

WORKSHOP

A GUIDE TO IDENTIFYING GOOD EXAMPLES OF RUG AND TEXTILE TYPES

BENCHMARKS

1 AN AFGHAN FELT MANTLE

STEPHANIE BUNN

READERS WILL BE AWARE of the variety of traditional silk and ikat *khalat* and *chapan* worn by the Turkmen, Uzbeks and Tajiks in Central Asia, and some may also have seen the sturdy felt coats, *kepenek* or *kapanak*, worn over the shoulders by shepherds in Turkey and Iran, but the full spectrum of felted coats and mantles across the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia is perhaps less familiar. The piece featured here is of a type traditionally worn in Afghanistan. So few exist that I cannot claim it represents the best of its kind, but as an example of the range of felt *khalat* and mantles from the region, it is outstanding.

The most commonly seen are *kapanak*, as worn by Iranian shepherds, felted in one piece, many with hanging vestigial sleeves. But in the early 20th century in Afghanistan there were also felt mantles cut and sewn from one piece of rectangular felt, slit so that they could be sewn into shape without waste fabric. Highly embroidered, they were also worn over the shoulders and their sleeves hung down empty, more decorative than useful. Not everyday work-wear, they were markers of status, or worn on special occasions.

Such felt *khalat* are often associated with Turkmen shepherds, and indeed they probably wore them in the past, but they have almost entirely disappeared from Turkmen attire, replaced by Russian Army greatcoats and 'European-cut' coats during the Soviet era. In Afghanistan, felt *khalat* may still be found, and are even worn occasionally by Turkmen living in the Herat area, by Aimaq groups such as the Jamshidi, by Hazaras and Tajiks.

Some felt *khalat* were sewn together quite carelessly, and were the only item of traditional clothing made by men, perhaps reflecting the difficulty of sewing through such dense fabric. These rough shepherds' versions served as sleeping bags as well as warm and waterproof all-weather coats. The sleeves were sewn together at the base, and served as a pocket for small objects or even food.

The altogether finer felt of this mantle from the British Museum, has been cut so that the sleeves taper to a decorative point. It is trimmed with gold and coloured thread, and is of a form reputedly made by the Pathans (Pashtuns) from Kandahar in the early 20th century. Elements such as seams, edges and sleeves are all embroidered or trimmed. The seams joining the bodice to the lower body are sewn with fine coloured stitching, while the lower body is defined by a



cream zig-zag line, with gold and yellow dashes interspersed. Triangular motifs inside these borders are outlined in cream, in-filled with coloured silk stitching which is tonally close to the cream of the felt and gold thread, and surrounded by yet more dashes. That even these are defined in cream and in-filled gives an idea of the embroiderer's attention to detail. The use of cream and gold thread and tones that harmonise with the felt indicates how the garment achieves both subtlety and richness in one form. The dashed triangles are reminiscent of motifs used on Pashtun bazaar felts from guild workshops in the Kabul bazaar, as acquired in the 1960s by Klaus Ferdinand for Moesgard Museum in Aarhus.

The upper body of the mantle is particularly fine. The outer border is almost entirely worked in gold thread. Where the bodice comes to a point at the centre front and is tied with two gold tassels, two clawed insects, reminiscent of a fearsome desert scorpion, are depicted.

The cut of such coats from one piece of cloth may suggest that their form is derived from an ancient method of tailoring which developed

Pashtun (?) felt *khalat*,
Afghanistan, early 20th
century. Wool felt, wool

and gold thread embroidery. British Museum,
London, AS1997.32.6

when sewing skins. Rudenko describes a colt-skin coat of similar cut with sewn up sleeves from Pazyryk. Persians depicted on reliefs at Persepolis wear similar coats with the sleeves hanging empty, known as *kandys*, over their shoulders. These were reputedly brought to the Persians by the Medes, who are also shown offering them as tribute. Such coats have indicated status and prestige throughout history in this region, and until recently they continued to be presented as tribute by nomadic people. Similar coats are still given at weddings and important social events in Central Asia.

To select a piece as an example of excellence is both personal and challenging. The factors that have defined my choice include economy of material, cut, quality of wool, fine embroidery, colour harmony, and above all that simplicity which combines subtlety and richness in one enduring form, which looks neither more nor less than what it is.

1 'Karagashli' long rug, Shirvan area (?) east Caucasus, 19th century. Wool pile on a wool and cotton foundation, 0.95 x 2.87m (3'1½" x 9'5"). Daniel Baldini Collection

2 'Karagashli' rug, Shirvan area (?), east Caucasus, 19th century. 0.99 x 1.40m (3'3" x 4'7"). Courtesy Sotheby's New York



1

2 TWO KARAGASHLI RUGS

RAOUL TSCHEBULL

THERE'S AN ASPECT of almost guilty pleasure connected to collecting Caucasian pile weavings. They're beautiful, but oh, so *déclassé*. Specialise in Uzbek belts, Hainan Island cotton textiles, Indonesian batik – almost anything but those ubiquitous Caucasian rugs. They're so common, so 'commercial'. And they're 'late', which can mean that they have little 'art' value. Michael Franses, in *Orient Stars* (1993), gives the Kirchheim Caucasian village rug group the implicitly pejorative title "Later Caucasian Rugs". Later than what? It's difficult to say, really: So many Caucasian rugs, so little hard information.

Ian Bennett, in *Rugs of the Caucasus* (2003), infers that "at least 90%" of Caucasian pile rugs post-date 1880, a fair estimate. But the Caucasian rugs from before that generally accepted 'quality' cut-off date can be artful, inventive, highly varied, precise, and filled with wonderful colour, the equal of any folk art rug weaving from anywhere.

To me, based on looking at dated examples over many years, it seems that if one were to plot Caucasian village pile weaving on a graph, the 'volume' curve would cross the 'quality' curve in the early 1860s. This does not mean that there aren't very good, artful Caucasian rugs woven post-1880, but generally the better ones seem to be earlier. Understanding the connection between age and beauty is slippery, to a large degree because of the aforementioned lack of data. But there is a definite correlation. And it is possible that intense inquiry – expensive and time-consuming – may provide more information. But for now, the slender corpus of knowledge is derived from 'dealer lore' and the writings, either direct, or as (mis-)interpreted by others, of Latif Kerimov, who was on the scene well after the magic of Caucasian weaving had been snuffed out by commercial demand, synthetic dyes and colonialism.

So, you ask, "What makes a good Caucasian rug old?" The answer requires some attention to taxonomy, because that is the only sure element to which one can resort for study. Old pieces have a wide array of natural dyes, including the frequent use of three madder dyes, one of which is a true purple. On the basis of dated examples, purple was largely gone from Caucasian weaving by about 1870. Drawing in old Caucasian rugs is well spaced and very precise, but colour use is often idiosyncratic. Minor field elements tend to be quite varied, and many never show up in *Kustar*-era post-1880 Caucasian rugs.

The two rugs illustrated here each exhibit a fluid, graceful execution of a deconstructed design based on the well-known 'Harshang' Iranian workshop pattern, especially the long rug 1. The latter has been around the block several times, having been sold by Jean Lefevre in London as long ago as May 1976. Since then it has appeared in colour in three major exhibition catalogues (Spuhler, König, Volkmann, *Old Eastern Carpets*, Munich 1978, pl.67; Kirchheim et al., *Orient Stars*, Hamburg

1993, pl.18; Thompson, *Timbuktu to Tibet*, New York 2008, pl.75), as well as another appearance at auction at Sotheby's in New York in April 1998 (HALI 99, p.125). The weaver's ability to avoid having the field motifs appear as a stack of unrelated elements is quite remarkable.

One of the hallmarks of old Caucasian pile rugs is that they have field and sometimes border designs that simply don't appear in later examples. But these combinations are not unique – there are often a handful of like examples in museums or private collections, which makes it seem that the early pieces come out of a fairly long tradition. The inference is that very few were woven.

As far as I know this particular long-format rug is the sole survivor of its type/design, although it is said that there is a near pair in a California collection. Based on its wool type, colours, and structure – wool warps, [assumed] cotton wefts, a small bit of white cotton plainweave end finish, a cotton selvedge and the use of a medium blue and corrosive dark brown outer reciprocal border, it can be placed within a small cluster of similar old weavings, all of which are long rugs or probable fragments of long rugs. Others in this cluster have undecorated fields in green, blue or red, an ivory-ground main border of large linked rosettes, and stepped multicoloured, slit-tapestry-like indentations into the field; two otherwise complete examples are missing the outside border, probably as a result of the stress induced by the corrosion of dark brown in the reciprocal, combined with relatively weak cotton wefting. There are apparently no post-1880 rugs of this type, even if some look superficially similar.

Caucasian rug formats are rarely discussed; it would be very interesting to know why the rugs

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in this cluster are all in a long format. Most likely they were originally designed to be used domestically in sets in long narrow rooms typical of the area. Without fieldwork and anthropological data from the period, of which there appears to be none, one can, at this point, only speculate.

The Russians, whose invasion of the Transcaucasus began at the start of the 19th century, systematically closed and converted mosques, which would have been depots and therefore a potential source of information about locally woven old rugs and kilims, much as they have been in Anatolia. Old Transcaucasian rugs at the time of Russian conquest were probably dispersed, and the knowledge about them has been lost. Hearsay has it that these long rugs are from the southern part of Shirvan, south of Baku, but nobody really knows.

The second rug 2, almost 'Persianate' in feeling, is almost equally well-known. Formerly in



the Rudnick Collection, it was published by Bailey et al., *Through the Collector's Eye* (Providence 1991, pl.21) and was sold at Sotheby's in New York in December 1999 (HALI 109, p.153). It is one of the best of its type on the basis of colour, drawing, condition, wool quality, complexity, and fineness of weave. Very precisely drawn, it has intense, harmonious colours with three red dyes, including abraded dark purple as a guard border background. The ivory palmette, an escapee from Chinese art, is intricately drawn. Later examples – with synthetic dyes, which make age determination fairly simple – omit the palmette(s), while the ogival forms are almost turned into rectangles. A comparison with pl.108 in Ulrich Schürmann's, *Caucasian Rugs* (1965), in which the design is incompletely rendered, is instructive.

At 115 knots per square inch, the density of 2 is twice that of the long rug 1, yet both have been

catalogued as 'Karagashli'. The two rugs are certainly similar in design source, but rugs with this design were woven all over the Caucasus and western Iran. 'Karagashli' is a Kerimov-sourced village name, said by many writers about Caucasian rugs to be on the Daghestan border, near the Caspian Sea. But rugs allegedly woven in that area have substantially different patterns and structure from these two. Something's not right. However, there is a town named Qaragashli west of Baku, but whether it is the source of either of these rugs is unknown. An educated guess is that anything as finely woven as the second rug could well have come from near an urban centre such as Baku.

There are so many anomalies and contradictions in the study of older Caucasian rugs that one can, at this point, only appreciate them for their art value, and hope that some day they can be placed accurately in a matrix of Azerbaijani material culture.

3

TWO GREY HILLS NAVAJO RUG

MARK WINTER

CHARLES AVERY AMSDEN published his much anticipated book on Southwest textiles, *Navajo Weaving: Its Technique and History*, in 1934. It is still considered by many to be the 'bible' on the subject. When referring to the Two Grey Hills rug weaving region (in 1998 the Navajo Nation changed the name of the area from Two Grey Hills to Toadlena/Two Grey Hills to honor the Toadlena weavers' contribution to the local rug tradition), Amsden writes that the area is: "...some fifty miles southwest of the Government agency at Shiprock, New Mexico, on the San Juan River. It is about equally distant from Crystal, and the lofty Chuska Mountains lie between. Yet the Moore influence has seated itself in this locality, aided by the intelligent cooperation of several traders roundabout no less than by the fact that this region is one of the most favored of nature of the entire Navajo country. Its neighboring mountains, lofty enough to be heavily forested, assure a rainfall much greater than the average for the reservation; so with water and pasturage assured, and wood and game abundant in the mountains, the Navajo thereabout have become a sort of local aristocracy. They are permanently settled, moving only up to the mountain, and down again with the seasons; they have means, leisure and considerable of the ancient pride of craftsmanship. Here the Moore tradition flourishes today, traders backing it with hard cash as well as kind words, and this small corner of the reservation has a wide-spread reputation as the home of the best of modern Navajo weaving."

I have chosen this Toadlena/Two Grey Hills textile woven in the early 1930s by Mary Yanabah Curley to demonstrate the fine tradition Amsden refers to. The piece is woven of lustrous handspun native wool in natural shades including an over-dyed black (the weavers would often use either local vegetal sources or store-bought dyes to enhance their dark brown wool). The local wool's long staple fibre allowed it to be very finely spun, and gives the textile a high gloss finish. The rug is flatwoven in the weft-faced tapestry technique with interlocking joints, so no slits appear in the weaving. The pattern consists of a bold right angle terrace and fret border surrounding a complex 'three column' arrangement of designs.

Amsden's comment in regard to "the Moore influence" refers to mail order rug catalogues produced by J.B. Moore, an Englishman, who owned the nearby Crystal trading post from 1897 until 1911. Moore blended his entrepreneurial sense of design with that of oriental rugs and Navajo aesthetic qualities, and encouraged weavers to produce rugs with bold graphic designs using quality materials and workmanship. The Two Grey Hills weavers took the basic Crystal design themes and elaborated upon them. They also added to their repertoire designs based upon prehistoric Anasazi pottery that can be found in the numerous local archeological sites. Most specifically seen in this textile is the spiraling 45° triangle, with or without the 'Anasazi footprint' at its end. The terrace, fret, and trident designs



seen are Crystal influenced, while the overall precision, complexity and use of Anasazi inspired designs are uniquely from the Toadlena/Two Grey Hills region. Attribution of such textiles to a specific weaver has become very important in determining their value and collectability. Accurately identified and appropriately attributed Anasazi design inspired Toadlena/Two Grey Hills textiles are currently the most highly sought after of all 20th century Navajo textiles. The weaver

of this piece, Mary Yanabah (1877-1977) from the Bear Clan of Toadlena, and her sister, Police Girl, are credited with being the first to incorporate Anasazi style designs in their rugs. Their designs, and those of their mother, Mrs Police Boy, strongly influenced rugs from the Teec Nos Pos area, where later more complexity and colour were used. Mary Yanabah was also an inspiration to her younger cousin, Daisy Taugelchee, considered to be the best Navajo weaver who ever lived.