



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



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www.ne-rugsociety.org

August 1: Reunited at Last! NERS Picnic, with Moth Mart and Show-and-Tell



Show-and-tell, May 2018

Please join other vaccinated NERS members in celebrating the resumption of our in-person gatherings. Our picnic, customarily held in May as the final meeting of the season, will in this exceptional year take place on Sunday, August 1.

We will convene at Gore Place, the lovely grounds of the former governor's mansion in Waltham, with plenty of lawn space for mingling and spreading out rugs, tables and chairs for all, and adjacent bathroom facilities. Should rain threaten, there's a huge tent with water, electricity, and side panels that can be opened for ventilation. Supply your own picnic lunch, and NERS will provide soft drinks, tea, and coffee.

Lunch will be preceded by the ever-popular moth mart; we invite all attendees (dealers or not) to bring things to sell, swap, or give away. Past offerings have included rugs, bags and trappings, kilims, and other textiles; books and periodicals; and even tribal jewelry and clothing.

Show-and-tell will follow lunch. Bring one or two of your treasured items to share with fellow members—mystery textiles or rugs, exotic specimens you think we should know more about, or wonderful new acquisitions you want to show off.

Come if you possibly can! We know our new crop of far-flung members may not be able to join us, but we welcome all who can attend this much-anticipated picnic/reunion.

Picnic Details

We ask that all who attend be fully vaccinated

Date: Sunday, August 1

Time: Noon to 4 p.m.

Place: Gore Place, 52 Gore Street
Waltham, MA 02453

From the Mass Pike: Take exit 17 and follow signs to Rt. 20 westbound (Main St. in Watertown). After 1.5 miles, turn left onto Gore St. at the second of two adjoining traffic lights (Shell station on right). Proceed 0.2 miles on Gore St. Turn left (through center island) to Gore Place entrance.

From Rte. 128: Take exit 26 onto Rt. 20 eastbound (it starts out as Weston Road and becomes Main St.). After 3.3 miles turn right on Gore St. at the first of two adjoining traffic lights (Shell station on left). Proceed on Gore St. as above.

From Newton: Go north on Crafts St. Turn right (at traffic light) on North St. Cross the Charles River and go straight. The street eventually becomes Gore St. Entrance to Gore Place will be on right.

Parking: Use the parking area on the estate grounds.

Meeting Review: Stefano Ionescu Traces Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania

By Jim Adelson



On March 13, Stefano Ionescu, speaking from his home in Rome, continued our season of online presentations with "Tracing the Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania." NERS is pleased to have had him as a speaker and to have hosted an audience from six continents for his talk.

Stefano, who was born in Transylvania, began with a map orienting us to his homeland, bordered by the Carpathian Mountains. Along with Wallachia and Moldavia, Transylvania is one of the three main regions of present-day Romania.

Stefano then identified significant dates in history, first noting the fall of Constantinople, in 1453, as depicted in a fresco in the Sucevița Monastery in Bukovina. At the Battle of Mohács, in 1541, the Turkish army defeated the Hungarian army, resulting in Transylvania's becoming an autonomous principality under the Ottomans. With Turkish

defeat in 1683 at the siege of Vienna, Transylvania and Hungary were no longer under Ottoman rule; Transylvania became part of the Hapsburg Empire. Fashions changed, lessening the demand for rugs; as a result, production in Anatolia of carpets made for export, such as Lotto, bird, and so-called Transylvanian rugs, was discontinued.

In explaining how so many rugs came to be found in Transylvanian churches, Stefano identified a multistep process: their arrival in Transylvania, their accumulation in the region, and their placement and survival in Protestant churches. Customs documentation of 1503, for example, shows the arrival in Brașov over an eleven-month period of some five hundred rugs, mostly brought in by merchants.

Rugs in Transylvania, Stefano continued, played various roles. They confirmed both the social status of their owners and, when given as gifts, the importance of their recipients, and they honored special occasions and events, particularly weddings, births, and even funerals. In homes, they were placed on walls, tables, and sofas, but rarely on floors.

Following the Reformation, many frescoes in previously Catholic churches, now Protestant, were whitewashed to cover figural imagery considered idolatrous. But Anatolian rugs, typically devoid of human or animal depictions, were deemed legitimate church decoration. Rugs given to churches were often inscribed with the donor's name and the date of donation; for instance, written on one of the kilim ends (1) of a rug from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bussd (Buzd) is *Suo Sumptu Martini Vagneri, Anno 1675* ("At the expense of Martinus Wagnerus, 1675").



1. Detail of a rug in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bussd (Buzd), Transylvania, with an inscription added to an end kilim noting the donor's name and the date he gave the rug to the church

In churches, these donated rugs were likewise not used on floors; a 1905 photo shows them draped over pews where, judging by their wear patterns, they remained for years.

Documents also provide valuable information about carpets arriving in Transylvania. For example, a 1621 report by one János Rimay, envoy to Turkey for Prince Gábor Bethlen of Transylvania, describes the “spotted” and “bird” carpets he purchased in Istanbul and lists their prices.

Much of this information was unavailable when Stefano first became interested in Transylvanian rugs, and false theories about them abounded. One concerned their origin somewhere other than Anatolia, a view espoused by scholars including Charles Grant Ellis (who attributed them to Wallachia). Another misapprehension was that they were gifts from the Ottoman sultans; Stefano noted that although a few carpets were given by Süleyman the Magnificent to Braşov and Sighişoara, such gifts would have represented only a fraction of the two thousand carpets present in Transylvania.

He also rejected as completely false the assertion that the rugs were war spoils left behind by Turkish officials and displayed by the churches as trophies. Nor were they used for prayer by Muslims, since few Turks came to Transylvania, and those who did would have been unlikely, as Muslims, to choose to pray in a Lutheran church.

Stefano then described and showed some Transylvanian churches and their rug collections. St. Margaret's Church in Mediaş has some forty rugs, particularly well preserved because the church never suffered a fire. Among them is a stunning array of white-ground rugs. The collection at the church of Bogeschdorf includes a fine Lotto rug; an 1857 church inventory mentions twenty-one rugs, two of which were then new and the others older. Probably the most famous collection is in Braşov's Black Church, so named because of a fire there in 1689. Showing slides of the church and its treasures (2), Stefano declared, “At least once, every carpet enthusiast should visit Transylvania.”



2. The organ balcony and south aisle of the Black Church, Braşov, festooned with Anatolian rugs



3. Clockwise from top left: single-niche, double-niche, columned, and plain-niche prayer rugs

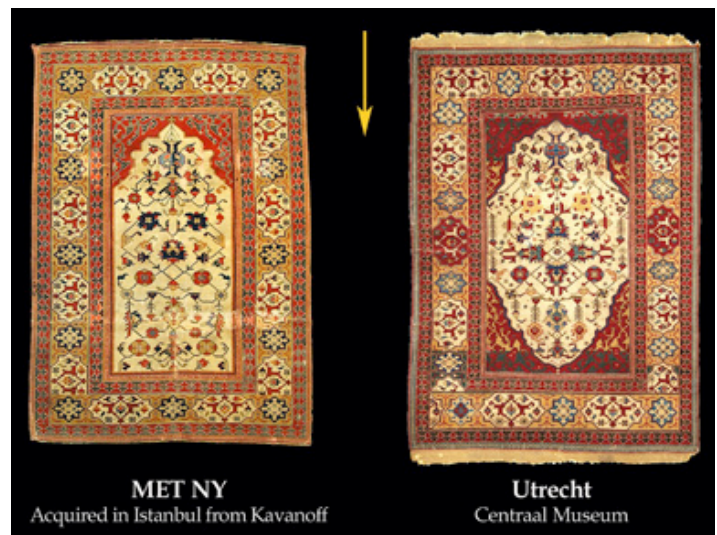
He next turned to the designs of Transylvanian rugs, categorizing them in four primary groups defined by the style and ornamentation of their niches: single, double, plain, and columned (3). He noted that rugs in all four groups are woven so their designs would have appeared upside-down on the loom. (The direction of weaving is shown by yellow arrows in Stefano's images.)

Transylvanian prayer rugs share with other prayer rugs a design scheme first represented in manuscript painting in the fourteenth century and recurring in other media, including a 1360 carved-wood Qur'an stand and a 1421 tile panel from the Green Tomb, Bursa. Of the 270 Transylvanian plain-niche rugs Stefano has counted, the main field colors are red, yellow, or—less frequently—blue. Green niches are avoided; Stefano cited Louise Mackie's observation that green was associated with descendants of the Prophet and with the Ottoman sultans, who claimed caliphal authority.

Where in Turkey were Transylvanian rugs produced? Not in Melas, where prayer rugs were woven "right-side-up" and show other technical differences. Stefano agreed with May Beattie and others that Gördes (Ghiordes) was a more likely source.



4. A single-niche prayer rug and some design precedents in Safavid and Ottoman arts



5. Single- and double-niche rugs, the double-niche rug echoing its design forerunner in having only one mosque lamp

He then considered the single-niche design (4), comparing the shape of its niche to that of an Ottoman tile panel and its border cartouches to those on a Safavid Persian kilim. The double-niche format, he continued, was a derivative of the single-niche design, with a specific origin. A 1610 edict of Sultan Ahmed I, noting that carpets with mihrabs, inscriptions, and other religious iconography were being sold to non-Muslims, declared this practice illegal. The weavers responded by adding a "counter niche," transforming the mihrab into an approximately symmetrical, medallion-like shape. Nevertheless, Stefano pointed out, double-niche rugs often retained directional motifs and links to the single-niche format and the mihrab heritage (5).



6. Floral-medallion rug in the Black Church, inv. 290

He also made a point to distinguish double-niche Transylvanian rugs from small-format Ushak medallion rugs, pointing out that “everything is different—minor border, main border, spandrels, field organization, field motifs, and even the lamps . . . In my mind, it is wrong to assign these rugs, at least the first-generation ones, to Ushak.”

Stefano next traced the designs of Transylvanian rugs of the floral-medallion group back to Safavid medallion carpets, and still further back to Timurid manuscript paintings and book bindings. One floral-medallion rug from the Black Church (6) was datable not because of an inscription, but rather because of a near-identical carpet shown in a Jacob van Toorenvliet painting done between 1666 and 1668 (7).

The source of one seemingly vegetal motif occurring on Transylvanian rugs (8a) and later rugs from Dazkırı and Bergama—but not found on Ottoman court carpets—puzzled Stefano. He pointed out a somewhat similar, umbrella-leaf form in Mamluk carpets, but found a closer relationship in a fragment from Konya now in the Türk ve İslam Museum.



7. Jacob Toorenvliet, *The Doctor's Visit*, oil on copper, 1666–68, The Leiden Collection JT-102, depicting a floral-medallion rug like the one shown opposite



8. Motifs (circled) in details of (a) a floral-medallion rug donated in 1706 to Weidenbach Church, Transylvania, and (b) a 17th- or 18th-century fragment from the shrine of Alaeddin Keykubad, Konya, TiEM inv. 536

Stefano then described a recent enterprise, which he termed “one of the most demanding projects going on today regarding Transylvanian rugs.” For better preservation, fifty-two rugs from the Bistrița Church have been stored since 1952 in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg. Stefano said that he had come to agree with the decision not to return the rugs to the church, but rather had embarked on a project to create high-quality, donor-sponsored replicas that could be displayed there instead. Working from very detailed photos, knot-by-knot patterns are made (9). Then, using hand-spun wool and natural dyestuffs, experienced Anatolian weavers skillfully produce the copies (10), following the designs of the originals exactly, even replicating such aspects as lazy lines and abrash. “It’s insanely difficult to make a beautiful rug,” Stefano noted.



9. Replication patterns for eight Bistrița/Nuremberg rugs



10. Prayer rug originally from Bistrița; trimming the pile of a replica woven in Sultanhanı, Central Anatolia

Finally, he announced, “I’m going to finish off my presentation with something that was not planned.” Behind him on his wall—and shown in his last slide—was a watercolor depicting a “Balkan-style” room with rugs, kilims, and embroideries on chair backs, walls, and floors (11). It was painted by Nicolas Grant, the Romanian son of Effingham Grant, the British Consul in Romania; Nicolas had studied in Paris with the famed Orientalist painter Jean Léon Gérôme.

Following his talk Stefano responded to many audience questions, posed by host Jean Hoffman. Among them were the following: Regarding the “spotted” carpets he had mentioned—were these *çintamani*? “Definitely yes,” Stefano responded, and added that this is a rare case where short descriptions in either Ottoman or Transylvanian documents can be linked to specific rug designs. Other terms used included *Kugelteppich* and “cat-prints.” He expanded on the question, noting that the documents also make reference to “Persian” rugs, but that no actual Persian rugs from the period have been found in Transylvania, so the term must have meant oriental rugs in general.

Another attendee asked if Armenian weavers were involved in making the rugs. Stefano cited a Transylvanian town, Armenopolis, that was founded by Armenians. However, a census taken there in 1720, listing professions of the population, included no carpet weavers. Much later—after 1915—Armenian emigrees, particularly from Kayseri, did bring their carpet-making skills to Romania.



11. Nicholas Grant (1868–1950), *Room in a Romanian House*, watercolor on paper, Stefano Ionescu Collection

Were the inscriptions on rugs added when they were woven? another participant asked. Stefano again noted that the inscriptions were not woven but rather written on kilim ends when rugs were donated to a church, and therefore don't indicate the rugs' age—whether new or old—at the time of donation.

In answer to a question about whether prayer rugs were ever used for prayer in the churches, Stefano indicated that they were not. Primarily they were hung on walls or placed on tables, which helped them survive. Also, Transylvanian documents do not explicitly refer to them as “prayer rugs,” suggesting that they didn't have a religious role.

Another participant asked that Stefano elaborate on the prayer rugs being woven “upside-down.” Stefano explained that this orientation allowed the weaver to knot the more complex area—the apex of the mihrab and the surrounding spandrels—first, and to truncate the simpler bottom of the field as necessary before adding the end border.

With time running out, Jean combined several questions for Stefano. Are the rugs still in the churches? If so, are they being rotated? If they aren't still in the churches, as at Bistrița, will they come back? Stefano said a whole separate webinar could be devoted to this issue.

Briefly, when he first got involved with Transylvanian rugs, he advocated their remaining in the churches. Over time, however, his ideas changed. Initially he had about two hundred rugs professionally washed prior to photography. In the years since, he's seen the condition of the rugs that have been stored according to museum standards, relative to those displayed in churches and hence negatively impacted by light exposure and dust.

The Black Church in Brașov is deeply concerned about this impact. A team there is working to control conditions in the church, and the number of rugs on display has been decreased from 110 to sixty. Some parishes have added UV filters to their windows. But each parish makes its own decision about the treatment of its rugs; that's why Stefano views the current replica effort as so important.

The final question was whether there would be more tours to see the Transylvanian rugs when conditions permit. Stefano replied, “As soon as it is possible I will go to Anatolia and the next year to Transylvania. This is sure. This will be done.”

We greatly appreciate Stefano's sharing his knowledge and insights about the Turkish rugs in his homeland. May we soon have the opportunity to take him up on his urging that all rug enthusiasts visit Transylvania at least once.

Rug, Textile, and Related Events

Auctions

- June 12, Vienna, Austria Auctions
Fine Antique Oriental Rugs XXV
- June 27, Philadelphia, Material Culture
The Leigh Marsh Collection
- Oct. 2, Wiesbaden, Rippon Boswell
Orient Stars II (rugs from the Kirchheim estate)

Fairs and Exhibitions

- June 23–27, online
HALI Fair www.hali-fair.com
- Until Sept. 12, London, Victoria & Albert Museum
Epic Iran
- Until Sept. 19, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum
Mediterranean Threads: 18th- and 19th-Century
Greek Embroideries

Photo Credits

p. 1: Jim Sampson pp. 2–6: Stefano Ionescu pp. 8–11: Skinner

Works in Progress: Book and Webinar

As a companion to *Orient Stars*, the renowned 1993 catalogue of the Kirchheim Collection, and to accompany the forthcoming sale at Rippon Boswell of thirty-three early and unpublished rugs subsequently collected by Heinrich and Waltraut Kirchheim, author Michael Franses and several contributors are preparing *Orient Stars II*, to be published by *HALI* in September.

Together with NERS and other co-sponsors, *HALI* will also host a webinar, led by Michael, about the extraordinary rugs featured in the new book and the auction. Date and time to be announced: stay tuned!

Future NERS Meetings

Both in-person events and webinar presentations are planned for the 2021–22 NERS season and will be announced as soon as they are scheduled.

We look forward to welcoming members near and far to both types of programs.

Auction Review: Skinner Fine Oriental Rugs & Carpets, May 2

By Richard Belkin



1. Lot 142, Marasali prayer rug, \$14, 000

With Covid more or less under control in Massachusetts, Skinner allowed in-person previewing of a carpet auction for the first time in over a year, and I took advantage of this to drive to their Marlboro headquarters to see the rugs on offer. First a word on the display: the Marlboro facility is a low-rise commercial building with no architectural charm or distinctiveness, and suffers greatly in comparison to Skinner's usual rug-auction venue, its elegant Boston gallery near the historic Public Garden.

Upon entering the Marlboro building, I was directed along a poorly lit corridor, where a number of good-quality rugs were hung high on the walls, making examination of their upper portions impossible. A left turn ushered me into the main viewing room where, again, many of the rugs were displayed in a less-than-optimal manner, rolled up on long tables or the floor and not immediately available for examination. But I persisted and viewed them all.

For the collector of Caucasian rugs, this auction contained many attractive examples, but only a few of real distinction. Lot 142 was a lovely Marasali prayer rug with a superbly designed layout of botehs on an indigo-dyed field (1). Although its color scheme was a bit limited and it lacked the exuberance of its worn cousin, lot 213 (another Marasali prayer rug), it had age and spaciousness and looked to be in untouched condition, including original ends and sides.



2. Lot 145, Kuba Bidjov rug, \$4250

At a hammer price of \$14,000, plus a 25% buyer's premium, it proved to be the most expensive lot in the sale. (I thought it should bring maybe \$8500, but I am not a big spender.)

Lot 130 was a ca. 1880 Kazak whose Kasim Ushag design was spaciouly executed and included attractive gold and teal-green colors. It too was in original and complete condition. It brought \$4500 (its hammer price, like all other prices quoted here).

Lot 145 was my favorite rug in the sale, a Bidjov with unattached pastel motifs floating on a field of even, deep indigo within two well-executed "eagle's beak" borders (2). The condition of this rug, with complete sides and ends, was again superb. Its color harmonies were excellent, and its selling price of \$4250 was right where I thought it might be. It will look great as art on someone's wall.

A real surprise to me as a collector of Caucasian weavings was the \$5000 price someone paid for lot 141, a Kazak prayer rug with a somewhat spartan color range and design. There evidently were two buyers who valued it well above the estimate of \$1500–\$2000. Its consignor must be pleased.

Two large Sewan Kazaks (lots 209 and 139) attracted interest as decorative floor rugs. Both seemed to be in good, usable condition, with (maybe) some well-done repairs here and there. They brought \$6000 and \$5500, respectively.



3 (top left). Lot 42, Farahan Sarouk rug, \$4500

4 (top right). Lot 49, Tabriz pictorial rug, \$4000

5 (left). Lot 120, Konya coupled-column prayer rug, \$8500



The selection of formal Persian rugs in this sale was quite limited. The better of these were lot 42, a densely patterned Farahan Sarouk **(3)**, which bought \$4500, and lot 49, a Tabriz pictorial rug depicting sites, seasons, zodiac signs, Bible stories, and more **(4)**, which sold for \$4000. Both were in great condition. Most of the other small Persian rugs sold in the \$1200–\$1500 range and had the usual condition issues of wear and/or rewoven areas.

The Anatolian selection was highlighted by lot 120 **(5)**, a rustic version of a coupled-column prayer rug, which brought \$8500 despite extensive restoration only partially noted in the catalogue. Lot 1, a Bergama, brought the next highest price—\$3750. It lacked the dynamism and vivid color of the prayer rug but was in great original condition. Much less common than Caucasian rugs, good Anatolian rugs always seem to bring higher prices than one would expect.



6 (left). Lot 105, Ningxia carpet, \$7500

7 (above). Lot 97, Ningxia pillar rugs, \$5500

8 (below). Lot 153, Heriz Serapi carpet, \$10,000

I have little expertise in Chinese weavings, so my opinion of the many Chinese rugs and mats in the sale is not very useful. As many of them sold for modest prices, there were probably some bargains for buyers who know the market. I did like the two most costly pieces: lot 105 was a nearly square (10' x 11'), gold-field carpet that had a restrained and elegant gold-and-indigo color scheme and nine evenly spaced roundels (6). Catalogued as early eighteenth century, it looked that old to me. It sold for \$7500 despite having numerous repairs and repleiled areas. Lot 97 was a pair of narrow pillar rugs in excellent condition, featuring well-rendered, facing dragons (7). The two sold for \$5500.

Room-sized or at least largish carpets accounted for eight of the ten highest-priced lots in this auction. My favorite in this category was lot 153, a turn-of-the-century Heriz with a spacious, uncluttered design and vibrant colors, although the border could have been wider (8). It sold for \$10,000.





9 (above). Lot 72, Tekke *torba*, \$3000
 10 (below). Lot 79, Tekke main carpet, \$5000
 11 (right). Lot 76, Salor *chuval*, unsold



Finally we come to the relatively few Turkmen weavings in this sale. Lot 72 was a very good Tekke six-gul *torba* with a pleasing, uncommon border and excellent wool (9). Despite the demand for Turkmen weavings being a bit down, it brought a strong hammer price of \$3000. Lot 79 was a Tekke main carpet in great condition, its kilim skirts preserved (10); it was hammered down for \$5000. That brings us to lot 76, an old Salor three-gul *chuval* (11) that brought . . . nothing. It did not sell or even meet the minimum opening bid and was passed. I didn't find this particular example very attractive: its color was uneven, and the corroded silk centers of the guls were distracting. But I did think it was 1830 or so in age and would sell for \$15,000–\$20,000. Salor weavings are quite rare; at a Grogan sale three months ago, a similarly described although much more attractive Salor three-gul *chuval* brought \$60,000 plus commission. Perhaps an explanation will come to light for the total lack of bidder interest in the Skinner example.

A final note of interest: the selling prices of rugs at this auction were lower than at recent sales of antique oriental rugs at other auction houses. Of the 330 lots in this sale, 110 sold for \$500 or less, and only thirty sold for more than \$5000, even including the buyer's premium.

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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.



The New England Rug Society

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