



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



Vol. 27 No. 3 March 2020

www.ne-rugsociety.org

March 20 Meeting: Collector Series, Honoring Jeff Spurr



Jeff Spurr amid some of his collection

Well known to fellow NERS members, Jeff Spurr is an independent scholar of Islamic textiles and a dedicated collector of non-Western textiles, basketry, and beadwork. He was employed for twenty-six years at Harvard, where he developed and managed collections of historical photographs of the Middle East and curated several exhibitions. For ACOR 8, in 2006, he organized and mounted *Unusual and Overlooked: Antique Textiles from Central Asia*. He is a co-author of *Kashmir Shawls: The Tapi Collection*, published in 2012, and has written many articles for *HALI*. He serves on a Collections Committee at the Harvard Art Museums and advises the Department of Textile and Fashion Arts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Jeff's talk, originally commissioned by New York's Hajji Baba Club in 2013, is titled "Off the Beaten Path: A Yen for the Obscure and Underappreciated in Textile Art and Basketry."

March 20 Details

Time: 7:00 p.m.

Place: Durant-Kenrick House, 286 Waverley Ave.
Newton, MA, 02458

Directions: From Boston and east, take Mass Pike to exit 17 and follow signs for Boston/Newton Centre, making a U-turn over the Pike. At Newton Centre sign, go RIGHT on Centre St. for 0.1 miles. Go LEFT on Franklin St. for 0.3 miles. Turn RIGHT on Waverley and go 0.2 miles. House is on LEFT.

From Rt. 128 and west, take Mass Pike to exit 17, turn RIGHT onto Centre Street and follow directions above.

From Watertown Square: Take Galen Street (Rt. 16) toward Newton Centre for 0.4 miles. Continue to Washington St. toward West Newton/Newton Centre, making a U-turn over the Pike. At Newton Centre sign, go RIGHT on Centre Street and follow directions above.

Parking: On Kenrick Street. Parking places at the end of the Durant-Kenrick House driveway may be used for dropping off people or supplies, but **NOT for parking during the meeting**.

Food: Provided by members whose names begin with **A** through **G**. Please arrive before 6:45 to set up, and plan to stay afterwards to clean up.

It addresses his collecting range, which he will illustrate with photographs of the walls of his apartment and images of individual textiles, beadwork, and basketry. Focusing on Kashmir shawls, Central Asian textiles, Kuba textiles, Pygmy barkcloths, Kirdi beadwork (from Cameroon), textiles of Sumatra, and textiles and basketry of Borneo, Jeff will explain why these art forms and the traditions they represent have specially appealed to him.



Kirdi beaded apron, Cameroon

April 17 Meeting: Joel Greifinger, “Kurdish Rugs Three Ways”



Joel Greifinger

For well over a millennium, the Kurds have lived in an area divided among present-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Some of their flatweaving techniques are probably the last examples of ancient forms. On April 21, NERS Chairman Joel Greifinger will present “Kurds Three Ways,” a survey of two nomadic weaving traditions—east Anatolian and Sauj Bulagh—within historical Kurdistan, and a third in an enclave in Khorasan, in northeastern Iran. His examination of designs, materials, palette, and weaving techniques will highlight both regional differences and common elements in Kurdish tribal weaving.

Before retiring, Joel taught psychology, political philosophy, and cultural studies. For twenty years, he was a clinical psychotherapist. The topics of his publications range from film

April Meeting Details

Time: 7:00 p.m.
Place: Durant-Kenrick House, 286 Waverley Ave.
Newton Centre, MA, 02458
Directions: See page 1.
Food: Provided by members whose names begin with **H** through **P**.
Please arrive before 6:45 to set up, and plan to stay afterwards to clean up.

semiotics to psychoanalysis to moral philosophy. His obsession with rugs and textiles is relatively recent, beginning in the waning moments of his first trip to Istanbul, in 2007, when his avoidance of rug-merchant inducements collapsed and he drank tea, listened to lively stories, and purchased a contemporary South Persian sumak. Of course, he was hooked.

As a compulsive researcher and categorizer, Joel sees himself not so much as a “collector” as an enthusiastic accumulator of pieces that provoke his research into their origin and cultural significance. Not surprisingly, he has also been a bird watcher for the past forty years.

Joel invites meeting attendees to bring Kurdish rugs, bags, etc., for a show-and-tell following his presentation.



Kurdish rugs from Malatya, SE Anatolia (left); Sauj Bulagh, NW Iran (center); Kuchan, Khorasan, NE Iran (right)

October Field Trip Review: A Visit to the Shein Collection



1. A Khotan welcome: Marj Albright (left) greeted by Lucy, Deborah, and Ed



2. The Shein Star Kazak, resplendent at the head of the staircase, and below it Arthur Dove's *Sunrise I*, wax emulsion on canvas, 1936

On October 19, a beautiful Saturday afternoon, Ed and Deborah Shein—and their recent canine adoptee, Lucy—welcomed twenty NERS members to their home in Seekonk, Mass., near Providence **(1)**. Their lofty house holds their superb collection of American early modernist paintings—twenty of which were exhibited at the National Gallery in 2010—as well as furniture and decorative arts of the period and a stellar group of rugs and carpets.

Ed was the raconteur for the occasion. He explained that we were standing in the first house ever designed by Friedrich St. Florian (best known as the architect of the National World War II Memorial). The house turned out far bigger than Ed and Deborah expected, and they soon realized that the paintings they owned, typically smallish in scale, wouldn't be enough to fill it; what they needed, for walls as well as floors, were rugs.

Ed first turned to Tom Chatalbash, the late Brookline dealer, but came to doubt the “animal rug” he'd bought, and sold it at Sotheby's. Then he met Skinner department head Louise Woodhead (d. 2013: see p. 9 of *View from the Fringe*, Nov. 2013) and asked her what she thought was the greatest rug available. “The Abadjian Star Kazak” was her answer, so Ed was off to New York to track down Berdj Abadjian (d. 2008) at his 57th Street gallery. The Star Kazak wasn't there, though—it turned out to be in hock at PB 84 (Sotheby's second auction venue). Ed bailed it out, and it now hangs in splendor at the head of the Shein staircase **(2)**.

Louise introduced Ed to dealer Tom Caruso (now living in Berkeley, California, but present for the occasion), who became Ed's rug finder and advisor. Within six months, the couple had acquired an enormous Kansu carpet for their living-room floor **(3)**. Independent dealing in art being “feast or famine,” however, the big Kansu eventually had to be deaccessioned. Its new owner put it in Sotheby's with high expectations, but despite being pictured on the catalogue cover it failed to sell, and Ed—as he related with particular relish—got to buy it back. It now keeps company on the Shein floors with several smaller Khotan rugs **(1)**.



3. Detail of the Sheins' huge Kansu carpet



4. Members examine the powerful Northwest Persian (?) rug pictured on the cover of Schurmann's *Caucasian Rugs*

Through Tom, Ed met Michael Franes, who pitched the idea of a *HALI* feature about the Shein Collection (see *HALI* 176 [Summer 2013]: cover and pp. 56–69). Tom also introduced Ed to Eberhart Herrmann, from whom the Sheins bought another pièce de résistance, famously pictured on the cover of Ulrich Schurmann's *Caucasian Rugs*. Not obviously Caucasian, but radiating both sophisticated figure-ground interplay and knockout primal power, it spurred questions and awestruck admiration from the assembled guests (4).

Standing between the Schurmann rug and the Star Kazak, Ed beckoned over Judy Smith (5). Both of them are elite tennis players, and Ed recalled his first encounter with Judy—a doubles match in which, to his astonishment, she and her partner “beat the s**t out of us.” Rug-lover Judy on her part extolled Ed as “the only person on the planet who shares my two passions.”

There were more anecdotes and more rugs, including a lovely old Sarouk (6) that bore the label of Moustapha Avigdor, a pillar of the early Boston rug trade. Likening its delicate central medallion to a butterfly, Ed said that deciding to buy the carpet was “a quick yes.”



5. Reunited tennis champs and rug admirers Ed Shein and Judy Smith



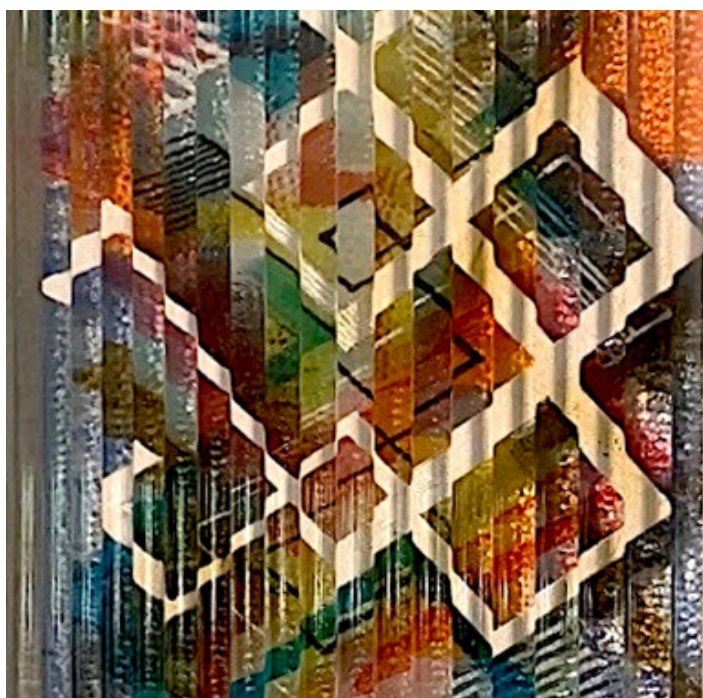
6. Central medallion detail of the Sheins' Sarouk rug; for full view see the 2013 *HALI* article



7. Detail of the Sheins' smashing Serapi (Heriz) carpet;
for full view see the 2013 *HALI* article



8. Favored by NERS members: Marsden Hartley's
Pre-War Pageant, oil on canvas, 1913



9. More texture: Irene Rice Pereira's *Ruby Flux* (detail),
mixed media on corrugated glass, 1952

Eventually NERS visitors drifted back down to the main floor for refreshments—served on a table atop a truly killer Serapi (7). Well fed and rug-sated, they again turned their gaze to the Sheins' paintings. A special favorite (despite lots of competition) was a vibrantly abstract Marsden Hartley oil on canvas, his 1913 *Pre-War Pageant* (8). Ed said he admired the spirituality implicit in the painting, but the likely reason most of the ruggies loved it was its explicit affinity with pile weaving: its forthright but “abrashed” colors deployed in familiar contrasting juxtaposition. As Deborah had earlier observed, the Hartley oil and a work on corrugated glass by lesser-known artist Irene Rice Pereira (9) were, in their textural qualities, the most “rug friendly” paintings in the Shein collection.

NERS thanks Steering Committee member Jean Hoffman for suggesting and then arranging the Shein visit, and we extend our wholehearted gratitude to Ed and Deborah for so generously hosting us and sharing their exceptional works of art.

Julia Bailey

November Meeting Review: Shiv Sikri on Markings in Oriental Rugs



1. Shiv Sikri answers a member's question

On November 1, in a talk titled “Markings in Oriental Rugs,” Shiv Sikri spoke to NERS about a class of irregularities, or “markings,” in weavings, a design phenomenon he has been studying for over twenty years (1). His premise was that many of what initially appear to be weaving errors occur with a frequency and similarity that suggest such irregularities are deliberate rather than accidental, and moreover are part of a long tradition.

Shiv's first example, a Baluch *balisht* (grain bag or cushion) illustrated some of the design variations that he would highlight throughout his presentation (2). The

lowest section—created first by the weaver—was abruptly altered partway up the *balisht*. The basic motif in the field changed, as did the colors the weaver was using. In the lowest section, motifs elsewhere aligned on a central vertical axis were displaced left or right. Likewise the border was discontinuous, changing in width and design. The visual impression for the observer was that the lower section came from another weaving altogether, but Shiv indicated that there were no signs of such joining—rather, that the *balisht* was woven exactly that way.

Lest we conclude that such design variations were the result of casual and crude nomadic weaving from memory, Shiv's next example was a sophisticated seventeenth-century vase carpet (3). Once again, the field design began one way but changed abruptly to another a short distance up the carpet. Why, Shiv asked, given the investment of time and materials, would the weaver be so lax?



2. Baluch *balisht* with dramatic design change



3. Kirman vase carpet (detail), 17th c., with design change

After illustrating the "marking" phenomenon in urban workshop weaving, Shiv returned to Baluch rugs. A septet of them displayed the "classic" irregularities he had identified in the vase carpet. In one rug, motifs in the lowest section differed from those above it in scale and color, and there was a visible line at the transition point. Motifs in the lowest section of another example were shifted off the axis governing their arrangement in the rest of the weaving. In a third example, a barber-pole design element switched direction at the transition point. Same-color repeat motifs created horizontal lines in the lower field of another rug, but formed diagonals above (4). Because these "markings" frequently occurred in the lower part of weavings, Shiv labeled them "internal *elems*" (*elem* being the term commonly used to denote the end section(s)—characterized by distinct designs and sometimes colors—of certain Turkmen weavings).

Such lower-field irregularities were not limited to Baluch rugs; Shiv showed a slew of examples—both piled and flatwoven—from many different regions and periods. An early Anatolian rug with a *çintamani* design, for instance, had a visible change of "three dot" orientation exactly where such transitions occur in later rugs. A finely woven Senneh kilim showed a clear reversal of boteh orientation and color at the typical break point, a short way into the field. A Star Kazak displayed another widespread lower-field design variation—the inversion of small motifs, in this case animals. In similar fashion, several rugs featured animal motifs repeatedly facing the same way throughout most of the field, but oriented in the opposite direction in the lower part. In a Saryk *ensi*, an otherwise continuous motif became

"disconnected" at the transition point. The lowest row of guls in an Ersari main carpet shifted to the left relative to the guls above them; the same axial shift occurred on a Caucasian Moghan rug (5).

Shiv noted several ways in which transversals signaled design transition. Sometimes a change in field color created a visual line (6). Or, as noted above, a single, unique row of one-color motifs served this function. In other cases, an explicit line of color, possibly of a different material, marked the transition point. Transverse lines could pass through a medallion. In a rectangular weaving, the point of design transition often occurred roughly where the portion remaining above the line formed a square.

Having shown so many examples, Shiv maintained, "The process of weaving is way too deliberate to be accidental." Given the weaver's level of control, he said, we must consider and likely acknowledge that the variations were intentional. He then turned to possible explanations of why weavers may have included them. Was it for visual interest—"the difference between music and muzak"? Or that "it's harder to make [something] different rather than to make [it] the same"—i.e., that creating such variations was a way for the weaver to demonstrate her skill? Or the belief that weaving perfection would arouse the ire of the spirits—the "evil eye"?

Ultimately, the theory Shiv entertained longest was that these "markings" reflected ancient shamanic cosmological diagrams (7), the rugs' transition points indicating—via different colors, motifs, layouts, and other features—the boundary between an underworld and an earthly level.



4–6. Rug "markings": Baluch with changing axes of same-color botehs; Moghan with offset lower octagons; Konya runner (detail) with transverse line above first large octagon



7. 1930s photo (detail) of a Telet woman shaman (Kemerovo Region, SW Siberia), whose drum depicts underworld and earthly realms



8–13. Show-and-tell rugs with design irregularities, usually but not always in the lower sections

Following Shiv's formal presentation, an audience member asked whether, given Shiv's thoughts about earthly and underworld levels, there were also indications on rugs of a celestial realm. Some pieces, Shiv responded, also exhibit what he called a transcendent level. Another member asked whether the design irregularities observed might have had an Islamic origin. Shiv didn't think so; rather he traced them to pre-Islamic, shamanic times. Did Shiv know of any direct, recorded explanations by weavers for the irregularities they had created? Amir Oskoueï, an NERS member and dealer, offered his observation that, when having Tabriz rugs copied in a remote Iranian village, he had asked an older weaver about "mistakes" recreated in the replicas. He said she answered that it was to prevent the "negative energy" of perfection—consistent with the "warding off of the evil eye" explanation.

For show-and-tell, members brought numerous rugs with the sort of irregularities Shiv had spoken about, as well as other design variations. Their examples—Baluch, Uzbek, Turkmen, Persian, and Caucasian weavings—reflected how

widespread Shiv's "markings" are. Several Baluch rugs had pronounced differences in their lowest parts, such as motif transitions (8) and figures not found elsewhere (9). Border and field motifs in the lower area of an Uzbek *julkhyr* (sleeping mat) changed size and alignment (10). A Tekke *chuval* (11) showed significant variations in the lower field. Motifs on a Yomud *torba* were off-axis and inconsistently spaced, although these irregularities were all along the right side rather than in the lower portion (12); possibly factors different from those in Shiv's examples were at play. Caucasian Perepedil (13) and Chajli rugs each had transversals in locations similar to those that Shiv had shown, and a Qashqa'i bag had a discernible line in the expected spot.

Our thanks to Shiv for compiling and illustrating such a wide array of weavings with "consistent irregularities." Their sheer number supports his contention that these variations were intentional rather than errant. The reasons that weavers perpetuated them remain less clear.

Jim Adelson

Fall Auctions: What NERS Members Bought

Eight members who bid successfully at Fall 2019 auctions reported their many purchases—*too* many, it turns out, to picture here. The representatives shown clockwise from top left—one per responder—nevertheless suggest the collective breadth of NERS buyers' taste.



1. Skinner, Oct. 27: lot 80, Uzbek half-cross-stitch (*iroqi*) pouch, \$308
2. Austria Auction Company, Nov. 2: lot 217, Chinese Pao Tao rug, €1,875
- 3, 4. Eldred's (East Dennis, Mass.), Nov. 23: lot 1063, Talish rug, \$1,320; lot 1160, Bijar carpet, \$1,920
5. Rippon Boswell, Nov. 30: lot 39, Konya *yastik*, €1599
- 6–8 Grogan & Company, Dec. 5: lot 10, Kazak rug, \$4,880; lot 21, Kirman horse cover, \$2,318; lot 58, Turkmen *torba*, \$4,575

With a Little Help from My Friends: A Black-Ground Azerbaijan Embroidery



1. Pre-treatment detail of the author's Azerbaijan embroidery, showing losses and machine stitching

I was already tearing open the wrapping as the DHL truck left. Once the embroidery was unpacked it was obvious why it had remained on the market for over two years, with an asking price that gradually dwindled until it was almost within my budget: its dirt, water stains, losses, and crude patches machine-stitched in white thread (1). Linen backed, it was mounted on an amateurish stretcher. One of those things

that, like Soviet architecture, looks better from a distance.

Still, I liked it—all over silk surface darning on linen, main colors blue and black on a beige ground, motifs obviously “east of the Bosphorus, west of Samarkand,” and an impression of respectable age. Up on the wall, it dominated my study. What was it? Where from? When made?

Since my working hypothesis has always been that NERS is populated entirely by people who know more than I do about textiles in general and rugs in particular, I figured that such questions would best be answered if I pestered member friends and mentors. Not surprisingly, the Baileys were more than up to the challenge. Doug immediately nailed it as a Caucasian embroidery, and Julia pointed me to a comparable example.

Well, I was mightily pleased with myself. What a keen artistic eye! What business acumen to defer buying until I could afford it! And so things stood until the arrival of *Stars of the Caucasus: Silk Embroideries from Azerbaijan* (HALI Publications, 2017), to my knowledge the first book devoted exclusively to the embroideries of historical Azerbaijan. In its centerpiece article (chapter 4), Michael Franes identified a group with four surviving examples that “share a similar high-contrast colour scheme on a black background” (p. 70). Two are in the V&A (2, 3), and a third (4) was formerly in the Textile Gallery, London. According to Franes, the fourth (not pictured in *Stars of the*



2. Azerbaijan embroidery with peris, animals, fish, and flowers, V&A T.48-1940 © Victoria and Albert Museum



3. Azerbaijan embroidery with floral motifs, V&A T.38-1940 © Victoria and Albert Museum

Caucasus) was in a private collection in the Netherlands. Oops, that's *my* guy: "from a Dutch estate," the seller had said! One of only four survivors, and now I'm responsible for it. And the condition it's in—O Lord, what to do?

Deirdre Windsor was my salvation. Her studio—Windsor Conservation, in Dover, Mass.—has an international reputation for superb work. She was quite severe about the stretcher, a "trampoline mount": four 3 × 3 × 100 cm wood strips, mitered and clamped together like a picture frame, the linen backing stapled to the reverse all around. I cringed. There was no escaping the inevitable: the need to make a proper mount in addition to treating the embroidery itself.

My concerns were more temporal than pecuniary. Deirdre's services being much in demand, major projects appropriately took precedence over mine. Patience is a virtue, however, its rewards manifest: the fourth member of Franses's quartet (5) at last holds its own with the other three.

An eight-pointed star on a black background is the obvious motif unifying the four survivors. Areas of blue are not fixed in place, but are invariably present. Establishing a chronology is not difficult. The senior member of the group has four stars, each enclosing a Safavid *peri* sitting before a fish pond as a bird perches above (2). Each rectangular cartouche contains a pair of fish, as does the circular central medallion. The red-ground border shows alternating deer and cypress trees.

On the next-oldest example (4), the rectangular cartouches have evolved into rough hexagons surrounding a single, central star. The *peri* has been replaced by a palmette and the fish by birds and flowers throughout. The border has become a floral meander on a dark green ground.

On the natural descendant of this embroidery, each corner has a pair of vestigial birds, and two somewhat ambiguous creatures flank the palmette within the star (5). The beige ground color of the star is repeated in the border, which bears a rather elaborate version of the alternating S-motif seen in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Caucasian dragon rugs.

The final member of the group (3) is strictly floral—no birds, no creatures, no fish, no *peri*. The border is a somewhat rustic floral meander on a yellow ground. All that has survived the journey is the eight-pointed star on a black background.

Regarding the "where" of the group, Rippon Boswell suggests Surahani, near Baku in the northern reaches of historic Azerbaijan, while Franses prefers the Tabriz region in the equally distant south. As for the "when," the V&A dates its pieces 1750–1800, and Franses says 1625–1700. Don't you love experts? In any case, after 1800 the design appears to have been abandoned.

Lloyd Kannenberg

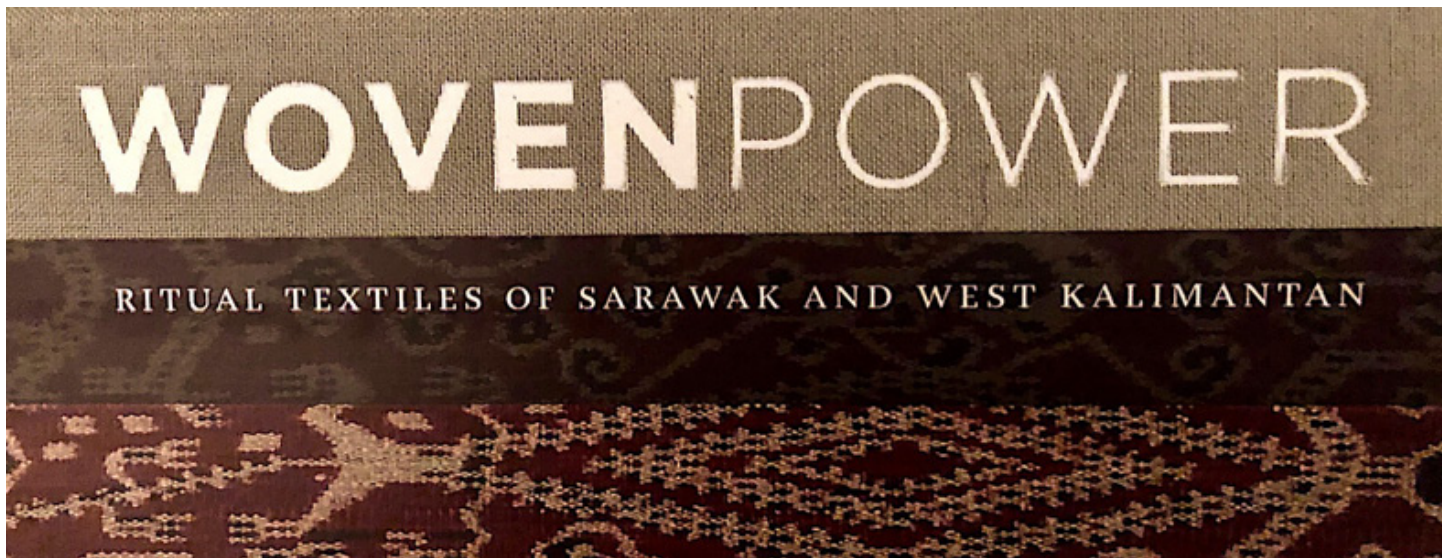


4. Azerbaijan embroidery with birds and flowers, present location unknown



5. Post-treatment: embroidery with vestigial birds, composite creatures, and floral motifs, 88 × 87 cm, author's collection

Exhibition Publications Now Available: *Woven Power* and *Stunned by Beauty*



Cover detail of John Kreifeldt's newly available catalogue

The 2016 exhibition *Woven Power: Ritual Textiles of Sarawak and West Kalimantan*, at Holy Cross College, Worcester, offered a superb display of ritual textiles and ceremonial skirts made by the Iban peoples of Borneo. All the pieces in the exhibition were from the collection of John Kreifeldt, who spoke to NERS about the Iban in October 2008 (see pp. 2–4 of the Jan. 2009 View: <http://www.ne-rugsociety.org/newsletter/rugl163a.pdf>). Jeff Spurr's detailed and beautifully illustrated review of the show appeared in *HALI* 190 (Winter 2016): pp. 99–103, but an exhibition catalogue has been long in coming.

Now that catalogue, *Woven Power*, written by John Kreifeldt himself and documenting all the textiles in the exhibition, is available. Accompanying it is exhibition curator Susan Rodgers's *Stunned by Beauty*, which offers an anthropological exploration of the textiles and their makers. Both volumes are distributed solely by Holy Cross College. Prices are \$60 for *Woven Power* and \$40 for *Stunned by Beauty*, plus a \$5 shipping charge per book. They may be ordered online at https://secure.touchnet.net/C20600_ustores/web/store_main.jsp?STOREID=3&clearPreview=true&SINGLESTORE=true or by mailing a check to Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery, College of the Holy Cross, 1 College Street, Worcester, MA 01610, ATTN: Paula Rosenblum.

March and April Rug and Textile Events

Auctions

- Mar. 18, Philadelphia, Material Culture, Oriental Rugs from American Estates
- Mar. 21, Vienna, Austria Auction Company, Fine Antique Oriental Rugs and Carpets XIX
- Mar. 25, Vienna, Dorotheum, Carpets, Textiles, Tapestries
- Apr. 1, London, Sotheby's, Arts of the Islamic World, Including Rugs and Carpets
- Apr. 2, London, Christie's, Art of the Islamic and Indian Worlds
- Apr. 26, Boston, Skinner, Fine Oriental Rugs & Carpets

Exhibitions

- Until June 7, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Turkish Rugs on Tudor Walls
- Until July 5, Washington, Textile Museum, Delight in Discovery: The Global Collections of Lloyd Cotsen
- Until Aug. 16, Toronto, Aga Khan Museum, Paradise Garden: The Wagner Carpet from the Burrell Collection
- Until Nov. 15, San Francisco, de Young Museum, The Turkmen Storage Bag

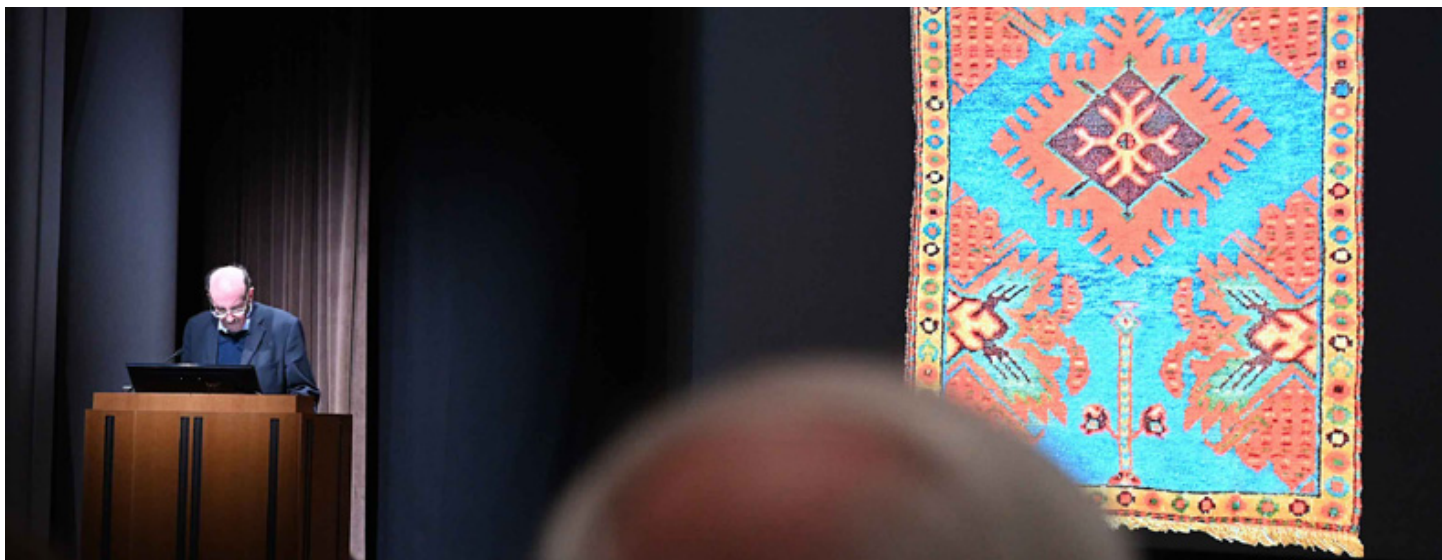
Future NERS Meetings

- May 8: Mete Mutlu, "Anatolian Village Rugs," Durant-Kenrick House, Newton
- May 17: Annual picnic, moth mart, and show-and-tell, Gore Place, Waltham

Photo Credits

p. 1: Jeff Spurr **p. 2:** Joel Greifinger (top), redbubble.com (bottom left), Jim Burns Collection (bottom center and right) **pp. 3–5:** Jim Sampson (figs. 1–7), *HALI* (fig. 8), Julia Bailey (fig. 9) **pp. 6–8:** Jim Sampson (figs. 1, 11), Shiv Sikri (figs. 2–7), Richard Larkin (fig. 8), Julia Bailey (figs. 9, 10, 13), Jim Adelson (fig. 12) **p. 9:** Skinner (fig. 1), Austria Auction Company (fig. 2), Eldred (figs. 3, 4), Rippon Boswell (fig. 5), Grogan & Company (figs. 6–8) **pp. 10–11:** Lloyd Kannenberg (figs. 1, 5), © V&A (figs. 2, 3), Austria Auction Company (fig. 4) **p. 12:** Carl Strock **pp. 13–15:** Walter Denny (figs. 1, 3), Julia Bailey (figs. 2, 4, 5)

In Remembrance: Jon Thompson, 1938–2020



1. Jon presenting his observations about color in carpets at *HALI* London, June 2019

Last June, at *HALI* London, Jon Thompson emerged from retirement to give a lively paper on color in carpets (1). Five months later, surgery for his back pain led to the discovery of metastatic cancer; he died on January 23, at the age of 81.

In his preface to *Through the Collector's Eye*, the catalogue of the 1991 rug exhibition organized by the New Boston (now New England) Rug society and the Rhode Island School of Design Art Museum, Jon began,

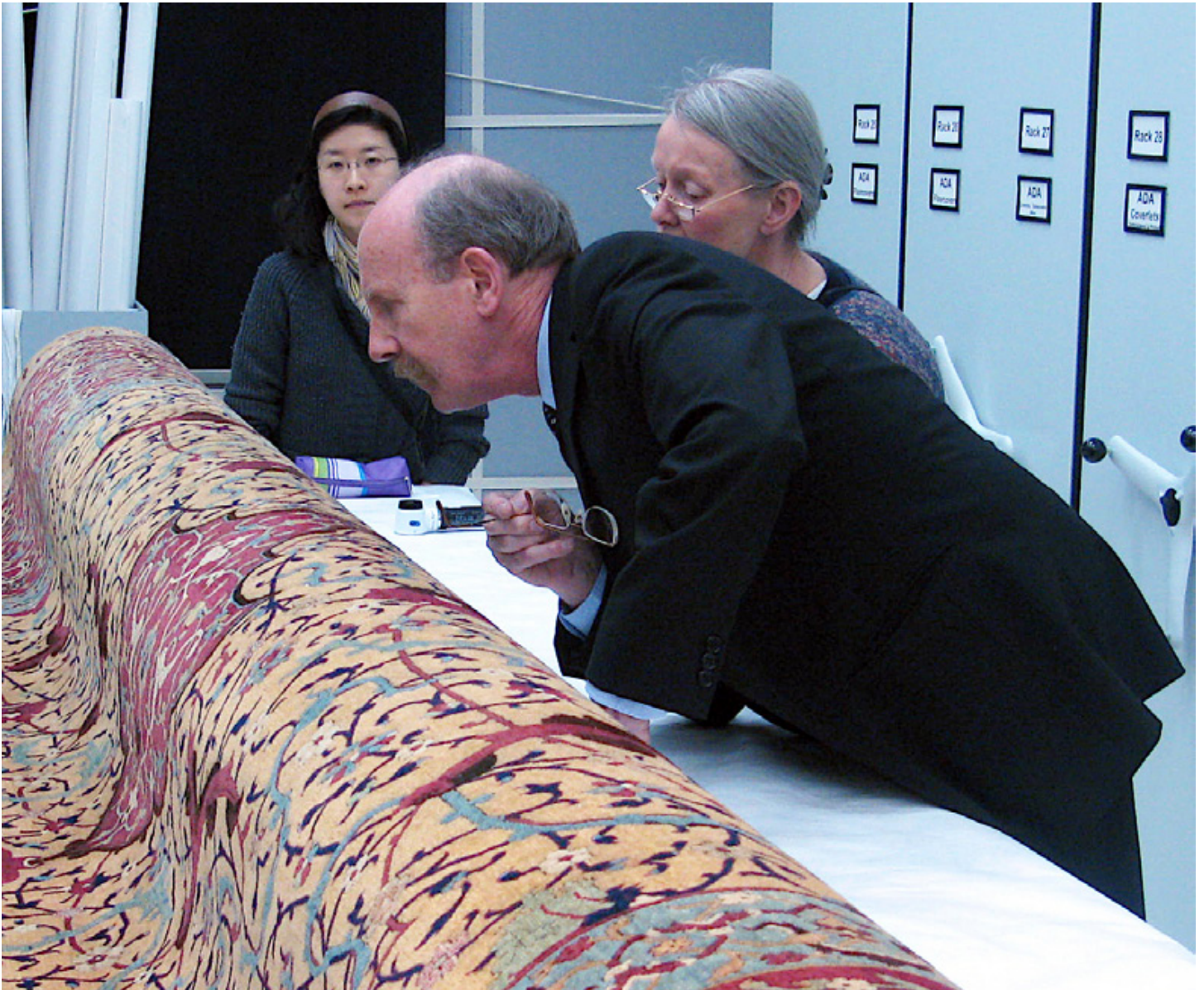
At the tender age of six I was sent away to a small school run by two elderly spinsters. I can still picture the room where we stood in rows to recite our multiplication tables, its glass cases stuffed with all sorts of strange objects brought by former pupils from Africa and the South seas. I was fascinated by some amazingly intricate pieces of Maori woodcarving. But these things, I was told, were "curios" of no special interest.

Jon's first profession was medicine, but his aesthetic fascination persisted, ultimately focusing on rugs from Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia. Starting as a collector/dealer, he forged a new career as a scholar dedicated to rescuing carpets from the "no special interest" class in which they, too, were held academically, and to redefining them as better understood and respected art forms. To that end, he taught courses at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and was the May Beattie Fellow in Carpet Studies at the Ashmolean Museum and the Khalili Research Centre, Oxford. The books he wrote or co-wrote include an annotated reissue of Bogolyubov's *Carpets of Central*

Asia (1973); *Turkmen: Tribal Carpets and Traditions* (1980); *Carpet Magic* (1983), of which a later edition was retitled *Carpets: From the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia; Silk, Carpets and the Silk Road* (1988); *The Nomadic Peoples of Iran* (2002); *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran* (2003); *Milestones in the History of Carpets* (2006); *Timbuktu to Tibet: Exotic Rugs and Textiles from New York Collections* (2008); and *Carpets and Textiles in the Iranian World: 1400–1700* (2010). He helped select the rugs exhibited in *Through the Collector's Eye* (2), and among his many lectures over the decades were three presentations to NERS: "Travels in Central Asia" (1990), "How Great Carpets Are Made" (2005), and "Mamluk Carpets" (2012).



2. Jon, Julia Bailey, and RISD Museum curator Susan Hay select rugs for *Through the Collectors Eye* in June 1990



3. Close scrutiny: Jon, with Barbara behind him, examines the Metropolitan Museum's Anhalt Carpet in 2008

Jon's brand of carpet scholarship was distinguished as much by acute, close-up observation **(3)** and inspired categorization as by bold theorizing. His structure-based identification of what he first termed S-group and later Salor weaving, for instance, has proved an enduring benchmark in Turkmen studies. *Carpet Magic*—surely his most widely read book—simply and brilliantly sorted rugs by the social contexts in which they were woven: tribal, cottage-industry, workshop, and court. In *Hunt for Paradise* (and in his 2005 NERS talk), he rebutted the assumption that Persian court carpets were knotted the “modern” way, from squared-paper patterns; rather, their scarcely noticeable—except to his keen eye—design irregularities revealed that their weavers must have relied on visual guides more akin to tapestry cartoons.

His lecture style was clear, measured, and punctuated with dry humor, not always modest. Longtime NERS member Richard Larkin remembers that, at an early-1980s Textile Museum lecture on the source of Turkmen gul, “Dr. Thompson . . . at a certain point paused, and in his unmistakable, highly civilized manner of address, announced calmly, ‘And now, ladies and gentlemen, if you would please fasten your seatbelts. We are about to gain altitude.’”

Undergirding Jon's professional career were his love of music, his family life, and his spiritual questing. He and his wife, Barbara (who before her death, in 2018, was a Senior Nurse at the Royal London Hospital), warmly hosted many a traveling ruggie in their London home. Their daughter, Anne Cotton, a teacher, is the author of *Platonic Dialogue*

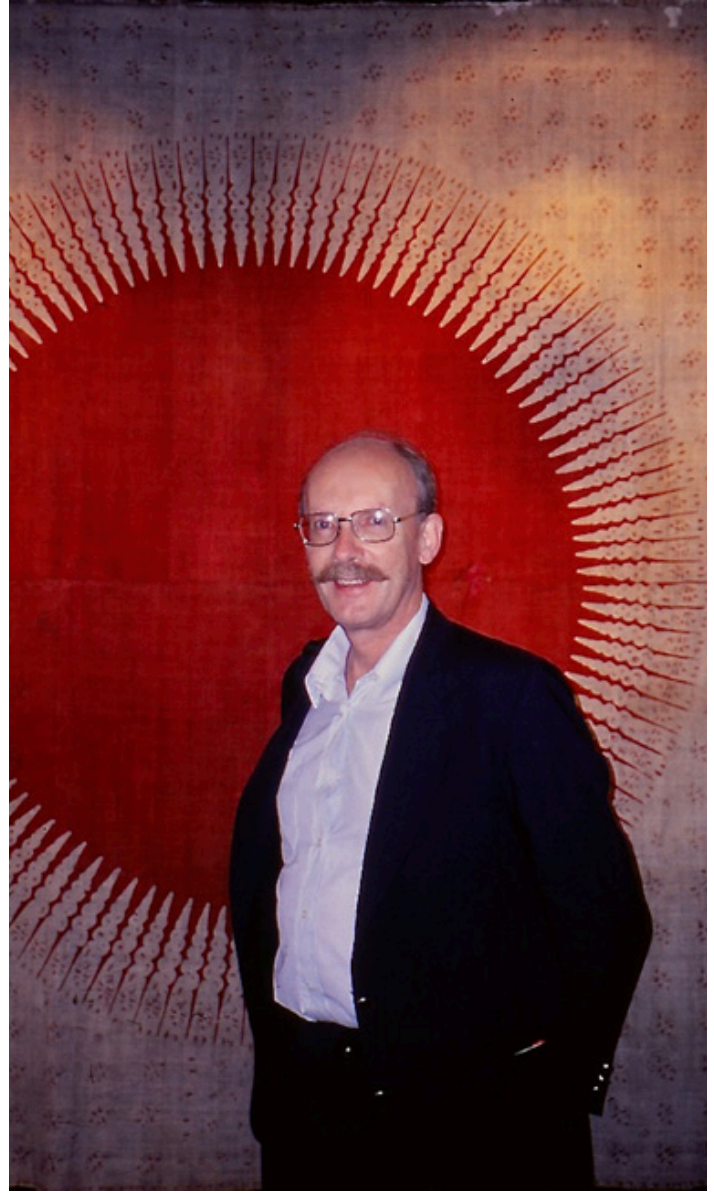


4. Exploring the ruins of Persepolis in 1991

and the *Education of the Reader* and the mother of two; their son, David, works in the National Health Service and also has two children.

Jon's fascination with Ancient Egyptian texts and especially with Buddhism colors his early writing (see his essays in Eberhard Herrmann's sale catalogues *Von Uschak bis Yarkand* [1979] and *Von Konya bis Kokand* [1980]). He later turned his attention to Sufism; his otherwise-Anglican funeral service included the recitation of a verse by Rumi. For as long as I knew him, he was a follower of the Russian mystic philosopher Gurdjieff.

One last memory serves to epitomize for me Jon's investigative spirit. On a tour preceding the 1991 Tehran Carpet Conference, two busloads crammed with European



5. Enthralled by a radiant Indian-export textile shown at ICOC 9, Milan, in 1999

and American participants turned off a main road in Chahar Mahal and lumbered up a dirt track "specially built for us," according to our Iranian handlers. Nearing a couple of tents, our visiting hordes alighted and encircled maybe twenty Bakhtiari men in traditional dress, who stood around in apparent perplexity as we surged forward and snapped their pictures. From this awkward, staged spectacle, Jon had completely absented himself. Back at the buses, he informed us that he had headed off solo over the hill, found a group of encamped Bakhtiari—non-showcased and entirely free of gapers—and joined them for tea and conversation.

Fare thee well, voyager Jon.

Julia Bailey

Editorial contributors to this issue: Julia Bailey (editor),
Jim Adelson, Lloyd Kannenberg

Distributor: Jim Sampson

NERS 2019–20 Steering Committee: Joel Greifinger
(Chairman), Jim Adelson, Julia Bailey, Yon Bard,
Richard Belkin, Jean Hoffman, Lloyd Kannenberg,
Richard Larkin, Jim Sampson, Jeff Spurr

ACOR Representative: Ann Nicholas

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 6125, Holliston, MA 01746; or by contacting Jim Sampson at jahome22@gmail.com.



The New England Rug Society

P.O. Box 6125

Holliston, MA 01746

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