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Caucasian  
Textiles  
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# Caucasian Textiles

16th - 20th  
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## **Introduction—Caucasian Textiles**

*Selections from the collection of H. Medill Sarkisian*

This is the second of a series of exhibits shown at the Museum, University of Colorado at Boulder, illustrating the interchange of design motif across Asia. The first exhibit on Asia Minor Textiles showed the western end of the spectrum. This exhibit moves eastward into the Caucasus, one of the major north-south connections of Asia. The numbering of the textiles continues from the previous exhibition.

We are indebted to Mr. H. Medill Sarkisian for his kindness in permitting us to display these carpets. In addition to the Museum personnel, we are indebted to the many volunteers who have contributed to the hanging of this show. Without their help it would not have been possible.

Peter Robinson  
Director, Museum  
University of Colorado at Boulder  
May 1979





## Caucasian Rugs

The Caucasus is the mountainous area between the Black and Caspian seas. Perhaps it will be most easily located by stating that its most famous mountain is Ararat where Noah supposedly grounded the Ark. It has been a heavily forested area throughout history, with man continuously waging war for survival of agricultural lands against the forests of oak, beech, laurel, and boxwood trees. Within the forests, because of the vast changes in temperature between the subtropical and almost polar climates, live animals for almost every climate.

The population may be the most varied and heterogeneous for any area in the world. Pliny, first century A.D., records that the Greek colony of Dioskuria on the Black Sea had to employ fifty interpreters in their trade relations with the Caucasian people. The Arabs called the area "the Mountains of Languages."

Because of geographical constraints caused by the Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Sea of Azov, and various mountain ranges, the Caucasus was one of the two main north-south corridors for movement in Asia. Throughout recorded history and before, the horse-oriented nomads of the steppes and the agricultural peoples of Mesopotamia, Persia, and India have used these passages for expansion and raids.

The general opinion of ethnologists is that the area was populated from the south under pressure of migrations of people from Mesopotamia, but invasions from the northeast are also known.

Among the names of people or places associated with rugs are the Lesghians—there are at least twenty-five different languages spoken by this group; an alternate name for them,

based on geography, is Daghestan. Daghestan is a region on the south slope of the Caucasus. The region may be divided into Kuba, Schmahka, and Nuka Zakatala. Besides Lesghians, there are Avars, Laks, Kiurians, Armenians, Georgians, and others.

A corruption of the name Kuba into Cabistan/Kabistan has added another rug name but not increased the number of different rug types. Names of mountains, forests, and villages have also been used by dealers to differentiate qualities. The rugs from this area are generally small, but long runners were common as were Kelleies (6-7' × 15-17'). Very few rugs from this area are thick; they are thin, frequently finely knotted, usually have braided and knotted fringes with wool warps and often cotton wefts. Some older rugs used cotton for white areas in patterns. Almost all the designs for fields and borders of Caucasian rugs were used by all the weavers of the South Caucasus. Colors were usually strong—reds, yellows, black, greens, indigo, and much white.

The Laks became Moslems near the end of the eighth century. The Avars, a very important group, have links with the Yueh-Chih of Chinese Turkestan pre-second century B.C. and with the Vandals of North Africa and South Europe of the fifth century A.D. They are responsible for a type of pile weaving called the "single warp" knot which has been characteristic of Spanish rugs from the fifteenth century until the present, for a similar weave identified with North Africa and Egypt of the ninth century A.D., and apparently for carpet fragments from Chinese Turkestan of the second century B.C. This indicates the vast area traversed

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by these peoples in their migrations and the direction of their movement. This will be discussed later.

The Armenians who became famous in Asia Minor history as weavers and metallurgists may have been the indigenous population; they merged very early with the Phrygians, a people from Southeastern Europe. They may be identified with the Hurrians of the late third millennium B.C., the Mittani of about the fifteenth and fourteenth century B.C., and with the Hittites, in one way or another, of a slightly later date. In the eighth century B.C., because of their wars with the Assyrians, they become clearly identified; here they are called the Urartians (cf. Ararat). What developments in weaving may be attributed to them are not completely determined. The Hurrians are identified in cuneiform texts as weavers on the royal looms of Mari, a pre-flood city-state on the Euphrates River.

The Hyksos, an Asia Minor tribe, introduced wool processing techniques and khilim weaving to Egypt about the sixteenth-seventeenth century B.C. During the Roman period the wars between the Parthians and Romans and later the Sassanians and Romans were usually waged in the country of Armenia and prisoners who had participated in the conflict on the Persian side when captured by the Romans were transported to Egypt; if the Persians were the victors, the prisoners were transplanted to the area around Shiraz (Southwest Persia). It should be understood that prisoners were taken only if they were to be sold as slaves or if they were artisans of sufficient importance to be of value to the state. The Armenians, already famous as weavers, were transplanted with their families into both areas. Whether or not the Coptic textile industry, much of it based on the khilim technique, owes its origin to the Armenians remains to be investigated.

43.





(Cover) Northern Caucasus, 19th Century





44. Daghestan, 19th Century

The design motifs on old Southwest Persian rugs, Lur, Afshar, Shiraz, etc., frequently seem so similar to East Anatolian and South Caucasian rugs as to indicate a close connection; however, the connection may have been continuous from ancient times through the Roman period until

the nineteenth century. The ancient trade routes followed the river valleys which run in a northwest-southeast direction. A skyphos from the sixth century B.C., in the Munich collection, shows a Bactrian (two-humped) camel which indicates trans-Asian migration (*EAA*, v. 2, p. 288).

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Earlier, Alexander the Great established the area around Kermanshah, Southwest Persia, as a place to settle his prisoners, and Yezd also became a base for prisoners and a weaving center; whether the weaving was of pile rugs at this time or only other textiles needs to be determined.

Southwest Persia remained a textile producing area of great fame during the early years of Arab power.

Generally speaking the textile patterns of a region did not change drastically with a political change (a conquest) unless the population was transferred out of the region and into a new home or a new people was transferred into a region to live among an already settled population. Both types of population changes have occurred in the Caucasus and East Anatolia repeatedly.

Hulagu, the Ilkhan of Persia during the Mongol period (thirteenth century), is said to have settled 150,000 Turkish families in East Anatolia and the South Caucasus.

These scanty and disconnected bits of information are not meant to be an historical introduction to Caucasian rugs. Recent researchers of Asia Minor and Caucasian rugs tend to commence their narratives with the Seljuk period (eleventh century). As indicated in the notes concerning Asia Minor rugs (Sarkisian, 1978), the weaving of a rug did not occur in an otherwise sterile cultural vacuum.

For pile rug weaving the area must first have the raw materials (in this case wool), a knowledge of textile weaving (pile weaving is merely a type of a textile), and a knowledge of processing the raw materials to make them suitable for weaving. Wool must be cleaned, carded, and spun before weaving; for patterned pile weaving a knowledge of dyeing or use of different natural colored wools was required.

Possibly no area of the world has a longer history of pattern weaving than Asia Minor and the South Caucasus. This





45. Seichur, Early 19th Century



46. Prayer Rug, Cabistan, 19th Century

does not mean pile carpet weaving. Khilim weaving on an upright loom, and belt, girth, and ribbon weaving on a tablet loom both preceded pile carpet weaving in the area. In order to weave a pile fabric, the loom had to undergo radical changes from that upon which early khilims were woven. Pile weaving existed several centuries prior to the Christian era; but while we have no carpets from the Caucasus nor from Eastern Anatolia that are pre-Islamic, we have remnants of pile weaving from Egypt and Chinese Turkestan that are early and partially fill the gap of pre-Islamic carpet weaving.

When the Seljuks entered East Anatolia, they had been living for almost 200 years under Iranians and had acquired enough Iranian culture to have passed beyond the rustic state of Central Asian nomads.

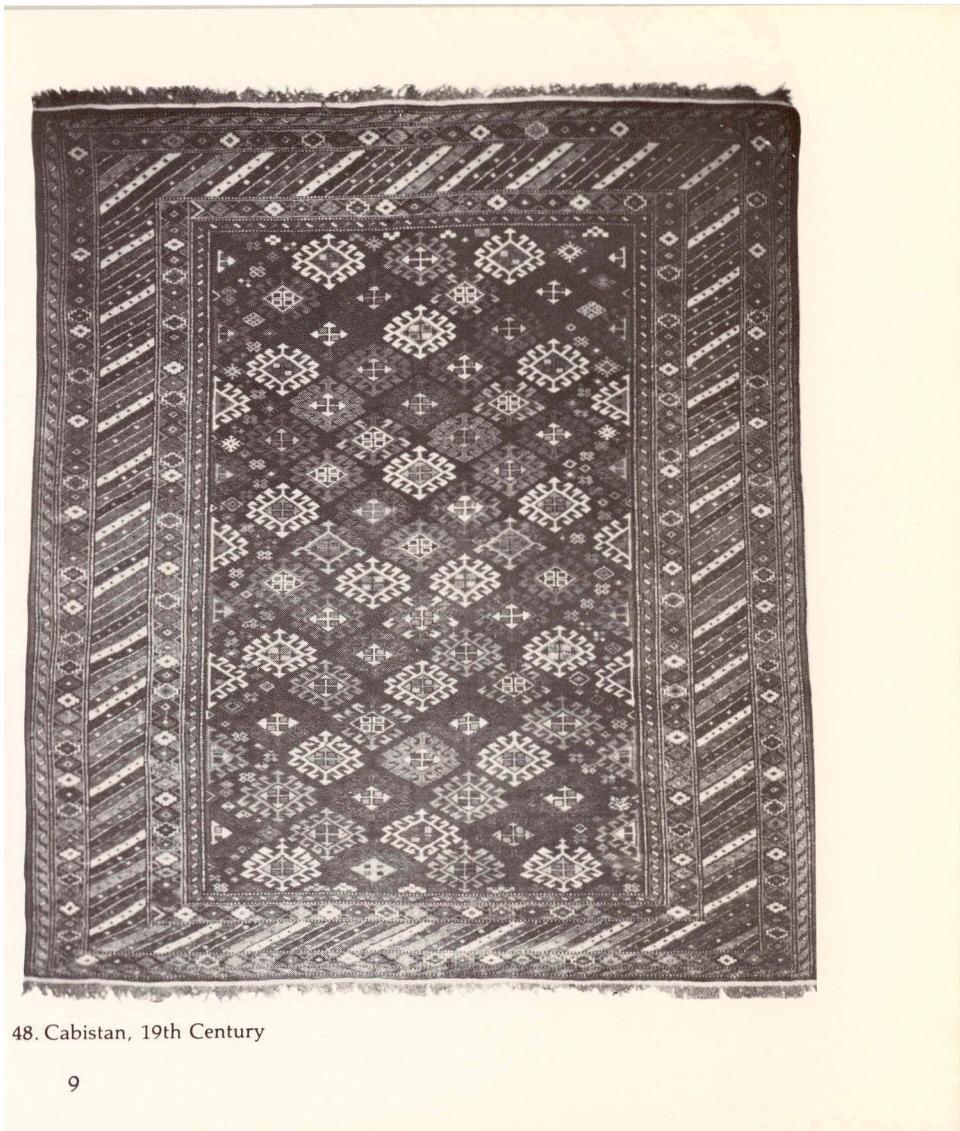
In the collection now on exhibit is a sixteenth-seventeenth century example of a Caucasian Dragon carpet (Number 58). When this carpet was acquired many years ago it, along with about 100 others still in existence, was considered to be thirteenth-fourteenth century and of Armenian workmanship. Recent studies whose results with which we generally agree indicate that these rugs could be dated much later, to the sixteenth-seventeenth century (Dimand and Mailey, 1973). The ethnological relationship of the workmen may be still undetermined.

In this particular carpet the original motif, a dragon and phoenix in opposition, has been so altered as to render it almost unidentifiable. The origin of the motif seems to have been China where it was a popular motif in Ming porcelains and cloisonné and also on Ming brocades. Whether or not the motif was popular during the Yuan Period (1280-1368) is an open question. There are similar arrangements on bronze, wood, and textiles of the T'ang and Sung periods,





47. Cabistan, 19th Century



48. Cabistan, 19th Century







49. Cabistan, 19th Century

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but neither the bronzes nor the wood carvings were likely objects for export, and the motifs in the early textile fragments, while frequently in the same family of design motifs, do not seem to be the objects used as models for these motifs.

It is our opinion that the origin of the dragon and phoenix motif of the Caucasian rugs is to be found either in cloisonnés or in textiles of the Ming or pre-Ming period and that they are not altered copies of Persian carpets of the sixteenth-seventeenth century (Yetkin, 1978).

Apparently, no one has attempted to study and classify peasant cross-stitch work of the tribal people (Kirghiz, Fenno-Ughrians) and various Turks whose work could have influenced carpet design motifs and who lived and moved about in the region from the Caucasus to Manchuria until the twentieth century. The cross-stitch work of the tribal people of China's northwest provinces seems to have been closely related to the blue and white rugs of the area in the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries.

Skilled weavers of pile rugs have little difficulty in copying designs from other media onto their rugs. In copying a motif from a brocade onto a pile rug, the first attempt might result in distortions of individual motifs because of differences in the numbers of warps and wefts but the weaver would be able to easily compensate for the differences in a succeeding rug. The distortion of dragons and phoenixes in these important early rugs is general, as if the original model itself were distorted and the true identity of the motifs only hazily understood by the weavers.

The Dragon carpets then may have been woven by members of a Turkish tribe, the Seljuks, who were just beginning to learn to weave pile rugs. They may also have been woven by a different group of Turkish weavers who also did not



50. Prayer Rug, Cabistan, 19th Century





51. Prayer Rug, Kuba, Early 19th Century

have a long tradition of weaving behind them. We do not think that these were the product of Armenian weavers.

Rugs 54 and 55 are a generally recognized type of Kazak rug, presumably woven in the Southern Caucasus. There are other rugs in this collection also called Kazak; but the exact provenance of any Kazak rug is in doubt for many reasons. If one attempts to relate Kazak rugs by designs, the problem becomes almost impossible to solve. If the attempt is made to relate them by construction, the identification becomes easier from one aspect, construction, but provenance still remains a question because these rugs may have originally been woven by Armenians.

Long before the Seljuks moved into the original Armenian homeland (East Anatolia and the South Caucasus), the Armenians had spread into different sectors of Asia Minor. Before the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks, many areas of Central and Southwest Asia Minor had become depopulated because of the incessant warfare between Byzantium and Persia; numerous Armenians moved into these vacant regions at the invitation of Byzantium but they did not completely abandon their ancient homeland; hence there were rugs of similar construction and design woven in many parts of today's Turkey.

On a painting which perhaps dates from the tenth century, now in the Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, is illustrated a rug which is certainly related to rug number 54. The painting illustrates the plight of Lady Wen-Chi, who for political reasons was given in marriage to a Uighur Turk. The Uighurs roamed China's northwestern borders as early as the eighth and ninth centuries and later moved west and some are found in Turkey at the time of the Seljuks.

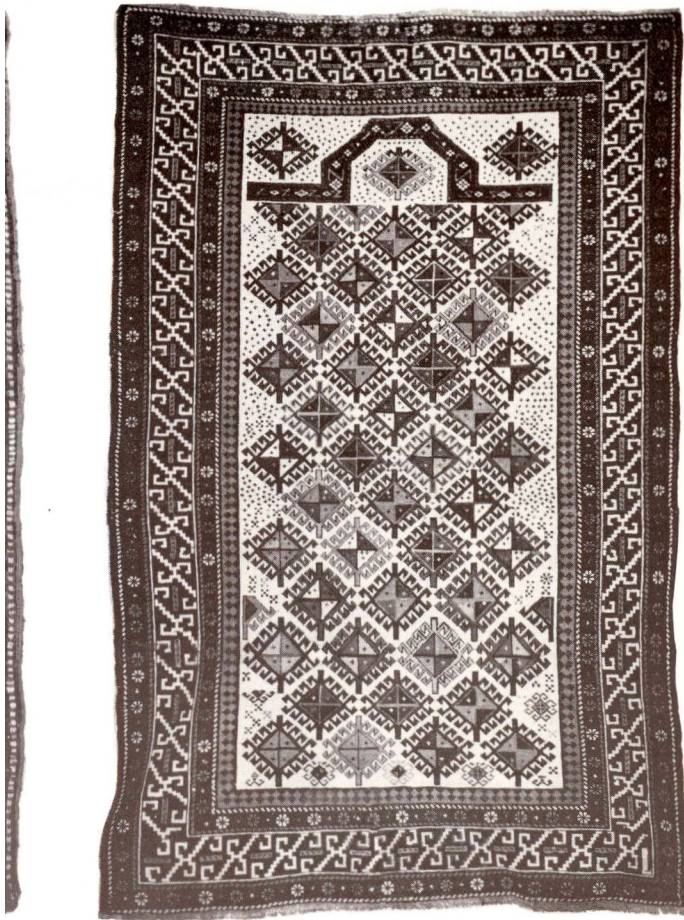
The question concerning this rug is whether it indicates

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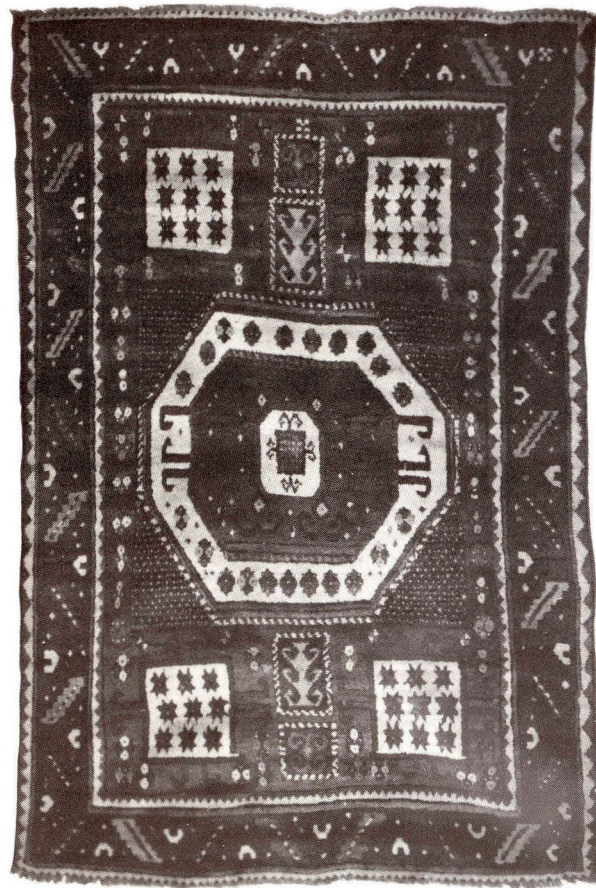


52. Prayer Rug, Kazak, 1214 AH (Ca. 1800)





53. Prayer Rug, Cabestan, 19th Century



55. Medallion Rug, Kazak, 19th Century

that this design composition moved from Chinese Turkestan to Anatolia or the other way around. Pile rug fragments (not large enough to provide information for design composition of an entire rug) have been found in Chinese Turkestan dating from the second century B.C. These remnants are patterned with geometric motifs as were several khilim fragments. Other textile motifs showed Greek influences indicating the direction from which the objects came at that time. These articles seem to have been associated with the Yueh-Chih, an Indo-European people who were forced out of the area to the west by the Hsiung-Nu in the second century B.C.

There is no reason to doubt that a Turkish tribe had learned to weave by the tenth century; however, we have no reason to believe that they had arrived at such formal and sophisticated design compositions, unless they were copying from another source. What few objects have been preserved of early Turkish work reveal an entirely different conception of design.

We suggest that the rug in the Lady Wen-Chi painting and the Kazak rugs number 54 and 55 are the products of Armenian weavers. We also suggest that most of the rugs from Southwest Turkey that are illustrated in early Italian paintings (e.g., Lotto—Dimand and Mailey, 1973) are products of Armenian weavers—the Armenians having moved into the region prior to the Crusades. The East Caucasian types, the Shirvans, Daghestans, Cabistans, such as numbers 43-47, seem to belong to a separate tradition. The arrangement of most of the design motifs appear to follow a setting of brocaded patterns done on a diagonal alignment.

Archaeological evidence indicates that as early as the second millennium B.C. the nomadic tribespeople inhabiting the region from Russian Turkestan to Chinese Turkestan

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56. Chi-chi, 1210 AH (1795)

wove straps, girths, belts, and bands on tablet looms. Because of the warping and wefting methods, these fabrics, if patterned, were warp faced with diagonally oriented designs. The patterns on these early fabrics, presumably produced on a tablet loom, were limited to herringbones, chevrons, lozenges, latch hooks, and diamonds.

Another loom of this area, the warp weighted loom, was originally intended for an entirely different fabric. Patterned fabrics with a weft-faced weave similar to kilims produced on this vertical style loom with pendant-weighted warps reveal a little more latitude in their design motifs. However, both systems still tend to produce geometric patterns. Thus

there is a long tradition in Turkestan for the weaving of textiles in geometric motifs. It seems likely that the pile rugs of Shmakha (Soumak) and adjacent areas are merely reproducing, with embellishments, the designs formerly produced on flat woven textiles.

These geometric designs, when transferred to pile carpets, became more flamboyant and extremely expressive of the aesthetic feelings of the weavers. The weaving of a pile rug does not limit the swing of a tendril nor the sway of a branch any more than the frame on a canvas limits the depth of perspective that an artist can create with a brush. The use of brocade or any other flat weave limits the weaver to the in-



57. Wall Hanging, Armenian, 16th Century



herent structures of the fabric. This is true whether the loom itself is horizontal or vertical, and it seems probable that the more complex the loom, the more it will limit the sensitive abilities of the weaver.

The pile carpet loom, compared with looms for brocading and making geometric pattern weaves, is a simple loom of sturdy construction. Traditionally, the weaver had no pattern to copy or drawings to guide her (unlike the present day); her work may be compared to that of contemporary artists who attempt to express themselves through color, harmony, and line. Rugs 73-75 are Kazak rugs done by weavers who have merely permitted their ideas to explode beyond the confines of lozenge motifs. The general outline of these motifs could have been done on a tablet loom, though on a reduced basis; but such designs translated into flat weave would not express the vibrant strength and exuberance that one gets from the dyed wool in a pile weave.

Rug number 76 is a designed or commissioned rug probably of Armenian origin of the nineteenth or early twentieth century. At one end is the Armenian church and inside are two figures, probably Adam and Eve. The border seems to represent a procession of worshippers. Could it be a procession such as we formerly had on Palm Sunday with crosses made of spliced palms?

The designs in numbers 67, 68, and 70 have been thought to be reproduced from a textile, chintz, from France or Italy that someone purchased at a local fair. The border design on rug number 67 has been called "the running dog" pattern. Rugs with this border when woven in the Caucasus are usually today termed "Seichur." The problem with this explanation is that there are several rugs in the collection with this motif, all different in weave and probably from different areas in the Caucasus. There are similarly patterned





60. Rug, Soumak Weave, Shmakha, 19th Century



62. Karabaugh, 1895-1900





63. Kalish-Kazak, 19th Century





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rugs woven in Northwest Persia and Southwest Persia. Sometimes a rose was intended and sometimes the carnation appears more likely.

Many rugs from Southwest Persia, Northwest Persia, and the Caucasus are based on natural flowers. Number 70 may divulge an individual's expression rather than the reproduction of a chintz pattern. The development of the blossom is depicted here from the time when the green calyx surrounds the petals to the full blossoming when the calyx is hidden.

Generally speaking, all rugs of a size between  $3 \times 5'$  and  $4 \times 6'$  may be considered as prayer rugs whether or not the rug has a mihrab (prayer niche) in the design. Numbers 50-53 are examples of old prayer rugs with mihrabs. Number 52, a Kazak, may be one of the oldest dated Caucasian prayer rugs; the problem is that the date seems unintelligible. In this regard we note that dates in rugs must be accepted with extreme caution. Very few Caucasian weavers could either read or write in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Dates were rarely noted even by the clergy except for devastations by invading hosts, natural calamities, or the arrival of unexpected blessings. Unsigned and undated rugs may be older than dated examples, and it is possible to weave into a rug any desired date.

Rugs from the Karabaugh area of the Southern Caucasus, of which there are several in the collection, vary as much in construction as in pattern and color. Because the area was known for its weavers, many special orders were executed here for European and Russian nobility. Rugs 62, 63, and 64 are examples of Karabaugh weaving of widely different dates. The cerise color of number 62 is an early aniline dye (from England), not fugitive, but a key to dating because this aniline color cannot be earlier than about 1895.

One of the most interesting types of weaving character-



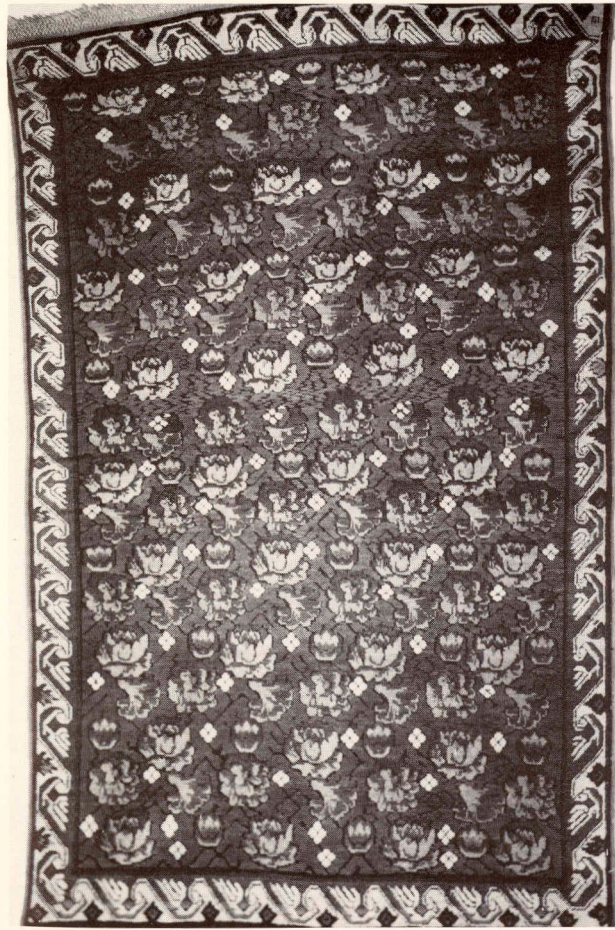
65. Cabistan, 1207 AH (1792), ? Shirvan





66. Chi-chi, 19th Century





67. Cabistan, Late 19th Century



68. Cabistan, Late 19th Century





69. Cabistan, 19th Century

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istic of the area is Shrmahka (Soumak). Examples of this weave appear quite early in archaeological sites. Shrmahka is a loom embroidery done parallel to and in conjunction with weft threads. Usually when colors are changed in Shrmahka the ends of the yarn are left hanging loose on the back, not interwoven into the body of the fabric.

We have several early examples of Shrmahka in this collection, numbers 59, 60, 61. We also have a very rare bag cover in a Gobelin type weave. Gobelin weaving grows out of khilim. The difference is that khilim is usually very regular; the wefts cross the warps at right angles in khilim. In Gobelin, an entire section of pattern of one color may be woven in at one time and the yarn will curve and twist adjusting to the contours of the adjacent figures and frequently the colors interlock, leaving no "eyes" between colors. Item number 71 is of this construction and, based on the design, is no later than the seventeenth century. There are also several examples of Armenian brocade and embroidery of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In older rug books the terms Shirvan, Cabistan, Daghestan, Seichur, and Chichi are often used rather confusingly. All the above are usually of similar weave with short pile and usually well woven.

The Chichi differs from the others only in pattern. The border has been considered to be based on Kufic writing. Whether this is correct or not awaits careful design analysis. Numbers 65 and 66 are both Cabistan and Chichi. Number 66 has an all-over pattern that may be derived from old brocades. (Some researchers feel that this motif is due to Persian influence.) One inner border has a scrawling vine motif similar to some old Bukhara, Suzani, or embroideries. Number 65 has the field design derived from lozenges which we believe became like double-headed eagles as the weavers

70.





Cabistan, 19th Century

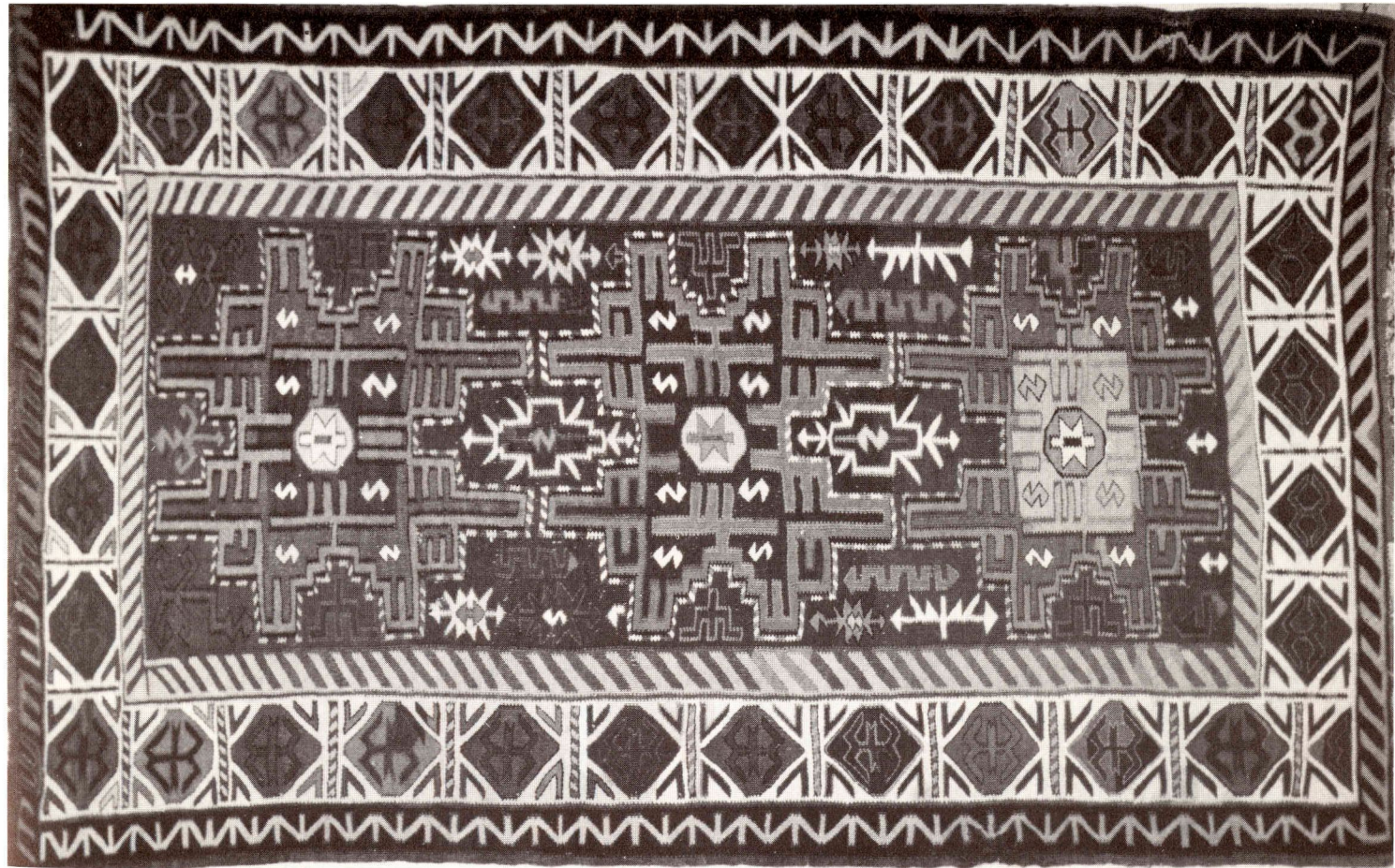




71. Kis-Khlim, Armenia, Ca. 1700







72. Kis-Khilim, Shirvan or Daghestan, Ca. 1700





73. "Double Eagle" Kazak or Karabaugh, 19th Century

experimented with patterning. This is an ancient motif in the Caucasus. Rug 65 is dated at 1207 AH (=1792 A.D.)

There are other rugs in the Shirvan, Daghestan, Cabistan category: 65, 79, 49. These rugs are not the same age but they are all characteristic of the South Caucasus. While the weave and quality differ they have more points in common than they have differences.

Kazaks in the "sunburst" design, numbers 73 and 75 (there are "sunburst" designs also in the Cabistan type), have been highly prized by European collectors, partly because many researchers in Europe have considered the design to be a floralized version of the double-headed eagle (emblem of the Hapsburgs). The German writers frequently refer to these Kazaks as "eagle" Kazaks.

While we believe that the double-headed eagle was derived from the source of this motif—a diamond lozenge, the sides of which have been extended—we suggest that the diamond lozenge existed at least a millenium prior to the time that some imaginative weaver interpreted latch-hook ends into birds' heads to create a double-headed eagle.

Rug number 74, unquestionably identified as Armenian by the Armenian writing, combines two corrupted Caucasian design motifs, the dragon-phoenix and the sunburst. The date 1907 (or 1902) is interesting as incontrovertible evidence for the continuity of design motifs from antiquity into the twentieth century.

One of the interesting problems connected with Kazak rugs is the origin of the composition of the design elements of number 55. The Asia Minor collection (Sarkisian, 1978, No. 10) included a Bergama rug with a very similar design composition but a distinctly different weave.

The existence of similar motifs in the extreme western part of Turkey and eastern Anatolia can be explained by the emi-

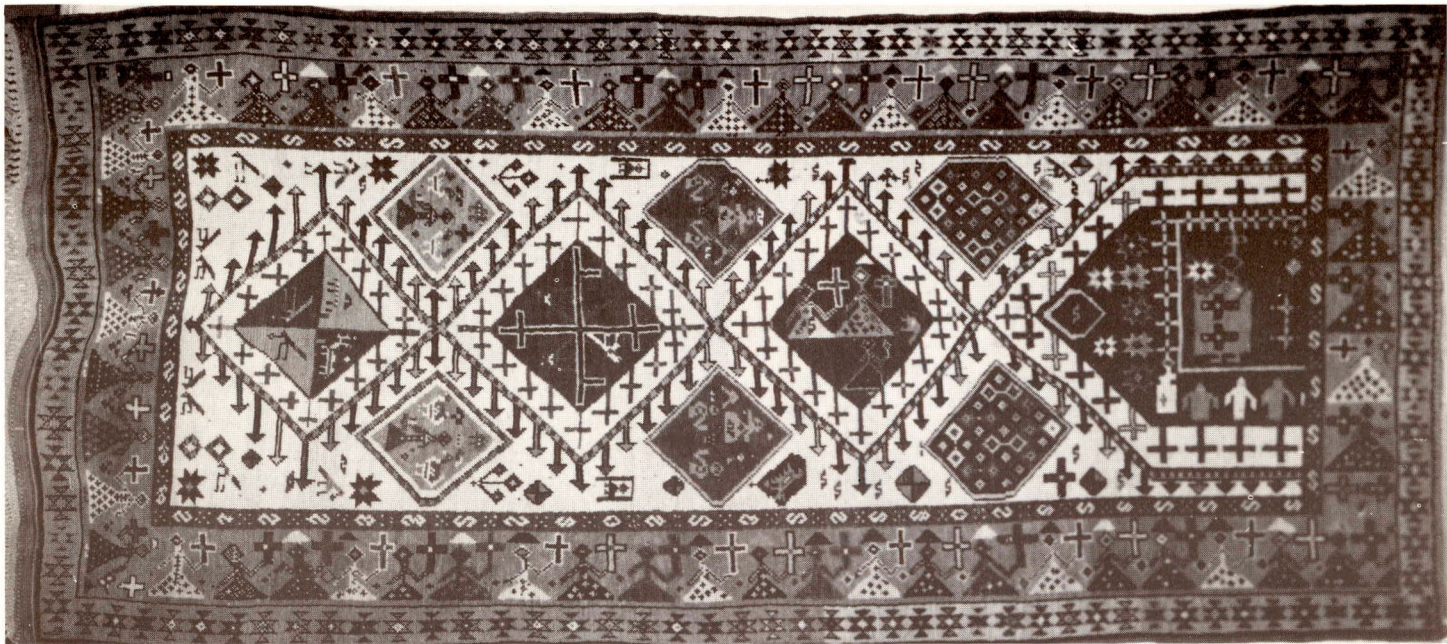


74. "Double Eagle" Armenia, 1907





75. "Double Eagle" Kazak or Karabaugh, 19th Century



76. Armenia, 19th Century

gration, just prior to the Crusades, of a large section of the Armenian population to southwestern Asia Minor. That would indicate that Armenian weavers had arrived at this arrangement of pattern motifs prior to the tenth century. A very similar arrangement of medallions is found in the Far East, where it becomes almost standardized in rugs of Chi-

nese Turkestan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The existence of octagons in one type of rug in place of roundels in another type may be easily explained. It is much easier to weave octagons than roundels—especially in pile weaving.

The problem is whether the five medallion composition



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moved from East to West or West to East. While we cannot at this moment offer an example, one of us (HMS) believes he has found this composition in Ming cloisonné, in very early cross-stitch from West China, and in a bronze mirror-back design from the T'ang/Sung period. However, similar compositions are found in Roman mosaics, for example Roman Britain (Smith, 1963, Fig. 17).

The Bergamo composition has been found on rug illustrations in early Renaissance paintings, but the original place from where this composition came remains a mystery.

In the collection are several rugs that at present are unclassifiable as to the exact provenance and type but which certainly are Caucasian.

Number 78 is the Caucasian interpretation of a garden carpet. The weave in this piece resembles the common type of Kazak weave—but it only resembles; it is not a regular Kazak weave. It is not the weave of Cabistans or Daghestans nor does it come from Karabaugh area. For the present it can be listed only as Caucasian, Garden Carpet. This motif also is found in Roman mosaics.

The repeat floral diaper in rugs 50 and 51 are similar to Roman mosaics from North Africa (Fendri, 1965, Fig. 12; and *EAA*, v. 5, p. 239). The same motif in number 77 is shown without the mihrab.

H. Medill Sarkisian  
Peter Robinson  
Ann Hedlund





77. Cabistan, 19th Century

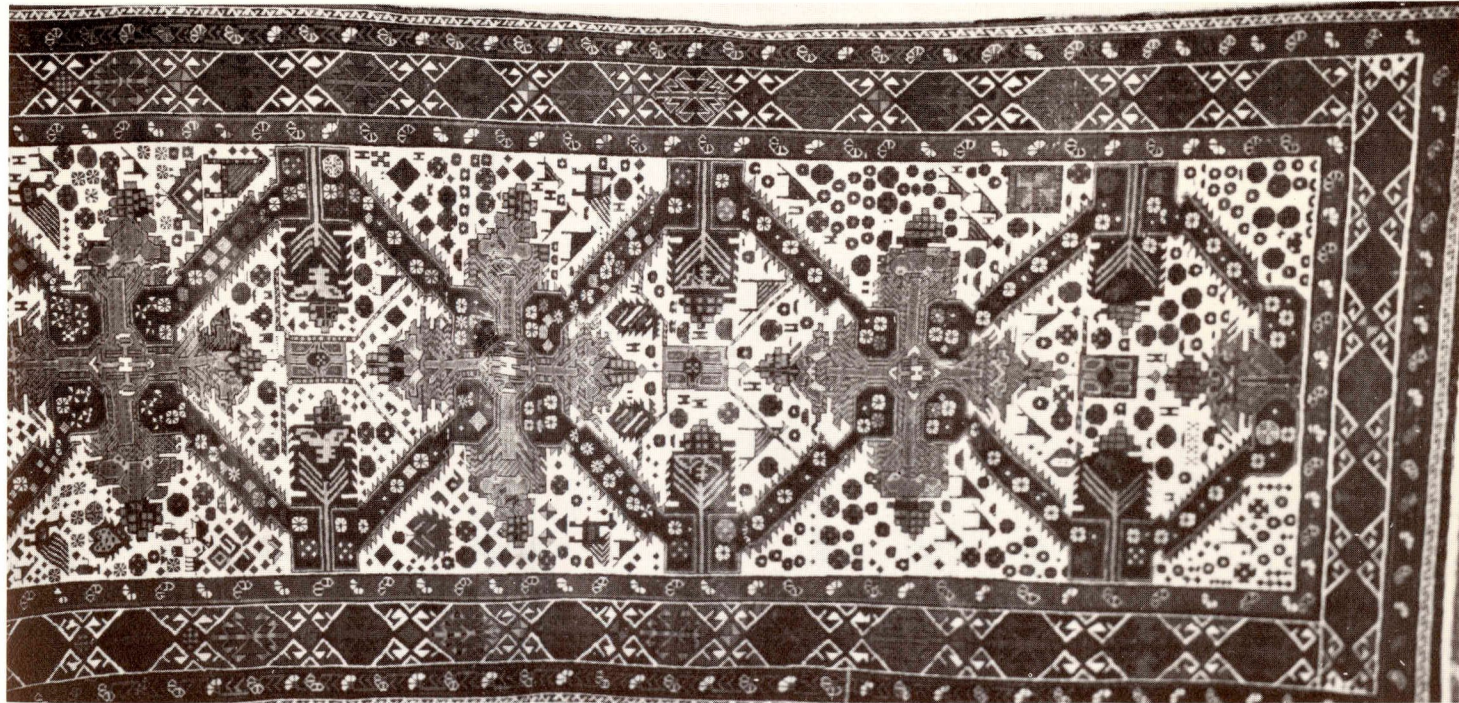


78. Garden Carpet, Caucasian, Ca. 1800



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79. Cabistan, Early 19th Century





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