



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



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January 9 Meeting (Online): Jim Ford, “The Early Persian Medallion Carpets and Their Collectible Derivatives”



Jim Ford

Meeting Details

Date and Time: 1 PM (EST)
on **Saturday, January 9**

Venue: Your desktop, laptop,
or tablet!

Directions: Jim Sampson
will email invitation links
to members; to receive the
Zoom login, you must register
before the meeting by clicking
on the link in Jim's email.
Non-members should email
jean.hoffman@jeanhoffman.com
to get an invitation link.



Medallion carpet (det.), Met Museum 64.311

P. R. J. “Jim” Ford has worked in the oriental rug business for sixty-four years. After studying German and music at King’s College, Cambridge, he was drawn into the carpet trade in Germany, at that time the world’s biggest market for Persian goods. This led to his first book, *Oriental Carpet Design*, published in 1981. In 1986 he married the American carpet designer Barbara Lindsay, and together they started their own carpet business, making many trips to Iran and all the countries of the Orient—most recently Nepal, where they continue to manufacture bespoke carpets. When asked to write the article on Persia in the *Encyclopedia of Asian Design*, Jim felt his first book needed a sequel. *The Persian Carpet Tradition: Six Centuries of Design Evolution* was published by HALI in 2019 and was the year’s winner of the Textile Society of America’s R. L. Shep Ethnic Textiles Book Award.

Collecting carpets began in earnest in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with many Americans like Joseph V. McMullan and George Blumenthal inspired to search for the great works of Safavid Persia, including early medallion carpets. These large carpets, of which eighty survive, are not from the workshops of the royal court in Tabriz. Misnamed “Northwest Persian,” they were woven in commercial factories all over central and southern Iran and share a design created in Shiraz. Production of these medallion carpets stopped when the Safavid dynasty collapsed in 1722, but elements of their design, especially the medallion, percolated down into Persian carpet folk art, and were revived in Shiraz, Bijar, and elsewhere. In addition to discussing the early medallion carpets, author Jim Ford will illustrate many of their collectible derivatives.

February 20 Meeting (Online): Alberto Levi, “Rugs of the Golden Triangle”

Meeting Details

Day and Time: 1 PM EST on **Saturday, February 20**

Venue: Your desktop, laptop, or tablet!

Directions: Jim Sampson will email invitation links to members; to receive the Zoom login, you must register before the meeting by clicking on the link in Jim’s email. Non-members should email jean.hoffman@jeanhoffman.com to get an invitation link.



Alberto Levi

While in Tibet in the early '90s, hunting, in his words, “for the next Seljuk animal carpet,” Alberto Levi “stumbled across an entirely different kind of animal.” In time, what seemed to be a casual encounter yielded a distinct group of carpets, which Alberto labels “Tibetan Golden Triangle.” Far from being Tibetan—and having nothing whatsoever to do with the Bermuda Triangle—this elusive family of rugs, most of them fragmentary, appears to originate from a triangular region defined at its extremes by eastern Anatolia, the southern Caucasus, and Northwest Persia. How and why these rugs ended up in Tibet is yet another part of the mystery that Alberto will investigate in his talk.

Alberto Levi was born in Milan but spent many years of his youth in New York. After earning his degree in chemistry from NYU, he returned to Milan and used the office of his father, a leading wholesaler of antique rugs, as his base while he worked for a small pharmaceutical company. Alberto’s inherent love of rugs was cemented when he was sent on his first buying trip—back to New York. Soon afterwards, all his chemistry journals were buried under piles of scholarly rug publications and auction catalogues. Having published his first articles on carpets, he became a contributing editor of *HALI* and *Ghereh* and presented papers at various international conferences. He was president of the Organizing Committee of ICOC IX, curating the conference museum exhibition *Sovereign Carpets* and co-writing its catalogue. After a long apprenticeship with his father, he opened the Alberto Levi Gallery in 1997, and deals in both antique and contemporary rugs.



Two fragmentary “Golden Triangle” rugs, sourced in Tibet: one (left) with small sawtooth and cruciform medallions and cloudbands, the other (right) with directional palmettes and rosettes; both with eight-pointed star borders

October Meeting Review: Walter Denny, “Out of Sight . . . at the Metropolitan Museum”

By Jim Adelson



1. Walter Denny, with Iznik-tile-patterned backdrop, presenting on Zoom from his home office

On October 23, Walter Denny, well-known professor, author, and lecturer, kicked off the 2020–21 season of NERS, and also our entry into the new world of online presentations (1). Walter’s talk was titled “Out of Sight but Always in Mind: Islamic Carpets in the Metropolitan Museum of Art That You Will (Probably) Never See in the Galleries.” Before launching into the topic his title suggested, Walter noted that he’d begun his formal work with the Met in 2007, surveying the textile and carpet collections in preparation for the 2011 opening of the museum’s new Islamic galleries.

Regarding carpets, Walter explained, the Met (and other museums) had to contend with many issues. “Carpets are problem children,” he said, noting that they’re big, they’re fragile, they have to be rotated to reduce light exposure, they’re hard to display, and when displayed they require greater-than-usual textual explication.

He then illustrated challenges other museums have faced—not always successfully—in showing their carpets. At the Philadelphia Museum of Art, for instance, some carpets have been left mounted for decades on slant boards and have perceptibly stretched; others are shown in floor displays such as the dome-covered one he labeled “pheasant under glass” (2).

Carpets are often out of scale with everything else in an exhibition space; one of the most famous examples, the Ardabil Carpet in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, is housed in a huge, light-controlled, custom glass case whose construction consumed most of the total cost of the gallery (3). Walter pronounced the “flying carpet” arrangement of the important rugs in Vienna’s Museum of Applied Arts (4) “clichéd” and “trivializing,” and illustrated how the new Islamic galleries of the Louvre have failed at addressing yet another issue—lighting.



2. “Pheasant under glass”: domical display of the Marquand Carpet, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art



3. Costly quarters: the Ardabil Carpet’s home in the V&A

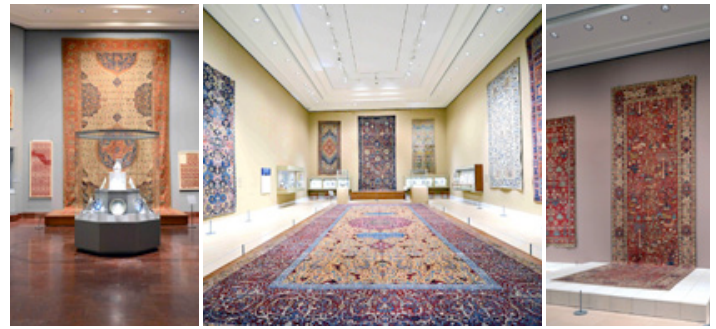


4. Clichéd contrivance: the “flying carpet” installation at the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK), Vienna

He next turned to museums’ responsibilities vis-à-vis the art in their possession. First and foremost are preservation and conservation, continuing the very existence of artworks. Other obligations are facilitating research and publication, providing appropriate public exhibition, and promoting accessibility in the broader sense—allowing people to interact in various ways with the art.



5. Views of the Antonio Ratti Textile Center, with some of the rugs stored there.



7. Carpets in the galleries dedicated to the arts of Turkey (left), Iran (center), and Later South Asia (right)



6. Examining a cut-down but still huge Persian "vase" carpet in the Met's Department of Textile Conservation



8. Innovative lighting of the Met's Spanish ceiling and the Turkish rugs then on rotation in that gallery

Carpets, Walter repeated, present museums with special challenges in meeting these responsibilities. They require space for storage and display as well as significant staffing and time for their study, care, conservation, and transportation. They require money, not just for their initial acquisition but also for care and handling once they are in a museum's collection. Their display needs extra contextual explanation, to allow visitors to understand and appreciate what they're seeing.

The Met, he was proud to report, has outstanding facilities—physical and otherwise—for carpets. They are kept in the Antonio Ratti Center (5), a storage and research area specifically for textiles, which generously provides access not only to staff, but also to outside groups and even individuals. In addition, the Department of Textile Conservation (6) has exceptional resources for putting carpets in condition for display. The Met's new galleries of Islamic art, known as Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey,

Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia (or ALTICALSA), have expanded exhibition space by about forty-five percent, much of it devoted to carpets (7). Finally, the Met's system of rotations allows more carpets to be seen by the public.

Even with these advantages, there are still factors that complicate carpet display. Limited ceiling heights and floor space for platforms (which, according to New York City building codes, must allow the passage around them of two wheelchairs) prevent full viewing of the largest carpets. The Met has therefore added adjustable or kick-out platforms, and roller boxes that show just a portion of some carpets. In addition, the museum has been innovative in its approach to lighting, particularly in the gallery whose sixteenth-century Spanish ceiling precludes standard track lights (8).

Walter then summarized the reasons that museums might not display particular carpets. Some constraints are physical—unwieldy size or poor condition. But others



9 (top). The too-big-to-show Blumenthal medallion carpet
10 (bottom). The reknotted Pulitzer/Barbieri Mamluk carpet

aren't tied to carpets' material characteristics. Questions of authenticity might discourage a museum from exhibiting a rug. A lack of thematic affinity with other objects in a gallery could make display more problematic. Finally, there might be negative judgments about a carpet's artistic quality or art-historical importance—disputable, because aesthetic standards change over time.

After this summary, Walter turned to his declared subject: Met carpets unlikely to appear publicly. His first example was a stellar Sanguszko carpet that the museum, having possessed as a loan for four decades, nevertheless failed to acquire; it is now in the Miho Museum in Japan. The massive Blumenthal Northwest Persian medallion carpet **(9)** suffers solely from being too large for any available floor space. Two other Northwest Persian medallion carpets, the Altman and the McMullan, ideally should be displayed side-by-side for comparison, but once again there is no space to accommodate them together.



11 (top). The Valentiner Carpet, baffling Jon Thompson
12 (bottom). The McMullan armorial Lotto, a Tuduc fake

The Ballard "Aq Qoyunlu" carpet, possibly dating to the fifteenth century, is unfortunately beset with areas of poor restoration. The sixteenth-century Baker "Salting" carpet is too fragile for display: Walter saw it taken out of storage and described hearing, during its re-rolling, the "snap, crackle, and pop" of its silk warps giving way.

Size and fragility are not the only issues. Another is peculiar appearance and condition: the fifteenth-century Pulitzer/Barbieri Mamluk carpet **(10)**, judged by Walter "the ugliest thing I've ever seen," turns out to have been entirely reknotted (and in the wrong colors and technique) on its original foundation. The problem with the fragmentary Valentiner Carpet **(11)**, on the other hand, is ambiguity: it looks old, but with its cotton warp and weft, no one can really say where or when it was made. Recent scholarship has cast doubt on the McMullan Armorial Lotto **(12)** and dragon carpets: the Lotto is now thought to be a Tuduc fake from the early twentieth century, and the dragon carpet a reproduction.



13 (top left). Inscribed Ghiordes prayer rug, Ballard Collection **14 (bottom). Examining carpets, including an exceptional medallion Isfahan (foreground), in the Lehman Wing courtyard** **15 (top right). Ballard's so-far-unexhibited Ushak**

(In the question-and-answer session after his talk, Walter said he suspected it was woven in the late nineteenth century.)

Despite the rarity and epigraphic value of its inscription-filled mihrab, the Ballard Ghiordes prayer rug (**13**), together with most Ghiordes rugs, has fallen out of favor with scholars, collectors, and the rug-interested public.

The Robert Lehman Collection, which Walter termed "a museum within a museum," presents a carpet problem peculiar to the Met. The entire collection can be exhibited

nowhere but in its own special wing, which includes a smaller-scale replica of the Lehman residence. But this space is too small for displaying any of Lehman's grand "Indo-Isfahan" carpets, including a notable Persian example with medallions (**14**).

Walter next lobbied on behalf of two never-shown rugs—he called them "wallflowers"—that he thought deserved exhibition: a sixteenth-century Ballard Collection Ushak with an apparently unique lattice pattern of octagonal stars (**15**), and a silky "Polonaise" carpet from the Love Collection.



16. Exhibition in the Met's Kevorkian Gallery, including the Ballard Karachov and McMullan "Memling" Kazaks

Not on long-term display in the principal Islamic galleries are later carpets in the Met's possession. These include Turkmen weavings such as McMullan's Salor and Yomud main carpets, a gabbeh that Ballard acquired long before such rugs became trendy, the Met's sole Moroccan carpet, various later Persian rugs, and standout Caucasian rugs including Kazaks from the Ballard and McMullan collections.

Nevertheless, the Kevorkian Special Exhibitions Gallery (16), established in 2011, provides wall space for these later rugs, as well as for older ones rarely on view. A 2012–13 show of Turkmen jewelry, for instance, included two McMullan Yomud main carpets. *Carpets in Paintings*, in 2014, juxtaposed antique Turkish rugs with their representations in European Art, and *Carpets of Kings*, in 2017, featured small Persian court rugs. Most important, in Walter's view, was the exhibition, in 2017–18, of the William and Inger Ginsberg Collection, which consisted exclusively of nineteenth-century bags and other small weavings from Turkey, Iran, and Transcaucasia (17). The Met's acceptance of the Ginsberg gift, and its putting these pieces on display, signaled to Walter the museum's admirable willingness to adapt to changing views about what constitutes great woven art.

Walter concluded his presentation by briefly considering what the future will bring. Today, he said, "the big question is money"—the fiscal straits most museums are in now, and their ability to rebound. But he voiced his optimism that "the future of museums . . . is moving slowly but inexorably toward being more carpet friendly."



17. William and Inger Ginsberg's gift of tribal weavings, exhibited in the Kevorkian Gallery in 2017–18

Following the presentation, Walter answered questions submitted by audience members and posed by Zoom host Jean Hoffman. Some viewers wanted to know where Walter was talking from. His home office, he explained; its Iznik-tile-patterned backdrop was actually a shower curtain (1). When, another questioner asked, was the huge vase carpet that Walter had shown in Textile Conservation (6) cut down? Not known, he replied, but probably by a dealer catering to the museum-level art market.

Was the Met's carpet rotation schedule publicized? No, Walter answered, for the sake of flexibility. Does the Met still purchase carpets? Relative to other museums, he explained, the Met doesn't have a large acquisition budget, and that budget is shared among all its departments. Gifts—but only of the highest quality, since Ratti Center storage is tight and costly—are preferred and encouraged.

Regarding the future, a final questioner asked if Walter thought other Islamic-art-oriented museums, such as the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, would show increasing interest in carpets. Yes re the Aga Khan Museum, Walter replied, especially given the support of New York emigrés Marshall and Marilyn Wolf, collectors who now live in Toronto.

This first NERS online presentation drew an exceptionally large response, with 138 in virtual attendance. Walter's choice of topic, his knowledge, and his experience and skill with online delivery made our season debut a great success, for which we're all very grateful to him. Thanks, too, to NERS member Jean Hoffman for organizing and hosting the session.

November Meeting Review: Hadi Maktabi, “Make Rugs Great Again”

By Jim Adelson



1. Hadi Maktabi presenting from Beirut (above), and displaying a prized Bakhtiari Khan rug in his gallery

On November 21, speaking from Beirut, Hadi Maktabi **(1)** delivered the second virtual presentation in the NERS 2020–21 season. Hadi’s talk was topically titled “Make Rugs Great Again” and subtitled “Rug ‘n’ Roll in the Time of Corona.”

NERS Chairman Joel Greifinger provided the introduction: Hadi, who was born into the fourth generation of a leading carpet-dealing family, initially studied mathematics at Oxford, but ultimately earned his doctorate in Islamic art and carpet studies. Returning to Beirut, he taught art history at the American University there, advised several museums, established the Hadi Maktabi Gallery for Rare Carpets and



2. A couple renews their wedding vows on a Tekke dowry rug

Antiques, and, in 2019, completed his groundbreaking book, *The Persian Carpet: The Forgotten Years, 1722–1872*.

Hadi began by labeling his talk “unacademic” and indicating that its topic—how he developed his rug business—was unusual for him. Hadi’s “brand recognition,” he said, was based on “transparency, accessibility, and relevance.” By “transparency” he meant the willingness to provide full information about his offerings. “Accessibility” implied using all means available to communicate with potential clients. “Relevance” referred to his approach to rug enthusiasts who were not collectors, but were more interested in rugs’ cultural setting and decorative appeal than in technical minutiae such as warp depression. For this group, Hadi, with his art-historical training, could provide the information they sought to foster their carpet interest.

His very first online rug sale, he noted, was on Facebook, in 2011; at the time he felt it was a fluke, a one-time thing. But by 2017, his online business exceeded local sales. While building this online presence, Hadi was also attentive to making the in-person gallery experience special for everyone. He installed a Foosball table and Pac-Man video games for young visitors; an older couple even renewed their wedding vows on a Tekke dowry rug **(2)**. He extended the spirit of fun online as well, as evidenced in his various hashtags: “#Ruglife,” “#Herizmania,” and “#RugNRoll.”



3. A Baluch camel trapping as a young superman's cape

Heriz rugs being one of his firm's most popular items, Hadi photographed two Heriz samplers laid atop a Heriz main carpet, their designs a striking match. A Baluch camel trapping became a superhero cape for his young son (3). Hadi's clients would in turn share their own photos: one from a London collector, responding to the #RugNRoll theme, showed an electric guitar atop a Khamseh rug that Hadi had found for him. Such playful approaches helped Hadi attract a significant under-forty audience. Numerous clients of all ages, having first become aware of his gallery via social media, arranged to visit in person.

But the COVID-19 pandemic forced Hadi to adopt a new strategy. Thankfully, his online business presence was already in place. Travel and social-distancing restrictions made it more palatable for clients to purchase online; for many, it was the only choice. Some potential buyers, their travel curtailed, had both the extra funds and the incentive to embellish the homes where they were now spending more time. Hadi's reputation, academic credentials, and museum involvement all helped give buyers, even first-timers, the confidence to proceed.

His adaptive online tactics included eccentric, personal social-media posts, extensive photography and videography, and a remodeled website. He instituted what he called "limousine service"—interaction that, among other things,



4 (above). A Karaja carpet in its new Chicago home 5 (below). A Southwest Persian kilim in Accra, Ghana

helped clients envision what rugs would look like in their own homes. He and his staff handled all aspects of the gallery's transactions except the shipping itself. Although he hosted webinars and live videos, he withdrew from Facebook rug forums, finding them time-consuming and "venomous."

Reflecting his international reach, Hadi showed a series of photos sent to him by clients in, for instance, Boston, Chicago (4), Kuwait, Accra (5), Jakarta, Melbourne, Riga, Delhi, and Doha, featuring rugs they had bought from him. Under-forty buyers in particular seemed to want something antique to go with their modern décor.



6. Replacing the shattered glass façade of Hadi's gallery: a "calligraffiti" Tree of Life with its message of resilience

But on August 4, a horrific explosion "ripped [Beirut] to shreds," leaving more than 178 people dead, 6,500 injured, and 300,000 homeless. Half of the double-window façade of Hadi's gallery was shattered, although the carpets inside were fortunately spared. Given the desperate, citywide need for structural repair, his team realized that the shattered window wouldn't soon be fixed, reluctantly removed the remaining, intact one, and installed what Hadi termed "bunkerlike" metal panels. These were first painted gray. Then—to broadcast a message of persistence, resilience, and hope in the face of a tragedy exacerbated by corrupt politicians—Hadi had a local studio of street artists cover the panels with a work of "calligraffiti" that suggested both an unfurling carpet and a Tree of Life (5).

From August 9 through the end of that month, Hadi's gallery ran a social-media fundraiser, with proceeds from carpet sales going to the Red Cross and other charities aiding Beirut. Buyers from twelve countries—most of them first-time customers—bought twenty-six carpets, raising over \$15,000. Although the gallery's stock was spared, many other rugs in the city were damaged or destroyed. Even now, Hadi's firm continues to wash and repair the salvageable ones.

After his presentation, Hadi fielded Zoom-audience comments and questions. One attendee requested that Hadi make available prints of the Tree of Life "calligraffiti," to which Hadi responded, "Great idea." Another asked whether Hadi felt his gallery was adapting to the needs of the current era. Hadi replied that this was what he meant by "relevance": as people's tastes have changed, old works of art can still be made relevant to their lives; for instance, rugs don't have to be surrounded by grandma's furniture.

Did Hadi see an ongoing dialogue between antique carpets and modern works of art? Yes, he answered,

particularly tribal rugs; in his words, "Old tribal rugs have soul." The next questioner noted the minimalist settings in homes that had acquired Hadi's rugs: was this a trend? Hadi answered that fashionably modern interiors, like modes of dress, were becoming more casual. Buyers preferred plainer furnishings with more limited color, allowing artwork and "statement" carpets to stand out.

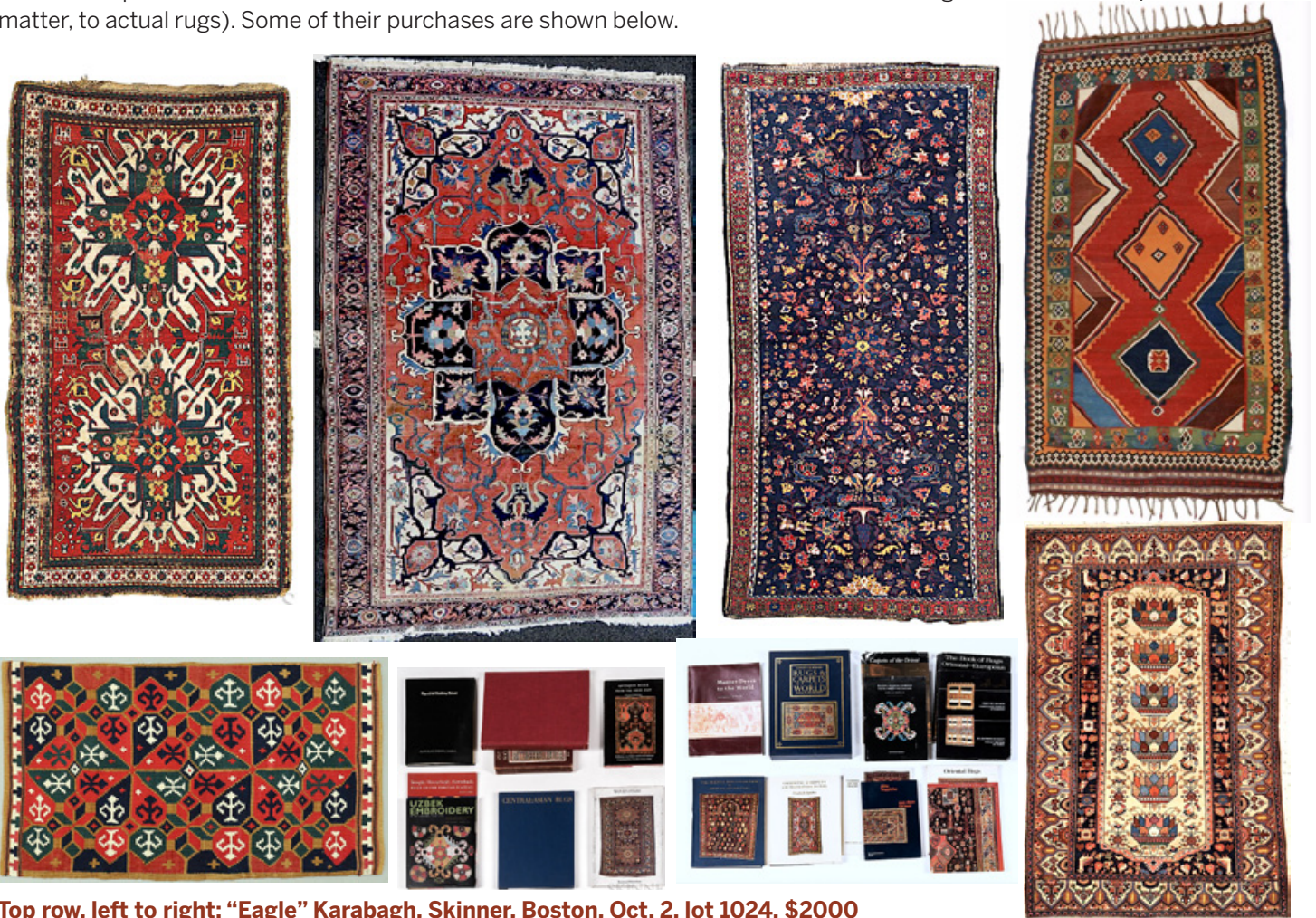
Why, asked another questioner, weren't Moroccan rugs featured in his presentation? Hadi replied that he hadn't seen as much interest in them, although he had sold a few antique Rabats to collectors. Then came a far broader query: which did Hadi view as "the art in a carpet"—how it was woven, or its design? "Yes," Hadi replied, and elaborated by citing many examples of how design and weaving technique affect each other aesthetically.

To a question about how Hadi buys carpets in the age of coronavirus, he cited a worldwide network of trustworthy sources that he had built in the prior fifteen years. Finally, had he had seen people with an initial interest in decorative carpets develop into serious collectors? "Oh yes," he answered, "and that's something that fills my heart with joy." Over time, for some clients, taste and knowledge grow—an evolution now aided by the availability of so much material online (although one must always question its reliability). And, he added, true scholarly understanding still requires scientific research, historical and ethnographic study, and field work.

Our heartfelt gratitude to Hadi for sharing his perspectives on his clientele and his innovative approaches to selling rugs, even with the unanticipated strictures of the pandemic. We recognize and appreciate his response to the terrible disaster that befell Beirut, and we wish the people of Lebanon the speediest and most extensive recovery possible.

Recent Auctions: What Some NERS Members Bought

In what has perforce become an era of online sales, NERS members didn't limit their bidding to local auctions (or, for that matter, to actual rugs). Some of their purchases are shown below.



Top row, left to right: "Eagle" Karabagh, Skinner, Boston, Oct. 2, lot 1024, \$2000

Serapi carpet, Kaminsky Auctions, Beverly, MA, July 26, lot 532, \$5000

Hamadan carpet, Eldred's, East Dennis, MA, Aug. 19, lot 158, \$225

Southwest Persian kilim, Derksen Veilingbedrijf, Arnhem, Netherlands, Sept. 22, lot 0605, €340

Bottom row, left to right: *akdyna* (carriage cushion), Crafoord Auktioner, Lund, Sweden, Nov. 4, lot 1476162, 3421 SEK (\$400)

Rug and textile books, Skinner, Boston, Oct. 2, lots 1295 and 1298, \$100 and \$130

North Persian Zarand-Saveh rug, Henry's Auktionshaus, Mutterstadt, Germany, Oct. 10, lot 7037, €500

Guido Goldman, 1937–2020

Visionary Europeanist Guido Goldman, mainly known to rug and textile lovers as a major collector and museum donor of Central Asian ikats, died on November 30. His first exhibition of ikats was held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1997. See <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/11/guido-goldman-83-established-future-minda-de-gunzberg-center/>.

Upcoming Boston Auction



On Sunday, January 31, 2021, at 11 AM, Grogan & Company will hold **The Fine Rugs and Carpets Auction**, billed as "a curated selection of rare and important rugs and carpets, highlighted by the collection of James Opie." The online catalogue will be available December 18.

Future NERS Meeting (Online)

March, date and time TBA: Mike Tschbull on how issues of condition, color, design, and cultural origin have driven his rug collecting

Photo Credits

p. 1: Jim Ford (l), Metropolitan Museum(r) p. 2: Alberto Levi pp. 3–7: Walter Denny pp. 8–10: Hadi Maktabi p. 11: online auction-house listings (see captions)

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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.



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