

CARPETS & KILIMS

Our Traditional Cultural Heritage: Anatolian Turkish Hand-Woven Carpets and Kilims

Turkish knotted carpets and flat-weaves occupy a very important place in our cultural heritage as ethnographic documents relating to the Turkish inhabitants of Anatolia in each succeeding epoch, like all other such historical documents, carpets and kilims clearly reflect the values of the period in which they were made. It is thus essential that priority should be given to precautions to be taken without delay in order to preserve these old carpets and kilims from wear and decay and, at the same time, to prevent their being smuggled abroad.

The textile fragments, weaving tools and dye materials yielded by archaeological excavations corroborate the theory that flat-weaves have been produced in Anatolia since the Neolithic period, but the amount of material so far obtained is not sufficient to provide an answer to questions such as how and when flat-woven or knotted rugs were first produced. Nevertheless, the fact that the earliest specimens of knotted carpets so far discovered were found in Turkish regions in excavations carried out on Turkish burial mounds confirms the belief that this type of rug was first woven and used by the Turks.

The way of life and philosophy of the Turkish tribes and nations who occupied the vast expanse of territory extending from Central Asia to Anatolia were enshrined in the thousands of colours and motifs incorporated in fabrics that have preserved their expressive power and character to the present day. From this point of view, Turkish carpets occupy a very special position in our cultural heritage.

The individual weaving forms and techniques to be found in the traditional Turkish hand-woven carpets, the significance and symbolism of the motifs and the dyes and colours employed, all reflect the socio-cultural and socio-economic values of the period in which they were produced.

The motifs and colours typical of Turkish carpets and kilims constituted an important medium of expression for the weaver and his community. The values of the period to which it belonged may be reflected in the twist and quality of the wool, the manner in which the dye was manufactured and from what plants or insects it was produced, the fineness or looseness of the stitch and, most important of all, the symbolic significance of the motifs and the aesthetic dimensions of the stylisation. Turkish hand-woven carpets may thus be regarded as source material for the study of the anthropology, ethnology and ethnography of the periods to which they belonged, as well as of the general technical and economic background.

Carpet-weaving, carried out on various types of looms without the benefit of modern appliances and demanding most meticulous handling at every stage of its production, from the preparation by the old traditional methods of the warp, weft and knot to the application of the natural dyes, is one of the few Turkish handcrafts to have continued with the same scrupulous application to detail right up to the present day.

Apart from the dyeing and weaving, which form the technical basis of the knotted carpet, the most important feature from the point of view of the cultural heritage involved is the nature of the motifs employed. The Turkish craftsman possessed the ability to imbue his hand-woven fabrics with his own identity, his social position and communal traditions. The marks stamped on the tents and horse-covers in the high-lands and summer pastures which are also to be found incorporated in their fabrics, have survived in their fabrics, have survived in the form of aesthetic variations the first inventors could never have foreseen. That is what distinguishes the Turkish carpet so very clearly from all other carpets in the world.

All Turkish carpets, from those of Eastern Turkestan to those produced in Baluchistan, Khorasan, the Caucasus and Anatolia, are characterised by the distinctive designs that raise our traditional handcrafts to the highest artistic level.

The motifs employed in Turkish carpets are so varied and can be classified into so many subcategories that they constitute, as it were, a great fan stretching from Thrace to Kars. From the Sivas region emerge the Sarkisla, Zara, Kangal and Divrigi carpets characterised by a remarkable wealth of symbolic expression forming one of the links in the rich chain of Turkish tradition. Motifs differing markedly in form and detail can be found in Anatolian kilims from Yagcibekir to Dosemealti, from Kula to Çanakkale.

The most important distinguishing feature of the motifs employed in Anatolian carpets is the "symbolisation" imposed by the traditional weaving techniques. The linear values of these woven fabrics constitute the symbolic representation of the ideas which the Turkish woman wishes to express. Perhaps it would be an exaggeration to say that all the motifs employed in carpets and kilims bear a symbolic significance, but it is usually possible to find a hidden connection between the "visible motif" and the "under lying motif". The symbolic values conferred upon the objects are stylised by the Turkish weaving technique itself. The language of the motifs is the language of any-one who can understand.

Each of the Turkish carpets and kilims produced by a very natural process under certain conditions and in the course of a certain period bears the mark both of a certain period bears the mark both of a cultural heritage and a work of art, but it differs from other works of art in necessitating an evaluation of the weaver and his world.

The motifs employed in Anatolian Turkish carpets have never been over-uniform in character. In their long migrations, the tribes and peoples adopted what was "good" and "true" from the cultures with which they came in contact. The "double S" motif in the skirt of the garment worn by Warpalawas in the rock relief at Ivriz dating from around 1250 B.C. can be found in a number of Sarkisla carpets that we have dated to the 16th century.

What is the present condition of these valuable old carpets and kilims which, for the reasons given above, occupy such an important place in our traditional heritage and cultural history? But before answering that question we should perhaps ask ourselves what, apart from the carpets and kilims preserved in the museums and archives belonging to the Ministry of Education and the General Directorate of Pious Foundations, we really know of the extent of the legacy we have inherited? Moreover, although hundreds of carpets and kilims are carefully preserved in the rich collections housed in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, the Vakıflar Carpet and Kilim Museum, the Topkapi Palace Museum and the Konya and Sivas Museums, there would appear little we can do to halt the gradual disintegration and disappearance of the carpets and kilims scattered here and there in remote corners of Anatolia. It is thanks to the Turkish tradition of pious endowments that rugs other than those that have remained in the house in which they were actually woven have managed to come down to us from the depths of the past. The benefactors who with their own modest resources, built the mescits to be found in even the smallest village, also furnished them with rugs and kilims, and to these were added several of the finest specimens produced over the centuries by the looms in the various houses. There were also a number of prayer-rugs and carpets specially woven for the mosques, to which they were duly presented. It is thanks to this tradition of pious endowment that our cultural heritage of carpets and kilims has survived to the present day.

Wool is a fragile material that wears very quickly even under normal conditions, and many of our carpets were left for centuries in damp corners under the worst possible conditions, without any thought of their value and without the slightest attempt to air and maintain them. Even at the present day, torn pieces of valuable old carpets and kilims are placed under stoves, on thresholds or ablution stools, or nailed on wooden stairs. All the rugs in a particular mosque are sold off to make way for a large machine made carpet covering the whole interior. Or if we don't actually sell them, we barter them for wood or coal. As for carpets that have been carefully preserved by the personnel of the mosque, as in the Great Mosque at Sarikisla, we resort to all sorts of expedients to prevent them being stolen by people who could gain a great deal of money by their sale.

Carpets and kilims are the most attractively presented of our cultural goods and the easiest to smuggle abroad, while the recently implemented free market regime regarding items of an ethnographic nature even further facilitates illicit sale. The very restricted powers of control with which the museums are endowed combined with the very small number of experts in this field makes it relatively simple to smuggle these valuable carpets and kilims abroad. No inventories have been drawn up of the valuable old carpets and kilims in Anatolia apart from those in the museums, and we are continually being amazed to find our most valuable carpets appearing in advertisements in various European and American magazines and periodicals.

There are now a number of very useful institutions in Turkey, such as the Turkish Cultural Research Association, the Society for the Encouragement of Turkish Carpet-Weaving and the Turkish Carpet-Weaving Foundation that make it essential that we should look at the whole problem in a new light.

Carpet-weaving is of great cultural and economic importance, and judicious investment in this field could provide employment for millions of workers at home and, by using the "Turkish Image", create a wide

market abroad. But to regulate the future of a cultural sector one must first have a very good knowledge of the culture itself.

Anatolia might be decried as a vast treasure-house of the most valuable carpets and kilims. Those reproduced in these pages represent the few remaining specimens to have survived to the present day under the most adverse conditions. One might very well compare them to the fragmentary remains from Catalhöyük, Bogazköyü or the Kubadabad Sarayi. The whole history of the Turkish people is incorporated in their colours and motifs.

1. This topic has been reviewed in the light of the paper entitled "Suggestions concerning measures to be taken for the prevention of theft and damage with regard to the old carpets and kilims in Turkish mosques" presented at the "Symposium on the smuggling, damage and preservation of old objects of historical or cultural value."

2. As a supplement to the work of Kurt Erdmann and researchers belonging to his school on the history of knotted carpets, see the several works published by Prof. O. Aslapanapa. S. Yetkin and N. Diyarbekirli.