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Brian Spooner

University of Pennsylvania, spooner@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract

The afghan war rugs on exhibit at the Penn Museum from April 30 to July 31, 2011, raise a number of interesting questions—about carpets, Afghanistan, and the way the world as a whole is changing. These rugs, which come in a variety of sizes and qualities, derive from a tradition of oriental carpet-weaving that began to attract the attention of Western rug collectors in the late 19th century. Unlike the classic museum pieces that were produced on vertical looms in the cities of western Asia for use in palaces and grand houses, war rugs came from horizontal looms in small tribal communities of Turkmen and Baloch in the areas of central Asia on either side of the northern border of Afghanistan—tribal communities that were incorporated into the Russian Empire in the 19th century.

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BY BRIAN SPOONER

THE AFGHAN WAR RUGS ON exhibit at the Penn Museum from April 30 to July 31, 2011, raise a number of interesting questions—about carpets, Afghanistan, and the way the world as a whole is changing. These rugs, which come in a variety of sizes and qualities, derive from a tradition of oriental carpet-weaving that began to attract the attention of Western rug collectors in the late 19th century. Unlike the classic museum pieces that were produced on vertical looms in the cities of western Asia for use in palaces and grand houses, war rugs came from horizontal looms in small tribal communities of Turkmen and Baloch in the areas of central Asia on either side of the northern border of Afghanistan—tribal communities that were incorporated into the Russian Empire in the 19th century.

The craft of carpet weaving suffered serious disruption in the 1930s as a result of Soviet reorganization of these areas, which led some weavers to migrate into Afghanistan, where the craft revived and expanded through the 1970s. As the rug market grew, so did the purview of Western rug connoisseurship, which led the international trade. As the



This war rug depicts the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989. In the upper left corner, Soviet war machines and helicopters depart from the country while the rest of the landscape remains littered with weaponry (T2008.1.40, 79 cm x 60 cm).



In a rural bazaar, Afghan men look at various oriental rugs. (Daulatabad, Afghanistan, August 1972)

interest of collectors moved down-market, it turned by degrees to different types of tribal rugs. When the demand for Baloch rugs began to rise in the 1970s, production spread to other parts of Afghanistan, including cities, and to Pakistan and eastern Iran.

Some Baloch weavers adapted both to changes in local conditions and to the changing international market, in which novelty carried a premium. New designs began to appear, inspired by the violence of the civil war that began after the revolution in 1978.

Cartoons of pastoral life were replaced by a bricolage of war-related icons: soldiers (Soviet, American, Afghan), AK-47s, helicopter gunships, tanks, mujahedeen, and maps of Afghanistan. The resulting war rugs tell us much not only about the oriental carpet industry and its evolving market, but also about Afghan society today and the way globalization is changing it.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ORIENTAL CARPETS

Carpet-weaving began at least two and a half millennia ago, probably in central Asia. The earliest rug that has come down to us in any form was excavated at Pazyryk in the Altai Mountains of southern Siberia, preserved in ice in the tomb of a Scythian prince. This woolen rug, which has over 200 knots to the square inch, is dated to the period immediately following the Achaemenian Empire (550–330 BC), suggesting royal patronage. We know the Achaemenians borrowed designs from the Assyrian Empire, with the craft of making carpets perhaps nurtured for generations in royal workshops. Textual evidence indicates that production continued at a high level of patronage under the Sasanian Empire (AD 224–651), through the Arab conquest and the emergence of Islamic civilization in the 7th century AD, down to the present time.

Afghanistan's War Experience

Afghanistan entered history in 1747. Nadir Shah, the Iranian ruler of the region, had been assassinated in Meshed (now northeastern Iran). One of his Afghan generals launched a new Afghan Empire from Qandahar (now southern Afghanistan), taking advantage of the decline of the Mughal Empire in India. When emissaries from the British Imperial Government in Calcutta first arrived in the area in 1809, the Afghan Empire was the largest and strongest polity in the region, extending from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea and including Kashmir. But then Afghanistan became sandwiched between the expanding British and Russian (later Soviet) Empires, isolated from the rest of the world. When the British withdrew from India in 1947, Afghanistan emerged with a seat in the U.N. But a period of accelerating social and political change ended in 1978 in a revolution led by Soviet-trained Afghan Air Force officers, who installed a Soviet-style communist regime. Resistance was spontaneous. Civil war has continued since that time, exacerbated by the Soviet invasion in 1979. Millions fled the countryside to seek a new livelihood in the cities and in refugee camps across the borders of neighboring countries.

The Soviet army withdrew in 1989, but the disruption to the country's political structure resulted in further civil war which was finally brought under control by the rise of the Taliban (students of religious schools). The Taliban were welcomed at first, but their regime soon became oppressive and was terminated in November 2001 by the American-led NATO response to 9/11. Since then the entire Afghan population of over 20 million may have suffered more from domestic warfare and its modern technology than any other country since World War II. Meanwhile, the continuing American and NATO military presence has met with increasing resistance in the form of guerilla activity, and Afghanistan, barely known by many in the West before, appears constantly in our newspaper headlines.



Top, the words at the center of this war rug translate as "Ghazi Amanullah Khan." Amanullah Khan (1892–1960), portrayed here, helped lead Afghanistan to independence in 1919 and served as the Emir of Afghanistan for ten years (1919–1929) (T2008.1.99, 85 cm x 58 cm). Middle, Ahmad Shah Massoud, a prominent Afghan military leader during the Soviet conflict, is shown at the center of this rug (T2008.1.70, 148 cm x 95 cm). Right, over a red map of Afghanistan are four landmine victims, three adults and a child, with their arms and legs destroyed (T2008.1.56, 72 cm x 96 cm).

Carpets from Constantinople (modern Istanbul) began to appear in Western Europe through Venetian trade by the 13th century, as we know from contemporary paintings. Since people in medieval Europe ate at tables rather than on the floor, they used the carpets as tablecloths (as shown in the paintings), not as floor coverings. Today the earliest extant carpets (apart from the Pazyryk find) are Ottoman and appear to date from the 15th century. It was not until the 19th century, however, that the European market discovered tribal rugs.

Carpets are textiles, and textiles have been one of the most important traded commodities in world history, despite geographical differences in the fibers used. This craft has prospered in a variety of social settings, including isolated communities of pastoral nomads, small village oases, agricultural communities in the hinterland of urban market centers, and



Left, this Persian rug, woven around 1920, features a World War I biplane. It is the only known depiction of a warplane in an oriental rug prior to the 1980s (T2008.1.58, 117 cm x 86 cm). Above, the traditional floral patterns of oriental rugs are here transformed into images of Soviet Mi-24 Hind attack helicopters, tanks, fighter jets, and hand grenades (L2008.352, 203 cm x 119 cm). Page 15: Left, this war rug shows an assortment of helicopters, rocket launchers, tanks, and grenades, along with the red outline of Afghanistan (T2008.1.46, 153 cm x 112 cm). Right, at the center of this rug is a butterfly surrounded by weapons. It likely refers to the highly explosive "butterfly landmine," which can be found at the bottom (T2008.1.13, 90 cm x 63 cm).



urban workshops. Central Asian carpet production benefited from the early availability of wool from domesticated sheep. There are various types of rugs, including exquisite large carpets, often with figurative designs, for use in palaces or estates—like those on permanent display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art—as well as humble prayer rugs with geometrical designs indicating the direction of prayer. Typical designs include gardens, hunting scenes, animals, jewelry, and, in prayer rugs, an Islamic prayer niche or *mihrab*. In their modern form, these carpets represent the continuation of a sophisticated pre-industrial technology.

War rugs are a new genre of oriental carpet; they symbolize the changing awareness of ordinary men and women in one of the poorest parts of the modern world, which has just recently been caught up in a variety of globalizing processes. Unfortunately, the civil war in Afghanistan has prevented us from studying how these rugs are produced. Do they come from the initiative of the weavers themselves, or of middlemen on the lookout for new markets? Tracing the origin of any particular oriental carpet has always been difficult. Each rug

passes through a chain of intermediaries from the producer to the consumer. Each intermediary knows only his own particular sources and market opportunities, and cannot provide information about connections or motivations further up or down the chain. Traditionally, the weaver has known nothing about the international market, and the international consumer has had no connection to the weaver. With the appearance of war rugs, this is changing, as weavers respond to the market.

The earliest war rugs appear to have been designed to attract Soviet tourists, but were later adapted for the general market, and especially the American military, which arrived in 2001. The basic, and probably original, style of war rug is Baloch, a variety that has generally been produced on a smaller scale, with figurative rather than geometrical designs. But more recent examples of war rugs are Turkmen in quality and weave, and may be financed on a larger scale. Connoisseurs classify and evaluate carpets in terms of imputed age, provenance, the quality of materials (including dyes and colors), the design, the “handle” (feel or pliability), condition,

How to Make A Rug

We use the words carpet or rug for any floor covering, especially one with pile: that is, an evenly cut surface consisting of densely packed projecting threads, which are the ends of knots. Rugs are woven on looms made of stout wood. Most of the best rugs are made entirely from wool—a fiber that was abundant historically only in Central Asia. Neither cotton nor silk were available in the early days of the industry. When these fibers became available later they were incorporated, but only to a small extent, more for purposes of color and design than for the quality of the fibers.

When sheep are sheared, the wool is carded and spun into three different qualities of thread: for the warp, the weft, and the knots that make the pile. The threads spun for each function are so different, even when they originate from the same animal, that non-specialists have difficulty in recognizing them all as the same fiber. For example, the warp thread, which is spun from the longest wool fibers, is as strong as other available non-woolen threads. The wool must then be dyed, often with the use of local plants such as madder, a Eurasian herb. All these materials are well within the reach of an isolated nomadic community, as well as urban workshops.

In the weaving process the ends of the warp threads are left to form a fringe at either end of the finished product. The webbing at the beginning and end of the weaving is often simple weft on warp, but may be elaborated by one or another of a number of flat-weave techniques, such as embroidery. The body of the carpet is made by tying rows of knots, one- or two-ply, around pairs of warp threads. Two basic types of knot are used in Afghanistan and the surrounding area, only one of which (the least common) is a true knot; the purpose is not the knot itself but the two protruding ends that form the pile.

After each line of knots, one or more weft threads are woven across the loom before the next row of knots. A good-quality carpet may have as many as 400 or more knots per square inch, though a carpet with no more than 100 may still be considered excellent on the basis of other criteria. In order to achieve the desired degree of tightness and evenness of weave, and density of knots, after every few rows of knots, the weaver beats the weft threads and the pile back toward her with a comb-like implement, the teeth of which fit over the warp threads. This action also has the effect not only of tightening the pile but of making it incline permanently in one direction, toward the end the weaver started from. For this reason, throughout the life of a fine carpet, light strikes the ends of the knots at a different angle according to the position of the viewer; in the case of some types of wool, and especially of silk, this makes the colors appear different from various angles. The design of the rug is in the color-patterning of the knots that form the pile. Designs have been traditional within families and tribal communities. As the weaving progresses, after every few inches the ends of the knots are sheared to even out the pile of the carpet at the desired height, which varies from less than 5 mm to 10 mm or more. The closer the ends of the knots are cut to the level of the weft-warp fabric, the finer the eventual product. The higher the number of knots per square inch, the less pliable is the rug. William Irons, an anthropologist who worked among Yomut Turkmen in Iran between the late 1960s and the mid 1970s, calculated that one woman could weave roughly one square foot in a day of heavy weaving, about 12 hours at the loom. Cheap labor has always been the key to the carpet industry—a factor that casts doubt on its future.



An Afghan woman and young girl work together to weave an oriental rug (Qala Nau, Afghanistan, July 1972).

fineness, and evenness of weave. War rugs in general do not rank highly on these criteria.

Since the rug trade began to grow several centuries ago, interest in this quintessential oriental furnishing has percolated down from the original aristocratic consumers, through various levels of the middle class in the 19th century, to an even broader circulation in the late 20th century. Interest has also expanded beyond the early museum pieces into the larger array of folk production from widely distributed rural communities throughout Central Asia. Turkmen tribes in western Central Asia—between northern Afghanistan and the Aral Sea—led this expansion, but the work of other Turkic tribes soon became known, as well as that of non-Turkic tribes that lived among them. Although the Baloch produced rugs that were less refined than those of the Turkmen, collectors still found them interesting and worth buying.

As the age of collecting evolved in the late 19th century, connoisseurship developed in Europe and America. By the second half of the 20th century, rug societies were formed, and rug journals were launched, such as *Hali* in Germany in 1978 and the *Oriental Rug Review* in America in 1981 (see websites at the end of this article). Oriental carpets became a standard stock item in Western department stores. Rug connoisseurship became the search for authenticity. But increasing instability and warfare has changed the market, the trade, and the collecting community. The interesting question now is: how will connoisseurship accommodate the success of the new genre of war rugs? The market for the new rugs, mostly priced between \$200 and \$1000, has expanded to include a variety of new customers who might not have become interested in oriental rugs *per se*. Finally, under globalization, the producer has come into a much closer market relationship than was possible earlier—with a new type of consumer.

EMERGENCE OF WAR RUGS

Afghan war rugs receive a very different sort of attention today compared to Turkmen and Baloch rugs of earlier periods. Consumers are interested in the novelty of the war motifs found on the rugs. Afghan war rugs come from various parts of the country: from Taimani Baloch in Farah province in the west, from Baghlan in the north, and more recently from Pashtuns in the south. The more expensive carpets are still from Turkmen communities, mainly in the north. Local dealers indicate that most of the weaving is done by women, but men create the designs. A wide range of sophistication in design, workmanship, and size suggests that a large proportion of the production probably originates from refugee camps in northern Pakistan.

While the inspiration for this new genre of rug began in 1978, market interest in war rugs grew slowly. In 1988 an Italian rug dealer, Luca Brancati, opened an exhibition of 80



The text at the top of this rug reads "Afghanistan Welcome to Peshawar," suggesting that it might have been woven by Afghan refugees in or near the city of Peshawar in Pakistan (T2008.1.23, 77 cm x 61 cm).

Afghan war rugs in Turin. These rugs were inspired by the Soviet occupation and were billed as Russian-Afghan War Carpets. In 1989, the exhibit traveled to the United States. Other similar exhibits followed in Europe and America. Oriental carpets had entered a new arena. The interest they attracted was very different from that of the oriental carpets of the past. Some saw them as protest art, some as tourist art. How else could we explain the sudden replacement of traditional designs with tanks, helicopter gunships, kalashnikovs, occupation maps, Soviet soldiers, and GIs? Although we do not know if this is the case, the idea that ordinary people in Afghanistan were protesting against war through their carpet weaving was appealing to consumers.



This manuscript page, dated to 1530, includes a miniature with a typical Persian battle-scene (14.5 x 23.4 cm).

Even though Afghan war rugs did not please connoisseurs, they gradually began to attract attention among a new audience interested in images of war. The representation of war in art has a long history. War scenes were painted in medieval Persian miniatures in representation both of classical themes and, under the Mughal Empire, in praise of the current royal victor. But none of the three Anglo-Afghan wars (1839, 1871, and 1919) was represented in rug design. Now, however, globalization has brought a broader awareness of world affairs to the rural weaver. Even as early as 1973, Turkmen weavers who visited the Penn Museum for an exhibition of Afghan carpets offered to weave a rug with a portrait of President Nixon in the center field. We settled at the time for a small rug with the Penn Museum logo.

Afghan war rugs represent the first effort of Afghan weavers to cater directly to an international market. They are looking for ways to earn a living. According to the International Trade Center (affiliated with the U.N.), close to two million hand-made rugs reach the international market every year from the Afghanistan region. The market is saturated, at least with the quality of rug an ordinary weaver can make. Weavers are innovating in order to get an edge on the competition in the international market.

Afghans make war rugs because of their continuing experience with war. Their reaction to that experience has changed as they have been caught up more and more in the international economy and the globalizing processes which war has brought to them, undermining their sense of local identity, and the relationships that they relied upon in day-to-day life: family, kinship, gender, village, and tribe. Afghans are looking for new opportunities. They thought to use a representation of what the outside world brought to them as a way of finding a place in the outside world that has taken them over.

Why do we buy these rugs? Most who buy war rugs are not traditional ruggists. War rugs constitute a new product, and those who purchase them constitute a new clientele. These rugs challenge us, because they would not be produced, and would not appeal to us today in the way they do, if it were not for the divergence of East and West over the past 300 years. Past identities are being renegotiated.

This is not the first time that textiles have led social change. Apart from providing one of the earliest commodities of long-distance trade, the textile industry led the industrial revolution, and more recently the rise of multi-nationals. Now textiles are changing the way ordinary Afghans interact with the

In 1989, the Soviet army withdrew from Afghanistan after ten years of conflict, leaving President Muhammad Najibullah in charge. He is depicted here as a Soviet puppet under a hammer and sickle. In the lower right corner, refugees are shown fleeing the country as a decade of civil war broke out (T2008.1.10, 102 cm x 69 cm).





This war rug highlights the global landscape of modern warfare, including references to the Pentagon and the date of September 11th on a computer monitor (T2008.1.110, 86 cm x 58 cm).

world around them, enabling them to cross the boundaries that have isolated them from the modern world over the past century. At the same time, this new genre is breaking down the boundaries that have separated the carpet industry from other sectors of the Afghan economy, and carpet design from other art forms.

On a broader geographical stage the rugs illustrate the changing social organization of trade and economic entrepreneurship in marginalized communities, and how the impact of globalization on poorer parts of the world is disrupting traditional practices and encouraging rural communities to scramble to catch up with the changing world around them. By exhibiting these rugs, the Penn Museum shows also how the role of museums is changing—displaying a new type of material, a century or so after large public museums first provided a window onto the material culture of the world beyond our experience. 🏠



BRIAN SPOONER is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and Curator for Near East Ethnology at the Penn Museum. He has worked in Afghanistan since 1963 on rug weaving and other traditional technologies. Dr. Spooner curated a 1973 exhibition of Afghan carpets at the Penn Museum.

For Further Reading

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Websites

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Oriental Rug Review: no longer published, but old issues available at www.rugreview.com

Textile Museum of Canada: www.textilemuseum.ca/apps/index.cfm?page=exhibition.detail&exHd=271

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