

TURKMEN RUG MOTIFS IN RENAISSANCE PAINTINGS: REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY OF TURKMEN MOTIFS FROM EAST TO WEST

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Introduction

Turkmen rugs are woven in extraordinary patterns; many of these unique patterns can be depicted on the Renaissance paintings of Europe. The commonality between these designs with origins so far apart is a delicate matter of discussion. Having studied the history and designs of Turkmen rugs we trace the apparent journey of these rugs and their designs from their initial origins to the western world. Since the eighteenth century; rugs have been always considered as items of great interest for researchers and art scholars especially in the Oriental world. Such researchers are often amazed by the designs and patterns woven artistically on such the rugs. Recently the attention of scholars has been engaged with a number of European paintings that are inspired with oriental rugs patterns. Holbein paintings of the fifteenth century illustrating Christian saints with Turkmen pattern rugs under their feet are very famous samples showing the influence of such oriental artwork in Europe. In the same sense, European painters used such unknown designs without any exact information about their origin to ornament their paintings. Kufic letters and Arabesque ornamentations are examples of such pragmatic copying.

However, as there is no written history on early rug export from east to west, one can give no firm reason for establishing such a relation between European paintings and Turkmen rugs. The first recorded rug export was no sooner than the sixteenth century. Shah Abbas the Great, the great ruler of the Safavid Empire and a savior of Persian art was among the first to export Persian rugs in large numbers to outside countries. Shah Abbas held numerous carpet fairs and exhibitions through Persia, Turkey and Europe.

Rug history prior to Shah Abbas is rather vague and dimmed. To survey rugs before the sixteenth century, we try to trace carpet origins through any plausible source, including western paintings before the sixteenth century, historical books and documents, and logical reasoning.

The paper is organized around three sections: section one deals with the history of Turkmens as well as their rug weaving background. We will see that these tribal people were among the first rug weavers and conceivably the pioneers of this art. Section two, the main body of this paper, deals with the trace of Turkmen patterns in European paintings especially those of the Renaissance era. Section four provides the reader with an overall conclusion and suggestions for further research.

Turkmen History and Turkmen Rugs

In order to discuss Turkmen origin, we must go back to the 2nd millennium B.C. According to Eiland, "Chinese accounts of barbarian incursions on northwestern frontier begin as early as 2nd millennium B.C." [8]. Barbarians are considered as the ancestors of nowadays Turkmens in Turkestan, and also of any Turk, Mongol and Baluchi origins.

As mentioned above, the barbarians invaded northwestern China; the Chinese had never resided in the area for it was unplanted and waterless, hence, the Barbarians were successful to form a nomadic culture in the region. During subsequent years they gradually penetrated into western Asia and even Europe. They kept coming forward in a gradual pace, until the 11th century when Seljuqs reached power in Transoxonia and defeated the Abbasid Khalifas. They moved forward through Persia and Anatolia and this was the beginning point of the Turks control over the east [8]. In the later decades, two waves of the Mongol invasions occurred by Genghis and Holaku Khan. Mongols, another descendant of the barbarians, established a Turkish theme within the area.[4]; they began as nomads engaged in animal farming and small agricultural workings; however, they became urbanized by invading Persia and minor Asia. The Mongols did not follow any particular ideology or religion; thus, they were ready and enthusiastic to accept any firm idea which seemed pleasing to them. Ghazan Khan was the first Ilkhanid man to convert to Islam. Previously, two ladies of Holaku's court had converted to Christianity and "Ghare Kilisa" in Azerbaijan was a monument built by their order.

Mongols were appreciators of art, they highly contributed to the art of Persia and added their own cultural features to it. Turks had started their gradual migration into Anatolia as soon as in fifth century (Huns Era) and even later in sixth century they were encouraged by Byzantines to unite against the Sassanids of Persia. The Bulgars as another group of Turks with their origins most likely traced to the Huns, defeated and killed the Byzantine Emperor Nice Phorus I in the eighth century. By the eleventh century, the northern kingdom of the Byzantine reign became ready for the dominant existence of Turks. Finally in 1090, Seljuqs conquered the area and the settlement of the Turks became finalized. Later Ottoman Turks migrated to Anatolia in thirteenth century and became the dominant power in Anatolia. Eiland suggests that this act is the main rationale for appearance of Middle Eastern tradition of pile rugs in Turkey [8]. It empowers us to firmly declare that pile rugs must not have existed in Anatolia before Seljuqs.

The first traces of rug designs have been distinguished in Timurid and Ilkhanid paintings. There are certain scenes in the various versions of the illustrated manuscripts of Shahnameh in which courtiers and kings are seen on the carpets with patterns currently known as Turkmen rugs. In the following we attempt to survey the probable origins of these patterns. However dealing with these paintings is beyond the scope of this paper. Those interested can refer to the further reading section [4, 5, 7].

The major motifs in Turkmen rugs are octagonal and hexagonal shapes complete with signs and symbols. No one knows for certain what they mean exactly; however, there are particular apparent meanings proposed by researchers. Some believe that these are Turkmen emblems each related to a tribe since Turkmens originally exist within the three tribes of Ersari, Yomud, and Saryk. According to some authors these polygonal medallions located at the middle of a Turkmen rug are special emblems resembling a tribe and is a categorization based on such weaver tribes [8&2]. The emblems and seals bring with themselves misunderstanding since researchers encounter rugs from a tribe bearing the

seals of another. In all sense, the main topic of this paper is far away from depicting and recognizing the special seals of each tribe.

Generally speaking, Turkmens have used flower-like patterns, animal designs, simplified shapes, and symbolic signs in decorating their rugs. Such designs were all derived from the nature and environment around the; particularly during the era when Islam had not reached the region yet. Turkmens lived with their cattle and the nature around them, hence, these elements were simplified and woven on their rugs since these elements were the only tangible possessions they saw and dealt with [9]. In the same sense, beautiful wild flowers, animals including mountain goats, dogs, horses and birds were among the main features of a Turkmen rug. It is also worthy to mention that the mountain goat native to the area was also a significant feature in Turkmen rugs in the case that even certain tribal seals were formed using the horns of a ram.¹

Dragon is a primary portrayal in Turkmen rugs. The reason may be the closeness of Mongols as the original weavers of such rugs with China and their acquaintance with Chinese illustrations in which dragon is a key element. Throughout the history of Turkmen rugs we can see a decline in the use of dragon illustrations and a growth of other ornamental features such as flowers and domestic animals. Another major element in these patterns are the accessories around the weaver. The comb and its profile in different angles is an example. Sometimes emotions and subjective concepts come in; for example, we were informed of a margin shape called "Chuicheh Brun", that is mother's finger or waver's finger. These are all simplification of Turkmen women and their characteristics which had developed up to the highest level of quality [1].

Islam reached the area and since it was based on seemingly rule-governed and strict principals, the painting or weaving of human figs and even animals became forbidden; hence, Turkmen weavers altered their style of ornamentation and initiated a new trend by decorating their rugs with more abstract designs originated from Islam which they later called "Mihrab" or "prayer" pattern. In future, this pattern was used in large scales by Turks in Anatolia and became the major pattern of Turkish Rugs.

Another abstract pattern that prevailed under influence of Islam were Kufic scripts placed upon the margin of the rugs and enhanced within geometric shapes covering the structure of the carpet. Although this pattern was later known as the Holbein pattern –maybe since Holbein as a tradesman, tourist or anything encountered these patterns on Turkmen rugs and made use of their patterns in his paintings- almost all of Ilkhanid and Timurid paintings of the thirteenth century, quite prior to Holbein's era, would display the rugs with this pattern under the feet of their characters.² This pattern later was left in Iran but was kept being used in Anatolia and then became another characteristic pattern of Turkic rugs [8].

As mentioned earlier, Turkmen's way of life, including farming and nomadic departures, empowered this probability that such patterns are rooted in Turkmen tribal customs and their culture. Turkmens must have needed something to step and sleep on in their travels through the deserts and mountains.

¹ Mountain goat is a particular animal in Turkestan. When Marco Polo arrived at Amudarya in the thirteenth century he saw these goats and then describe them in detail in his book. In 1960 a famous zoologist named these animals as the "rams of Marco". [12]

² A very interesting point is that this pattern has been rather more common in Jalayirid School than Muzaffarid and Heart schools. Note that Jalayirids were Mongols who acquired Anatolia and Iraq.

Renaissance Painters and Rug Depiction

Renaissance as the name suggests was a golden era for rise of art and culture in the west. Europe had survived from two violent wars and had become acquainted with a new and unique culture and lifestyle. European artists took advantage of such a circumstances and gathered abundant resources and opportunities to create a metamorphosis in their works of art.

Conceptually speaking, the early works of renaissance were rather similar and associated with the classical masterpieces. Artists preferred to illustrate the same Christian personages as the classical paintings exhibited. However as time passed the artists dared to depict more objective and terrestrial motifs. They started to decorate the halos encircling the head of the saints and their garments with both classic ornamentations and new Islamic designs consequential of the influence of Islamic culture. Oriental rug motifs became another source of ornamentation which was later applied in European paintings.

Renaissance paintings during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are full of rug designs. These paintings would use such patterns as decorative features to ornament the background of their paintings and objects within. "Such carpets were often integrated into Christian imagery as symbols of luxury and status of Middle-Eastern origin, and together with pseudo-Kufic script offer an interesting example of the integration of Eastern elements in Renaissance painting and Islamic influences on Christian art." [13]

These depictions can be categorized into groups. The first would include Kufic scripts used mainly on the margins and within geometrical pattern located in the middle of the design or painting; more famously known as the Holbein patterns (figs 2 and 6). The second group would include images of the cross in various designs (fig 7). Finally, the last group are prayer rug patterns (fig 9). Prior to Holbein (1498-1543), many other Christian painters, e.g. Memling (1433-1494) and Mategna (1431-1506), made use of oriental carpet designs in their divine and saint illustrations or even in still life works. However Holbein was the first who made use of these elements in a much larger perspective and encountered it as a worldly object.³

Conclusion

No forged and imitated work is able to survive for centuries and reach the peaks of quality and soundness where Turkmen rugs are now located; and it is the most persuasive point about Turkmen weavers. Turkmen rug pattern can be well assigned as the oldest and the most original thriving rug patterns in the world. The path has not completely illuminated yet, however dashed trace of these patterns suggests that the origin of rug weaving may be the Barbarians particularly Mongols or Transoxians. The invasion of Persia and Anatolia by the Seljuqs and Mongols is a significant turning point in the carpet history. Although it later

³ **Holbein carpets** are a type of Ottoman carpets taking their name from Hans Holbein the Younger, due to their depiction in European Renaissance paintings. Actually, these in fact are seen in paintings from many decades earlier than Holbein, and are sub-divided into four types (of which Holbein actually only painted two); they are the commonest designs of Anatolian carpet seen in Western Renaissance paintings, and continued to be produced for a long period. All are purely geometric and use a variety of arrangements of lozenges, crosses and octagonal motifs within the main field.[3]

⁴ Many Holbein rugs are Anatolian in essence. As Anatolia is a region under direct influence and power of Turks and Turkmens migrated from the east, we can assign these rug designs to original Turkestan.

became a major weaver in the region and became a route for the export of rugs to western markets; Turkey was not the originator of such rugs. Finally, it is worthy to mention that the tradition of Turk rug weaving is embedded with a treasury of Persian and Byzantium designs and motifs and with such unique designs it thrived in magnificence and splendor.

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