to the church. "The idea of the church structure as a representation of heaven combined with the desire to have names recorded there in a permanent

register explains the impetus for the Armenians to inscribe dates, places and events on churches and the objects within them."²⁴ The church is believed to be the meeting place for believers on earth and those in heaven who were written in the register of life. The inscriptions very often lists the living family members with the deceased. The indication is that there was not a clear cut distinction made between the living and the dead, between heaven and earth and between their religious and daily lives.

Besides rugs woven for prayer and for gifts to the church, the Armenian, Turk and Persians also wove carpets specifically for other occasions, such as special celebrations or for burials. Rugs woven for burials are wrapped around the body and buried with the body. The Western world's custom of the pall for covering the coffin comes from this Eastern tradition.²⁵ Rugs used for burial usually have a tree design. The cypress is most commonly used. The cypress tree is planted in the cemeteries and a piece of the tree symbolizing immortality may be buried with the dead.

Some rugs are woven for nobility purely as a status symbol. In these types of rugs the patterns, designs, and colors are common to all three of the major rug weaving areas. These are hung on the walls, and are usually rolled up and stored away only to be used at times of celebration. Instead of woven on wool like most Oriental carpets, they are woven of silk with gold or silver threads woven into them.

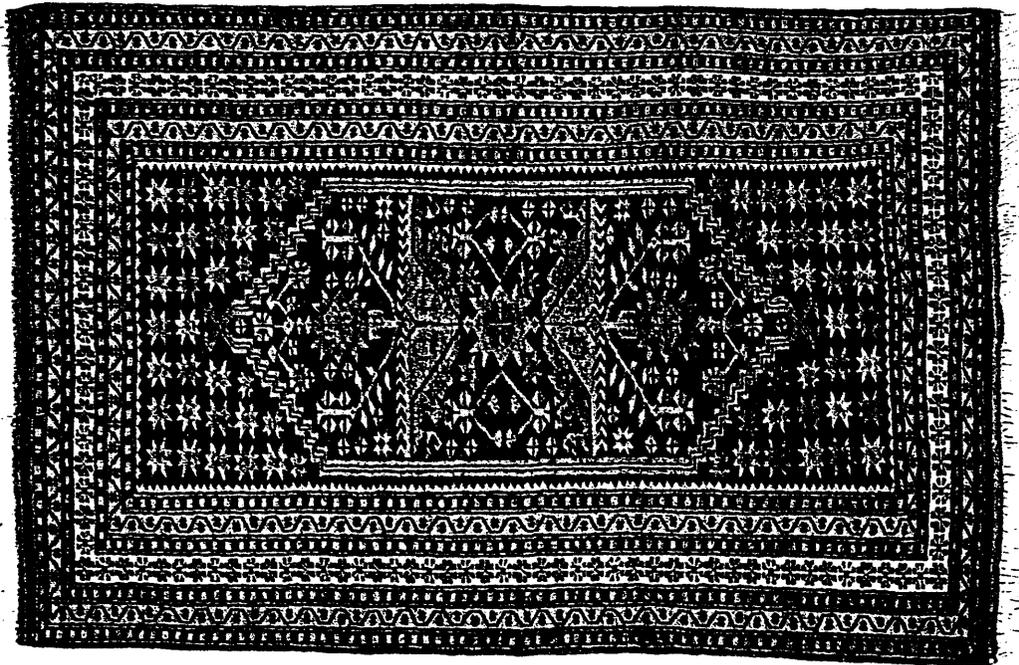
The gold and silver threads are often used in outlining shapes. Fruit trees representing plentifulness may have precious or semi-precious gem stones sewn on them for the fruit. Rubies may be sewn on clusters of grapes.

Celebration rugs use symbols of joy and merriment. Often depicted are scenes of a successful hunt, sporting events or beautiful nature scenes. If it an occasion of mourning or sorrow, the rugs may have a weeping willow or a cluster of grapes woven in to show tears and sorrow.

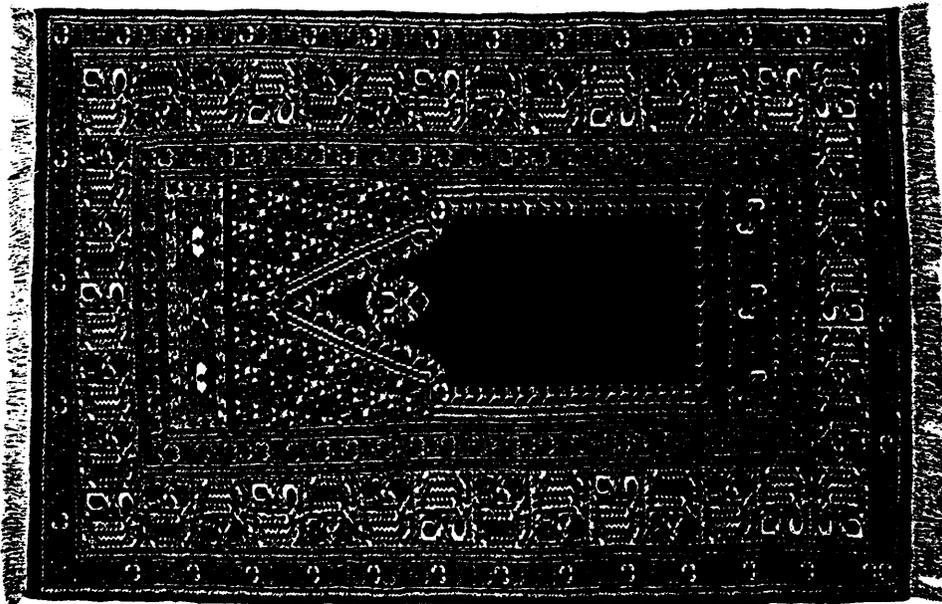
The Oriental carpets of Persia and Turkey represent a different philosophy and religion than those rugs woven by the Armenians. However, because Armenia came out of the Eastern tradition and was once ruled by Iran, much of the imagery and the use of pattern and color is common to all three areas. Oriental rugs are enjoyed as works of art and are valued for their beautiful design and craftsmanship. In the process of telling stories, creating a place to pray and creating a gift to their church to save their souls, the weavers have created carpets that are still enjoyed for their beauty.



KIRMAN CARPET. PERSIA 6'10" x 4'4"



YACEBEDIR CARPET. TURKEY 6'10" x 4'8"



KULA PRAYER RUG. TURKEY 6'10" x 4'8"



KARABAGH CARPET. ARMENIA 5'6" x 7'5"

FOOTNOTES

¹Kukut H. Turkham. Islamic Rugs. New York, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969, p. 29.

²Eliza Dunn. Rugs In Their Native Land. New York, New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1923, p. 15.

³Arthur T. Gregorian. Oriental Rugs And The Stories They Tell. New York, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967, p. 84.

⁴R.E.G. Macey. Oriental Prayer Rugs. Leigh-On-Sea, England: F. Lewis Publishers LTD, 1961, p. 7.

⁵Dunn. Op.cit., p. 32.

⁶Gregorian. Op.cit., p. 85.

⁷Manuelian. Op.cit., p. 36.

⁸Ibid., p. 32.

⁹Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 33-34.

¹¹Ibid., p. 33.

¹²Ibid., p. 34.

¹³Gregorian. Op.cit., p. 90.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁵Manuelian. Op.cit., p. 38.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 39.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 39-40.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 40.

²⁰Dunn. Op.cit., p. 84.

²¹Manuelian. Op.cit., p. 40.

²²Ibid., p. 44.

²³Ibid., p. 45.

²⁴Ibid., p. 45.

²⁵Dunn. Op.cit., p. 79.

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