



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



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www.ne-rugsociety.org

February Meeting: A Night at the MFA

NERS member Lauren Whitley, curator in the Textile and Fashion Arts Department of the MFA, will again host a special evening at the museum. We will look at four early Chinese carpets on display—two from the museum collection and two on loan from a private collector. (Note that February 10 is NOT a First Friday, so this year we should be able to hear about these carpets in addition to seeing them!) We will then gather in the Textile and Fashion Arts study room to see a sampling of carpets and textiles brought from MFA storage just for us. Following this, we'll enjoy a coffee-and-pastries reception in Riley seminar room. Finally, for all who are interested, there will be a walk-through of *Beauty as Duty: Textiles and the Home Front in WWII Britain*, an exhibition about British use of fashion as a morale booster in the

austere and challenging decade of the 1940s.

Those attending should park in the surface lot nearest the Fenway, off Museum Road. If this lot is full, park in the garage opposite. For directions and rates, see <http://www.mfa.org/visit/getting-here/parking>. Museum parking is expensive, so carpooling is highly advised.

Use the Fenway Entrance of the museum (between the giant baby-head sculptures!), where Julia will distribute tickets to those who are not MFA members. (MFA members should show their membership cards on entry.) Plan to gather in the Sharf Information Center, just beyond the ticketing area, before 7:00 p.m. Lauren will meet us there at 7:00 and begin the evening's events.



MFA Curator Lauren Whitley.

February Meeting Details

Date: Friday, February 10

Time: 7:00 p.m.

Place: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Directions: <http://www.mfa.org/visit/getting-here>

Parking: Off Museum Road, the surface lot nearest the Fenway Entrance of the museum.

Entry: Fenway Entrance. Look for the giant baby heads!

Admission: MFA members should show their membership cards. Julia will distribute complimentary tickets to NERS attendees who are not MFA members.

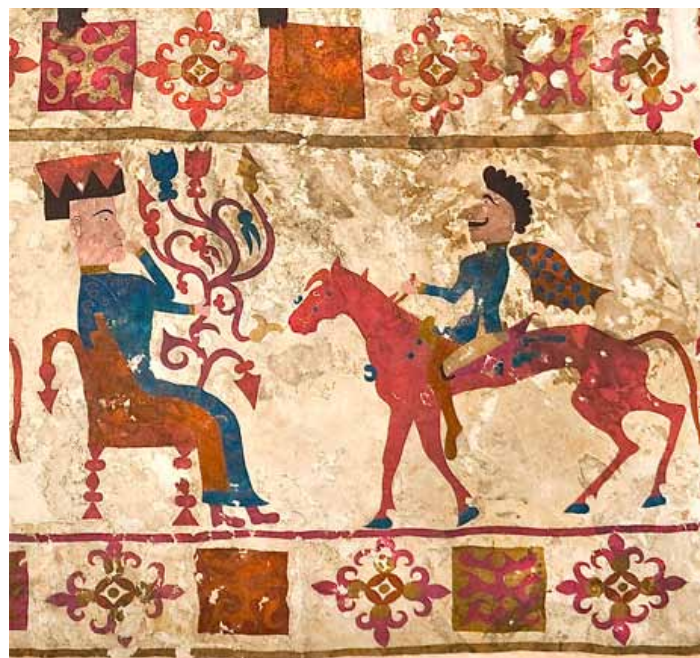
Gathering point: Sharf Information Center, just beyond ticketing area of the Fenway Entrance.

March 9 Meeting: Elena Tsareva on Felts of Northern Eurasia

On Friday, March 9, in a special addition to the regular NERS lecture series, Dr. Elena Tsareva will present “Felts of Northern Eurasia.” Felted textiles, which are made by matting loose, combed wool fibers together, developed as a tradition throughout many cultures, nomadic and settled, in northern Eurasia and Central Asia: for example, huge, sophisticated pictorial felts were discovered buried in tomb



Elena Tsareva.



Detail of a huge felt found in Siberia.

mounds in Siberia. Beginning with the earliest-known archaeological evidence, Dr. Tsareva will trace the formation of the four main lines of felted-textile ornamentation, describing the Anatolian-Iranian, Pazyryk, Hsiung-nu, and European traditions, and will also introduce several of the “side” branches of felting.

Dr. Tsareva is a world-acknowledged specialist in the field of archaeological and ethnographic textiles and an expert on the topic of carpet weaving of the peoples of Northern Eurasia. A graduate of the Oriental Faculty of the Leningrad State University, she now works in the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) of the Russian Academy of Sciences. She is a longtime participant in ICOC and contributing editor of *HALI* and has published more than one hundred articles and books. *The New York Times* named her *Turkmen Carpets: The Hoffmeister Collection* one of the five best books on antiques published during 2011. The Near Eastern Art Research Center recently announced that Dr. Tsareva will be the 2012 recipient of the Joseph V. McMullan Award for Stewardship and Scholarship in Islamic Rugs and Textiles.

March 9 Meeting Details

Time: 7:30 p.m.

Place: First Parish, Bedford Road, Lincoln

Directions:

From Rt. 95 (128), take exit 28B, Trapelo Road West. Proceed west about 2.5 miles to a stop sign at the five-way intersection in Lincoln. (There’s a white planter in the middle of the intersection.) Go right on Bedford Road for 0.1 miles to Bemis Hall, a large brick building on the right. First Parish is on your left.

From Rt. 2, take Bedford Road, Lincoln Center exit (eastbound, turn right at light; westbound, go through light, turn right, and circle 270° to cross Rt. 2 at the light). Proceed 0.9 miles to Bemis Hall, a large brick building on your left. First Parish is on your right.

Parking:

Park in the lot behind the parish house, along the street, or in front of Bemis Hall, provided that building is dark and not in use.

March 23 Meeting: Peter Poullada on the Lebab Turkmen

On Friday, March 23, Peter Poullada, a collector and independent scholar specializing in the Turkmen and their weaving, will present “Lebab Turkmen and Their Interaction with the Local Uzbeks.” The Lebab (from Persian, “edge of the water,” i.e., “riverside”) live in the Middle Amu Darya region. Peter’s talk will challenge common assumptions about their weaving and will include photographic images of their life and its “Bukharan” milieu—a mixture of Lebab, Uzbek, and “Sart” cultural and social traditions relating most directly to the world of women.

Peter has collected Central Asian weaving since the 1960s. He lived in Afghanistan and Iran in the 60s and 70s and in Turkey in the 80s. He holds a BA from Princeton in Near Eastern Languages and History; pursued graduate study at the University of California, Berkeley; and has published articles in *HALI* and the *Journal of the Royal Society of Asian Affairs*.

The meeting will be at ALMA. Members are encouraged to bring Turkmen rugs, bags, and trappings—so-called Ersari and Beshir examples and any others they wish Peter to discuss—as well as Uzbek pieces in their collections.



Peter Poullada.

March 23 Meeting Details

Time: 7:30 p.m.

Place: Armenian Library and Museum of America
65 Main Street, Watertown

Directions:

Go to Watertown Square. (Out-of-towners, get off the Mass Pike at exit 17 and follow the signs.) Take Main Street (Rt. 20) westbound (left turn if coming from the Pike). Church Street is at the first traffic light, and the museum building is on the right-hand corner.

Parking:

Turn right on Church Street and enter the municipal lot on the right. Most meters are free after 6 p.m., but check to make sure!



A Turkmen woman spinning.

November Meeting Review: Tom Hannaher on Molas

Tom Hannaher on Molas, cont.



1. Intact Kuna blouse with spiderweb mola, 2010.

On November 18, longtime NERS member Tom Hannaher gave a talk about molas, his collecting focus of recent years. These exuberant textiles are the product of Kuna Indian women of the San Blas Islands, off the Caribbean coast of Panama.

Before launching into the textiles themselves, Tom started with some historical and cultural background. He explained that the San Blas are a group of 360 to 380 islands, approximately forty of which are significantly inhabited. The Kuna of San Blas do not consider themselves part of Panama and have fought with central authorities on multiple occasions, including a revolt that took place in 1925. Because the Kuna desire to keep the race pure, non-Kuna males were forbidden, at least until recently, to stay on the San Blas islands overnight and had to return to the mainland.

Certain political and cultural features inform all aspects of Kuna life, including their molas. Meetings of the Kuna Congresso, which take place at least four times a week and are attended by everyone, are the political forum for discussing and deciding all kinds of issues. Chiefs run the Congresso but can't dictate the outcome. Tom opined that the Kuna have a high level of happiness and a very strong sense of community, both of which stem from this participatory decision-making. Spiritually, the Kuna believe in eight levels of being; physical being is but one of these. People have multiple spirits, sometimes within themselves but sometimes elsewhere, such as the *galu*, or spirit resting-place.

A mola is basically a shirt or blouse worn by Kuna women. These garments have decorative panels, but also



2. 1930s abstract mola.

yokes and sleeves (1); removed from the other parts, the panels alone are usually what are exported. According to Tom, the origin of the mola concept is uncertain, but it may have evolved from earlier practices of body painting.

The designs of these panels vary tremendously; as Tom said, "It's hard to beat molas for visual variety." In part, the variation stems from the freedom given to the mola creators; although they sometimes copied motifs from one another, designs were not stipulated as they are in some other ethnographic textiles. In addition, Tom pointed out, the techniques used to make molas—reverse appliqué (involving the cutting away of successive layers of cloth), appliqué, and embroidery—make it easier for the artists to create and execute new designs than do many weaving techniques.

The recorded history of molas starts with the oldest known evidence, an 1887 photo in the Smithsonian. For purposes of his talk, Tom divided molas into three periods: pre-World War II, 1950s and 60s, and 1970s to the present. Tom's own collecting interest runs to the first and, in some instances, the second of these periods. He highlighted a few characteristics of the earliest surviving molas: the panels were both longer and wider than those from later periods, and the designs consisted of larger, chunkier motifs, with broader spacing between them (2). Tom showed a photo taken in 1936 that included a sewing machine; he said the Kuna women had these machines at least as early as the 1920s. He then showed slides of examples from this early period now in the collections of the British Museum and the Smithsonian. During the second era, Tom observed, molas became more precise and finely made. In illustration, he showed some slides that he had obtained from a tourist who had visited the area in 1952. He also commented that the Peace Corps had arrived during this middle period, originally intending to teach the Kuna about raising animals.



3. Political mola, 1963.

When the volunteers noted that the Kuna understood animal husbandry well, however, they switched to helping them market molas more broadly.

Tom then turned to some of the prominent European and American mola collectors. Eleanor York Dell was the earliest of all, actively collecting these textiles in 1906. Lady Richmond Brown and her partner, F. Mitchell Hedges, came to Panama in 1922, and bought 1,200 "picture writing clothes," some of which were subsequently donated to the British Museum. Richard Oglesby Marsh did his collecting in 1924, and donated his molas to the Smithsonian. A Swede, Erland Nordenskiöld, and his partners were collecting actively in the region from 1927 to 1932; Nordenskiöld was the first real researcher. Kit Kapp and F. Louis Hoover, collecting in the 1960s, represent the more recent members of the group. Kit, a Navy soldier and mapmaker, was Tom's mentor in the study of molas and the Kuna.

Tom concluded his overview by enumerating his own design categories, grouping designs into eight "buckets." The first he labeled abstract floral: he showed some examples, the earliest of which was collected in 1922. The second category was of land animals, with squirrels and monkeys being particularly popular in the mola design vocabulary. Sea or water creatures—sea worms, frogs, and turtles, among others—made up the third category. Household objects were the fourth, with examples that included carved wooden plates, hammocks, coconut husking tongs, and incense braziers. The fifth category comprised figures from Kuna myth and ritual, such as spirits rising from animals, the spirit resting-place, healers, and Kuna birth-myth characters. Tom's sixth category was politics: Kuna artists were particularly fond of political



4. NERS member's "superhero" mola, 1960s.

posters, and incorporated a number of them in their molas (3). Tom labeled his seventh category "acculturated," meaning that they copied items of Western culture, a practice started in the 1950s. Examples in this category included images of JFK and Jackie, Kool cigarette ads, Captain Marvel and Mickey Mouse comics, crucifixion scenes, and depictions of Adam and Eve. Tom titled his eighth and final category "crazy molas" for their hallucinatory images. He has invented names for some of these molas, such as, for instance, "Loco Chickens Overturning Vehicles."

Following his remarks, Tom took us quickly through dozens of molas from his collection that he had brought for the meeting. (In addition to being affordable and available, molas are also very easy to transport!) He started with his rarest and oldest pieces, the first of which dated from 1921 or 1922 and included the image of a plane. Another 1920s mola featured sea urchins in its design. A slightly later piece from the 1930s used capuchin monkeys as its main design elements. While most of Tom's pieces were panels, he showed a complete blouse that he dated to the 1930s. NERS members in the audience also brought examples, including one with a "superhero" figure (4) and another in which a dragon appeared to be wearing a fez.

Tom has established a virtual-museum website, www.mola-museum.com, as well as the Kuna Art Society on Facebook. Hearty thanks to him for providing a wealth of information on a type of textile never before addressed by NERS speakers, and for providing so many examples from his collection for us to enjoy!

Jim Adelson

What in the World Is This?



The Gropius House embroidery.

While visiting Istanbul many years ago, I was approached by my good friend the late Charles Lave, who said, "I'm returning to California with a ton of rug purchases and could use some help. Would you be willing to carry back a small mystery weaving and ship it to us when you get home?" I readily agreed.

The "small mystery weaving" turned out to be the size of a huge bedspread, for which Charles would receive much grief over the ensuing years. But we managed to lug it back to Lincoln and ship it. Charles's subsequent research identified the piece as a weaving of the Marsh Arabs of Iraq.

That memory received a nostalgic jog last summer when I was visiting the Gropius House in Lincoln with friends from Germany and discovered a very similar piece hanging in the Gropius master bedroom. Nostalgia turned to dismay when the guide identified it as a weaving of "nomadic Kurds."

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The next week, after making sure my concerns were warranted, I sent the following email to the Gropius House curatorial staff:

I was interested and concerned during a recent visit to the Gropius House to hear the textile hanging in the master bedroom identified as being woven by Kurdish nomads. As a past collector of Kurdish textiles, I identified the piece rather as the product of the Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq. On doing a little research to confirm my identification, I can relay the following:

- 1. The weaving was indeed done by Marsh Arabs.*
- 2. During most of the mid-twentieth century (c. 1930–1970), these weavings were being purchased by international dealers in Baghdad. The dealers were told they came from the southern Iraq city of Samawa, where*

What in the World , cont.

the Marsh Arabs sold their goods. However, because the designations "Samawa" and "Marsh Arab" were meaningless to the foreign markets, the sellers chose to identify them as "Kurdish" (i.e., anything to make them saleable).

3. Therefore, at the time that the Gropiuses purchased the piece, it was most likely identified to them in good faith as being a Kurdish weaving.

A few more facts in case you might be interested: There is irony in the "Kurdish" designation, because during that period, anything so labeled in the international markets was considered at the bottom of the desirability scale. If you didn't know what it was, it was Kurdish. If you didn't like it, it was Kurdish. What a shame, because some of the weavings of Kurdistan are remarkable in their beauty. Thankfully, today the best ones are very much prized.

The ground cloth of these Marsh Arab weavings was woven by the men, who also did the dyeing, while the embroidery was done by the women. While these pieces still appear on the market today, they are not very popular, owing primarily to their use of rather garish synthetic dyes. Based on a few auction prices I found in a Google search, the Gropius piece probably has a market value of around \$800–\$1200.

The story of the Marsh Arabs is a sad one. Involved in an unsuccessful Shi'a uprising against Saddam Hussein, they were decimated when he diverted the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in retribution, draining their marshes and destroying their way of life. The Gropius piece and others like it reflect a way of life that most likely won't be seen again. [Subsequent note: the rivers have been redirected and the Marsh Arabs are reestablishing.]

If you are interested in references, about the only publication of value on the subject I've located is McGuire Gibson's "Non-Kurdish Weavings of Iraq," in Oriental Carpet and Textile Studies IV (Berkeley, 1993): 205–20. Re Samara weavings, see 212–16. Anyway, I thought this info might be helpful to you and to Historic New England's records. Thanks for the great job you're doing.

Happily, the curators were most receptive of this new information and promised to incorporate it into their scripts directly. My thanks, incidentally, go to former NERS member (and Charles Lave's wife) Bethany Mendenhall for digging up the OCTS reference.

Mark Hopkins

Rug and Textile Events

Future NERS Meetings

Apr. 20: Collector Series, Alan Varteresian (Grogan and Company, Dedham)

May 20: Picnic (Gore Place, Waltham)

Exhibitions

Baltimore Museum of Art: Embroidered Treasures: Textiles from Central Asia, through May 8.

De Young Museum, San Francisco: The Art of the Anatolian Kilim: Highlights from the Caroline and H. McCoy Jones Collection, through June 10.

The Textile Museum, Washington: Dragons, Nagas, and Creatures of the Deep, February 3 through January 6, 2013

Auctions featuring rugs

Skinner, Boston, Feb. 11 (Fine Oriental Rugs and Carpets)

Grogan, Dedham, Feb. 26 (February Auction)

Rippon-Boswell, Wiesbaden, Mar. 24 (General Carpet Auction)

Nagel, Stuttgart, Mar. 27 (Rugs and Carpets, Ethnographic Art)

Shows and Fairs

Tribal and Textile Arts Show, San Francisco, Feb. 9–11

London Antique Rug and Textile Art Fair (LARTA), Mar. 23–25

Dealer (and NERS member) relocates

John Collins, who generously hosted many NERS meetings at his former Watertown location, has returned to Newburyport and opened a gallery at 40R Merrimac Street, in Brown's Wharf. With its brick walls, old beams, and unusual flooring, the renovated space is ideal for displaying oriental rugs. John invites members to stop by (phone: 978-462-7276). We look forward to holding a meeting there during the 2012–13 season.

Photo Credits

1: Lauren Whitley; 2: Elena Tsareva (top and bottom); 3: HAL/169: 34 (top), Peter Poullada (bottom); 4–5: Tom Hannaher (figs. 1–3), Yon Bard (fig. 4); 6: Mark Hopkins; 8–9: de Young Museum.

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Exhibition Report: Art of the Anatolian Kilim at the de Young Museum

Richard and I went to our first big rug conference—the ICOC in San Francisco—in 1990. The experience of seeing great rug and textile exhibitions and meeting rug aficionados from all over the world was amazing. We have often wished that, knowing what we now know, we could go back and do it all over again.

Incredibly, it happened! Twenty-four Anatolian kilims from one of the 1990 ICOC exhibitions are currently on display at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. We vividly remembered those remarkable old pieces: would they still

be as captivating today as they were in 1990? In their present gallery, the huge slit-tapestry weavings hang vertically, surrounding visitors with their monumental splendor. We found their deeply saturated colors, simple yet dynamic patterns, and great presence every bit as glorious as we remembered.

Caroline McCoy-Jones, who with her husband formed the world-class collection from which these examples are drawn, donated the kilims to the de Young Museum in 1988–89, after the death of H. McCoy Jones. They were

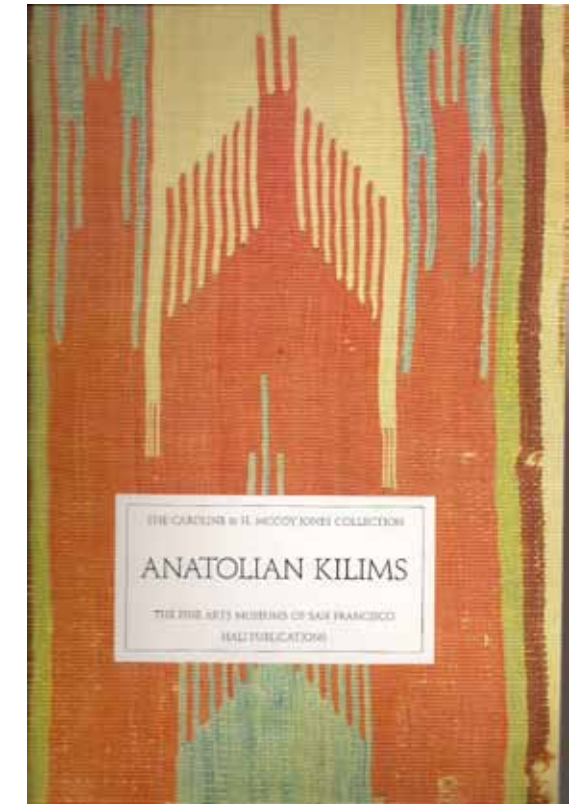
Kilims at the de Young, cont.

woven between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries by semi-nomadic and village women of Anatolia, an area that today constitutes much of Turkey. Their wool has rich, earthy hues from natural dyes, and their bold, abstract designs are thought to be symbolic renderings of architectural, human, animal, and floral motifs.

“The first time Anatolian kilims of this age, rarity, and fragility were seen by the public was in the 1990 exhibition,” curator Jill d’Alessandro explained. “These surviving examples, in their fragmented states, show the passage of time. Although structural disintegration has interrupted the design field on some of these pieces, their colors remain deeply saturated and their patterns simple and powerful.”

Cathryne M. Cootner wrote *Anatolian Kilims: The Caroline and H. McCoy Jones Collection* for the 1990 exhibition at the de Young; if you can’t manage a trip to San Francisco before the exhibition closes on June 22, her catalogue is a commendable substitute. But nothing beats seeing the real things, and we recommend that you make the effort to get to the de Young. It may be another twenty years before these kilims are displayed again!

Ann Nicholas



Left and above: Anatolian kilims on display in the current exhibition at the de Young. Above right: cover of the 1990 catalogue of the collection.

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NERS 2011–12 Steering Committee: Jim Adelson, Robert Alimi, Julia Bailey (co-chair), Yon Bard, Louise Dohanian, Joel Greifinger, Mark Hopkins, Lloyd Kannenberg, Ann Nicholas (co-chair), Jim Sampson, Jeff Spurr.

If you haven't already done so, please renew your NERS membership now! You can pay online using a credit card: go to www.ne-rugsociety.org/NERS-paypal.htm and follow directions. Alternatively, you can mail your check, payable to NERS, to our Charlestown address (see the box opposite).

The New England Rug Society is an informal, non-profit organization of people interested in enriching their knowledge and appreciation of antique oriental rugs and textiles. Our meetings are held seven or more times a year. Membership levels and annual dues are: Single \$45, Couple \$65, Supporting \$90, Patron \$120, Student \$25. Membership information and renewal forms are available on our website, www.ne-rugsociety.org; by writing to the New England Rug Society, P.O. Box 290393, Charlestown, MA 02129; or by contacting Jim Sampson at jahome22@gmail.com.



The New England Rug Society

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