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One of the peculiar customs in the Americana field is the inclusion of Oriental carpets in sales of Colonial furniture, ceramics and silver. Such carpets are also displayed over tables and on floors in the Early American period rooms in places like the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Oriental carpets and American antiques go together like peas and carrots.

"Oriental carpets have been an integral part of the material culture of the West for 600 years," said Walter B. Denny, an art history professor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Turkish carpets "have been an essential part of the American interior since the 19th century," he added.

An authority on Islamic and Turkish art, he is the guest curator of "The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets," an exhibition at the Textile Museum in Washington from Sept. 13 through Feb. 16.

The show features 50 colorful Turkish carpets, prayer rugs and cushion covers from the 14th through the 19th centuries, many amassed by George Hewitt Myers, an heir to what is now the Bristol-Myers Squibb company fortune who founded the museum in 1925. The London publisher Scala has brought out an illustrated catalog with text by Mr. Denny, who explores the classical design sources that inspired Anatolian carpet weavers.

"By classical, I mean carpet designs that have never gone out of style and that have continued to appear in Anatolian rugs over the centuries, sometimes in their original forms and sometimes in designs that gradually mutated," Mr. Denny said.

There were carpet-weaving centers in ancient Egypt, Persia, Syria and the Caucasus, but the only center whose earliest carpets survive is Anatolia, the Asiatic portion of modern Turkey. In 1071 Turkic tribes invaded Anatolia from Central Asia and the women in these tribes had a tradition of weaving distinctive woolen nomadic carpets. These knotted pile carpets were immensely varied in technique, design, symbolism and function, and they attracted attention. When Marco Polo was in Anatolia in 1271, for example,

he said the best carpets in the world were woven there. Early travelers from France also praised them. Soon they were being exported.

"We start seeing evidence of Oriental rugs in Europe in the 14th century," Mr. Denny said. "By the 15th century, large numbers of Orientals are appearing in paintings, usually shown on a table or on the floor beneath the feet of the Virgin Mary." Hans Holbein, Lorenzo Lotto, Domenico Ghirlandaio, Giovanni Bellini, Carlo Crivelli and Hans Memling were some of the painters depicting the carpets; today, certain patterns are still named after these painters.

For example, Holbein carpets -- which have orderly rows of octagonal medallions -- are named for the 16th-century German artist who painted them. In the exhibition, "small-pattern Holbeins" are displayed with "large-pattern Holbeins." Mr. Denny matches 16th-century designs with their 18th- and 19th-century descendants. He does this again and again with other rug motifs to show continuity of form.

"If we take a broad view, we can see that a large proportion of later carpets, from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, trace their common origins to a few small and easily defined groups of early carpets," he said. "I organized these early sources for motifs into four groups: the so-called painter carpets; carpets from the city of Ushak; carpets inspired by silk and embroidered textiles; and Ottoman court-style carpets."

Painter carpets are geometric; Ushak patterns are curvilinear. "The basis of Ushak design was pen and paper," Mr. Denny said. "The Ushaks were inspired by drawings, illuminations, bookbindings and colorful tile decorations." (Think of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul.)

Ushak carpets often depict small lotus blossoms, eight-petaled star medallions, split-leaf forms and curving vines. "All these designs were produced in commercial establishments, with the same predominately red-and-blue color scheme, some of them over a period of over three centuries," Mr. Denny said.

Another early source of motifs was patterned silk. "Anatolian weavers turned again and again to the layouts and motifs of velvet and brocaded silks as sources for new carpet designs," said Mr.

Denny, who shows fragments with leaf forms and lotus blossoms. Mr. Denny paired a 19th-century yastik, or cushion cover, which has a bright yellow medallion boasting eight peacock-blue feathers, with its presumed prototype, a 17th-century deep red and pale green Ottoman silk velvet yastik from Bursa with a green, eight-feather medallion. Here the idea is to accentuate the differences. The first is bold and gutsy, the second, calm and refined.

Despite what a rug dealer may say, the significance of many motifs is not known. "Weavers gave nicknames to motifs," said Sumru Belger Krody, the associate curator at the museum and author of the catalog's introduction. "Their meanings would be passed down from mothers and grandmothers, but the meaning of the same motif could be different in the very next village."

One carpet in the show, borrowed from the Met, illustrates the difficulty of pinning down meanings. It has an architectural design with three arches and an oil lamp, called the coupled-column motif. It is a 16th-century Turkish prayer rug from an Ottoman royal workshop. "It symbolizes the passage of the pious Muslim's soul to paradise," Mr. Denny said. "The hanging lamp symbolizes the presence of God."

The design, however, resembles one on an early-17th-century Egyptian curtain used to cover the Torah scroll in a Jewish synagogue. "The similarity between the two designs and their symbols, the prayer rug and the Torah curtain, is striking," Mr. Denny said.

Mr. Denny speculated that the coupled-column motif originated in Spain, probably in the form of a Torah curtain. He compared it to the archways in the courtyards of the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. "I traced the origins of the coupled-column motif to Spain and the Sephardic Jews, who got kicked out of Spain when the Christians took over in 1492," Mr. Denny said. "The Jews were immediately invited to Istanbul by the sultan. In fact, by the early 16th century a substantial portion of the Istanbul population consisted of Spanish-speaking Jews. That's the nature of art. The Muslim artists simply borrowed the motif for their own uses." Coupled-column prayer rugs are still in Turkish mosques.

"You'll see a hundred other little mother-and-daughter resemblances in Anatolian carpets that reflect 500 years of carpet history," Mr. Denny said. "They took these designs from the past and reused them, each time with a new burst of creativity and fresh artistic ideas."

Mr. Denny is to lecture on Anatolian carpets on Sept. 14 at the museum, which will hold a rug symposium related to its exhibition from Oct. 18 to 20. Information: (202) 667-0441, Extension 64; or www.textilemuseum.org.