Links between Anatolian Kilim Designs and Older Traditions

by Walter B. Denny

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

The surge of interest in flat-woven rugs of the flat-woven rugs of the late 19th century has now led to a discussion of both the phenomenon of collecting and that of publication, has created a paradox. We at once knew a great deal more about flat-woven rugs than we formerly did, and yet, in comparison with the amount of material actually available for study today, we probably know proportionally much less than we did ten years ago, at the time of the ground-breaking Rosenthal to Sarukand exhibition and its important catalogue.

The great Venetian scholar Alois Riegl first pointed out the importance of the decorative arts in reaching a broader understanding of the development of the so-called Fine Arts. Riegl abolished the artificial distinction between 'decorative arts' and 'fine arts' which had kept the serious study of such traditions at the Islamic tradition in eclipse. His idea, that the concept of ‘classical’ could be used without the concept of ‘decadence’ as a necessary accompaniment when studying post-classical works, is indeed the very foundation of our present-day understanding and enjoyment of the village and nomadic rugs of the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries as a vital art form. The study of carpets, building upon the methodology first set out by Riegl, has developed to a point where we are now able to explore basic questions of form, style, technique, provenance, and symbolism, in conjunction with questions of economics, the place of the carpet in society, and its reflections of the broader history of taste in both Eastern and Western societies. In all of this scholarship, however, flat-woven rugs have been to a great extent ignored, although a few landmark publications have prepared a foundation for study. Through Rosenthal to Sarukand we have been introduced to the various techniques and the broader parameters of the geography of flat-woven rugs. Through the Whitfield Art Gallery exhibition of 1977 and its catalogue, we more fully began to appreciate the extraordinary beauty of flat-woven rugs. And in the forthcoming volume Kilims, with its hundreds of illustrations and its distillation of years of research by Y. Petropoulou and M. Franasz, we will be presented for the first time with a comprehensive overview of the various types of tapestry-woven rugs.

The question I would like to explore in this presentation is however another problem altogether. We are by now familiar with the process of stylization and stylistic change, whereby representational art is often changed, sometimes precipitously and sometimes in subtle ways, as each generation of artists adds upon the heritage of forms bequeathed to it by earlier generations. This phenomenon has been explored at some length by several authorities dealing with carpets, whether the great Dragon Rugs from the Caucasus or the village rugs of Anatolia, but it has largely been assumed to this time that such processes occurred relatively infrequently in flat-woven rugs, and especially in the tapestry-woven kilims whose technique was supposedly ill-adapted to the curvilinear forms of representational art. It was easier to assume that the simple geometric forms in kilim weaving reflected some sort of age-old concept or abstraction arising from the technique itself. While this point of view may indeed have some merit, as we have begun to learn more about that technique, we have also begun to recognize that just as styles change with the passage of time, so do the materials and techniques used to produce the rugs themselves.

Notes:
1. A much more extensive range of design variations is illustrated in Beatte, May II.
4. See note 1, Fig. 25.
5. Ellis, C.G. 'A Soumak-Woven Rug in a 12th Century International Style'. Textile Museum Journal, 1, No. 4, 1963. Fig. 4.
considerable extent forms observable in more recent examples may derive from Ottoman representational court art of the sixteenth century, in the same way that forms of so many other village rugs do.

First, it may be useful to point out some examples of design types which in my opinion do not partake of this particular evolution of forms. These may for convenience be divided into three groups. The first of these, the most basic of all rug designs, is the repetitive textile pattern evolving in abstract fashion from the nature of the technical means available to the weaver, including the four-square nature of warp and weft in a two-coordinate weaving system, the degree of coarseness of the weaves itself, and the colors and materials made available to the weaver. Perhaps the best-known of these textile patterns is an interpenetrating zig-zag stripe, often seen in the earliest Islamic depictions of rugs found in fourteenth and fifteenth-century miniature paintings. This sort of design persists quite strongly into our own day, both in the brocaded rugs of Anatolia (Fig. 1) and in many tapestry-woven examples as well (Fig. 2).

The second pattern, this time with a strongly symbolic function, is the familiar gul, that closed geometric shape familiar from central-Asian Turkmen weaving as a tribal symbol, although perhaps more appropriately called by its Turkish name of Ayıuk (amulet) or Tangle (seal or tribal symbol). Since there exists extensive documentation for the settling of Anatolia by Turkmen nomadic peoples from Central Asia from the twelfth century onward, we should not be surprised to find the gul form, as a repetitive geometric form, in Anatolian flat-woven rugs (Fig. 3), although as tribal groups settled into agricultural communities, both its form and its meaning may have been changed or even swallowed up in the maw of history. Such gul rugs, both flat- and pile-woven, appear in abundance in Anatolia, especially among the Turkmen (Yırtık) peoples, and the rugs generally favor a hexagonal gul, but we are no longer able to attach specific forms to specific tribal groups or sub-groups with any confidence.

The third type of pattern, closely allied to the second but generally more complex from a visual point of view, is that called here the 'totemic design. Frequently but not invariably employed in a repetitive pattern like the first two, totemic designs are powerful geometric forms, complex in form and stylized beyond recognition from earlier antecedents, which also appear to retain a great deal of symbolic importance of one sort or another in village society (Fig. 4). The complexity of these forms argues against these having evolved from the loom itself, and for their having developed from earlier representational forms which, in many cases, were probably symbolic of various aspects of the nomadic environment where, even after the adoption of Islam, animistic currents were rarely more than slightly beneath the surface. Not self-contained forms like the gul, but frequently on a huge scale, such forms, as they appear in more recent kilim weaving, are intriguing links to the past.

Given the often remarkable degree of stylization observable in kilims, it is frequently an open question as to whether a particular
The discovery in the great mosque of Divrīği of a number of important fragments of tapestry-woven rugs in the last ten years has finally made it possible for us to test our theories about the classical origins of kilim forms from the realm of conjecture into that of fact. The great kilims of Divrīği, with their forms derived directly from court designs, appear to be the product of a commercial atelier in east-central Anatolia, whose production was evidently fairly short-lived, and which flourished during the seventeenth or the early eighteenth century. The largest example found at Divrīği (Fig. 6) originally measured some 5.4 m in length, and all of the examples which have come to light are of large size, woven on very large looms, with bold and large-scale patterns all of which relate directly either to textiles designs of the Islamic or to designs which can be traced back to other media. These designs include the famous stylized flowers, in particular the lily-palmette, the tulip, and the hyacinth (Fig. 7), as well as the curved crescent leaves so beloved of sixteenth-century artists in the nakkṣatran. Other Divrīği examples, with their designs of cartouches containing flowers (Fig. 8), can be traced to those urvul patterns woven under the influence of the nakkṣatran in the Ottoman weaving centers of Bursa and Istanbul.

The Divrīği kilims, and a few other examples which have come to light, while probably of the seventeenth century rather than the formative sixteenth, provide a foundation upon which to base a chronology and establish without ambiguity a link between tapestry-woven rugs and the Ottoman classical tradition of the sixteenth century. A second group of kilims, later in date and in the chain of stylization, provide a link between this earliest group and the more geometric weavings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Ethnographic Museum in Ankara, whether by design or by happenstance, contains the largest number of examples of this intermediate group, others of which have appeared in American collections and on the London market in recent years. Of Central Anatolian provenance (the town of Lüle in Konya province was once suggested for them), and on the basis of coloration is still a strong contender, these kilims employ the vocabulary of the classical age, in particular the tulip flower and the curving rinceaux which often accompany it, but adapted to a syntax which utilizes bands of ornament in the rug. A remarkable prayer rug in Ankara shows stylized white tulips in the arch spandrel.
(Fig. 9): an example from an American collection, a detail of which is shown (Fig. 10), clearly demonstrates the adaptation of the vertical tapestry technique to the curvilinear forms, through the use of outlining wefts and by the vertical compacting of the design-bearing weft yarns to create curved lines where colors meet.

From this intermediate group of tapestry-woven rugs, there is not a great distance to the weavings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The design in the central field of a central-Anatolian tapestry-woven sejdeh rug of the early twentieth century (Fig. 11) represents an adaptation of the same design seen in Fig. 10 above, but with a necessary coarsening and angulation made necessary because of the weave. The sprays of tulips have almost entirely lost their delicacy and their curvilinear aspects, but they are still recognizable if we understand the chain of stylization.

The very same sort of process results in the great 'carnation kilims' composed of row upon row of stylized Turkish flowers. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Ottoman Turkish tile-makers worked in the ateliers of Iznik developed a method of showing separate petals on flowers such as the carnation not by outlining, but by separating each petal in a stenciled fashion on the white ground of the tile (Fig. 12). The kilim-weaver has continued this basic idea by using the white ground of the kilim to separate each petal of the fan-like flowers (Fig. 13), which are arranged in staggered rows in exactly the same fashion as they are in the well-known seccade kilims composed of flowers from Iznik, woven in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The existence of certain motifs derived from the classical Ottoman art of the sixteenth century in village weaving of the nineteenth century certainly comes as no surprise, given the all-pervading influence of the Ottoman classical tradition and its demonstrated impact on village emboidery, pile rug-weaving, and painted architectural decoration. The full extent of its impact upon the medium of flat-woven textiles has yet to be fully ascertained. It appears that the more malleable technique, that of brocading called cicim ('jiym) in Turkey, was paradoxically lost affected by the court style, while the more static technique of flat-tapestry weaving, the ubiquitous kilim, was profoundly affected by the earlier tradition. It remains however to distinguish among those kilim designs which trace their origins back to the classical style of the sixteenth century, and those gül, totemic, and textile-pattern designs which may be rooted in a much more distant past, and whose forms, however, provocative, may forever remain unexplained.

Notes
1 The subject of the present article, presented in Munich at the Second International Conference on Oriental Carpets, was suggested by Hans König, to whom the author is deeply indebted.
3 A. Riegl, *Altorientalische Tempelte (Leipzig, 1891), and Stiftsgemächer (Vienna, 1892)."
Detail of hand kilim with sprays of stylized tulips (cf. fig. 10)
Detail, Streifen-Kelim mit Zweigen stilisierter Tulpen (vgl. Abb. 10)
Neil Winterbottom Collection, London