



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



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August 14: NERS Picnic, with Moth Mart and Show-and-Tell



Reunited after a long hiatus: catching up and shopping at the August 2021 picnic

Please join other members (and guests) for a late-summer NERS picnic, to take place this year on Sunday, August 14.

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 open 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 recent crop of far-flung members may not be able to join us, but we welcome all who can attend this much-anticipated event.

Picnic Details

Date: Sunday, August 14

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.

Webinar Review: Alan Rothblatt, “RareTurkmen Asmalyks”

By Jim Adelson



1. Presenter Alan Rothblatt, his bird asmalyk behind him

On March 26, longtime Turkmen collector Alan Rothblatt **(1)** treated NERS webinar viewers to “Rare Turkmen Asmalyks,” illustrating his talk with examples from his own collection as well as from museums, auction houses, dealers, and other collectors. A splendid Tekke “bird” asmalyk displayed on the wall behind him gave his large audience an immediate signal of the extraordinary quality of pieces to follow. He began by noting that although the designs of older Turkmen weavings might seem uncomplicated, closer study reveals their complexity and the artistic and technical virtuosity of the women who wove them.

Asmalyks are paired wedding trappings that adorn each side of the camel carrying the bride in the wedding procession. In addition to their decorative role, Alan explained that the designs of asmalyks have amuletic or talismanic functions that offer protection and lead to favorable outcomes, such as fertility. He derived the term *asmalyk* from *asm*—“sky” or “heaven”—and *malyk*—“lord” or “ruler”—and reiterated German dealer Eberhart Herrmann’s view that asmalyks’ positive powers would help the bride’s passage to heaven once her earthly life was finished.

Alan then turned to the asmalyks themselves, organizing them by tribal origin, design, materials, or other features, and highlighting the distinctive characteristics of the best examples. This report only covers a subset of the pieces he presented; anyone interested in seeing them all is encouraged to view the webinar recording available to NERS members.

The Yomud tribe wove the greatest number of asmalyks, in the widest variety of designs. Interesting late nineteenth-century Yomud asmalyks are still relatively easy to acquire. Many of these were made for sale rather than personal use, however, and lack what Alan noted as the outstanding qualities of the best early examples: “spacious drawing, ancient motifs, saturated colors, phenomenal wool quality, and dynamic proportions.”



2. Yomud asmalyk with lattice, private collection, Germany



3. Yomud tree asmalyk, advertised in *HALI* 5 (1983), Gallery 19

Alan’s first design group of Yomud asmalyks were five-sided (as are most asmalyks), with a field lattice and motifs called “ashik” often placed within the lattice. (Was it mere coincidence, Alan asked, that the term “ashik” resembles the Arabic word *‘āshiq*—“in love”?) Of this group, his oldest example, which he dated to the early eighteenth century, had particularly spacious drawing and utilized the ashik motif only in the main border, while two forms of another motif, the erre gul, occupied the lattice **(2)**. Most lattice-group Yomuds have ivory fields, but Alan illustrated two with red grounds.

Next he showed Yomud asmalyks with tree designs. Some members of this group made heavy use of offset knotting, which enabled a more curvilinear rendering of motifs. Instead of the typical five tree forms, one unusually spacious example included just three, their curving branches drooping gracefully downwards **(3)**.



4. Yomud seven-sided asmalyk, private collection, Germany



6. Yomud asmalyk, Musée des Arts Décoratifs 41.921



5. One of a pair of Yomud asmalyks, ex-Munkacsi Collection

5a. Elem detail of a Yomud main carpet, private collection

Other Yomud asmalyks, featuring starker tree-like forms, have seven sides rather than five. They most often have ivory fields, but there are red-ground versions as well. Using one asmalyk from this group as an example, Alan emphasized its simplicity of design and the inclusion of small devices, such as the kochak (ram's horn) motifs near the apex of its field and other talismanic ornaments in its periphery, all intended to ward off the evil eye (4).

Alan then considered extant asmalyk pairs. While Turkmen articles such as chuvals and torbas (two types of storage bag) were woven together on the same loom, asmalyks were made separately. Alan showed three asmalyk pairs, one seven-sided duo (5) having ivory grounds and repeated plant motifs that Alan compared with those on the elem (end panel) of a sixteenth-century Yomud main carpet (5a).



7. Pictorial asmalyk, Rippon Boswell, May 3, 1986, lot 100

A stellar Yomud asmalyk, considered by many to be the greatest of its kind (6), also featured plant motifs—Alan called them poppies—linked to Yomud main-carpet elems. Its field design was “defocused” by the rendering of many elements in white; surrounding the field on sides and bottom was a delicate yet powerful reciprocal-trefoil border. As with other great asmalyks, Alan said, the overall effect was like “a look through a window into the next life.”

He termed the following group of Yomud asmalyks “pictorial,” for their depiction of such aspects of Turkmen life as wedding processions, people and animals, jewelry, and tents. Considering one example featuring jewelry (7), Alan noted that a bride’s silver adornments, worn in quantity, served to protect her from vulnerability to illness and infertility. Below the pictorial area, the main field of this asmalyk was dominated by stylized forms that Alan identified as tulips, a flower he said originated in the Tien Shan mountains of Central Asia. In the pictorial group Alan also showed two asmalyks that were felted and embroidered rather than woven; despite their different technique, they shared numerous motifs and a general design arrangement with the knotted-pile examples.



8. Seven-sided Ersari asmalyk, ex-Ronnie Newman Collection, sold at Skinner, October 21, 2018, lot 52



10. Rectangular Tekke embroidered asmalyk, ex-Robert Pinner Collection, sold at Rippon Boswell, May 15, 2004, lot 1



9. Chodor asmalyk, de Young Museum, gift of George and Marie Hecksher, 2000.186.8

Among non-Yomud asmalyks, Alan first considered examples made by the Ersari. These were fewer in number and usually seven-sided. One (8) featured tiny floral elements and larger serrated motifs with double tops that Alan maintained had been Zoroastrian symbols of life and eternity; he related these forms to the botehs used in Kashmir shawls.

He then showed single examples of asmalyks from other Turkmen tribes—Saryk, Arabatchi, and Chodor. The Chodor (9)—“a true masterpiece!”—exemplified what Alan had said about the best old Turkmen weavings: at first glance apparently uncomplicated, it was in actuality

sophisticated. Its limited color range included a multitude of shades, and the small geometric ornaments in its field grew bolder and denser toward the top, perhaps in suggestion of stars in the night sky.

Alan next turned to embroidered asmalyks, most of which are attributed to Tekke weavers. In addition to large flowering plants, some examples that he showed included human figures and animals taking part in the wedding procession or other activities. Of the many embroidered asmalyks known, only three are rectangular rather than pentagonal; he also pictured one of these (10).



11. Salor camel trapping (kejebelik), ex-Jon Thompson Collection, sold at Sotheby's New York, December 16, 1993, lot 58

12. Tekke animal-tree asmalyk, de Young Museum, gift of George and Marie Hecksher, 2000.186.7



13. Singular Tekke animal-tree-variant asmalyk, Leslie and Elizabeth Leifer Collection



What types of asmalyks might the Salor tribe have woven? Although one of the embroidered asmalyks Alan had just shown had been attributed to the Salor in an early publication, no basis had been given for linking it to that tribe. Perhaps, Alan surmised, the Salor did not make pentagonal or heptagonal asmalyks but instead used their large, rectangular pile trappings (**11**) for that ceremonial purpose. There exist many such trappings, which lack woven backs and show no other indication of having been storage bags; these may have functioned as asmalyks.

Since the Yomud wove the most, and most varied, asmalyks, collectors initially assumed that the ones with “bird”

or “animal-tree” (**12**) designs were Yomud products. In 1974, however, on the basis of structural and color analysis, Siawosch Azadi reclassified these asmalyks as Tekke. Alan added that other observations have supported the Tekke attribution, one being the near-identical rendition of the animal-tree motif on ensis (door coverings) that are known to be Tekke.

Most Tekke animal-tree asmalyks are similar in design to one another, but Alan showed an example (**13**) without known counterparts. It had no lattice, its (floral-looking) trees were more intricate, and its animals—if present at all—were more stylized. Its border elements, too, were different from those of any other asmalyk.



14. Tekke bird asmalyk, ca. 1700, Rothblatt Collection

14a. Detail of bird, small animal, and surrounding leaves



15. Tekke bird asmalyk, ca. 1800–1825, GWU/Textile Museum 1980.13.2, gift of Arthur D. Jenkins

15a. Detail of bird and surrounding leaves



Turning to bird asmalyks, Alan indicated that about twenty have been identified, but the whereabouts of three of these are now unknown. The first example to be published, in a 1914 article in the St. Petersburg art magazine *Stary Gody*, was one of two asmalyk pairs collected by Russian ethnographic explorer, artist, and photographer Samuel Dudin, during expeditions to Central Asia in 1900 and 1901.

Alan pictured nine bird asmalyks in chronological arrangement, assigning them dates ranging from 1700 to 1850 based on aspects of their design. But he also relayed an alternative theory about their relative age, proposed by Kurt Munkacsi: that some of the supposedly later ones were in fact created contemporaneously with those considered older; these “younger,” more “generic” asmalyks were instead produced by traveling weaving specialists and, being more quickly made, could be offered to families at less expense.

Alan disagreed with this theory, however. In his own travels he had observed how the passage of time and the exposure to outside influences often led to artistic decline. Furthermore, he reported, according to C. A. De Bode’s *Travels in Luristan and Arabistan*, published in 1845, Turkmen couples married very young—the brides at ten or twelve and the grooms slightly older—and spent a few days together, following which the bride returned to her family home, where she would remain for the next two or three years preparing her dowry. Only after this would the wedding procession take place, the bride being transported to the tent of her husband’s parents. Thus she herself had time to weave asmalyks before the ceremonial procession; to Alan this suggested that the less refined asmalyks were, after all, actually later in date.

He then further explored the contrast between bird asmalyks from the early 1700s (14) and others from the early and mid-1800s (15). The older asmalyks were larger, with more generous spacing, fewer birds, more realistic drawing, and a greater color range. On one earlier example, Alan highlighted the birds’ visible neckbands and beak definition, the more detailed surrounding leaves, and the presence of stylized animals known as *tau nuska* (14a), all missing from a later piece (15a). He emphasized that the later bird asmalyks are nevertheless very beautiful.

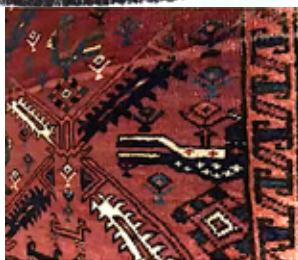
Among the missing bird asmalyks, their current ownership and location unknown, Alan showed the sole known image—in low-quality black-and-white—of an early example sold many years ago by Perez & Co. of London. The asmalyk pictured had only twelve birds, in unique placement: facing right in the top rows and left in the lower rows. A second missing piece, the Gogel running-bird asmalyk, was published in *Burlington Magazine* in 1927, but has since vanished. (In contrast to the “sitting birds” illustrated above, “running birds” have splayed legs.) Based on the available image—again of poor quality—Alan felt that the Gogel asmalyk might be older than the pair of running-bird asmalyks Dudin had acquired around 1900.

A European trip in 2014 offered Alan a chance to see firsthand numerous bird asmalyks owned by museums, dealers, and collectors. One of these formerly belonged to Sigmund Freud and can now be viewed in his namesake museum, in London (16). Compared with early members of the bird group, Freud’s asmalyk lacked stylized animals adjacent to its birds; the birds themselves had neckbands



**16. Tekke bird asmalyk,
ca. 1775–1800, Freud
Museum London 2016.14**

**16a. Detail of cross-
filled bird, leaves, and
other ornaments**



and defined beaks, but some of their bodies were filled with tiny crosses (16a). In addition, the asmalyk's bottom and sides were adorned with black tassels. Given these features, Alan classified it as one of the later examples from the early group.

He concluded his presentation by thanking the museums and collectors who had provided him access and supplied him with pictures for his talk. Recommending the upcoming Rug Collectors' Weekend, he posted his email address, turkmencollector@gmail.com, for anyone wishing to contact him.

Relayed by webinar host Jean Hoffman, many questions followed Alan's presentation. Asked where he purchased his asmalyks, Alan replied that he got the majority in Europe—from auctions, dealers, or directly from collectors. In answer to why the camels depicted in the weavings were dromedary while the majority of Central Asian camels were Bactrian, Alan didn't have an explanation, but confirmed that the camels he himself had seen in the Altai Mountains were Bactrian.

As to whether only wealthier brides had asmalyks, Alan surmised that, bridal processions being such an important life milestone, all brides would have had such weavings. One questioner noted that asmalyks often had five elements; did that number have special significance for the Turkmen? Alan responded that he'd wondered about that himself and had asked others about it without receiving an explanation.

Did Alan know what kind of trees were depicted on asmalyks? Cypress and pines were candidates, he said, and noted that in some areas of Central Asia he had seen evergreen trees, but also many treeless deserts.

An audience member questioned Alan's etymology of "asmalyk," and thought it was instead linked to the word meaning "to hang." Alan noted that the Turkish word for "to hang" is *asmak*, but said that he separates "asmalyk" into prefix and suffix.

After technical difficulties temporarily interrupted the webinar, Alan rejoined and was asked about when embroidered asmalyks came into fashion, and whether anyone besides the Tekke produced them. Addressing the second part of the question first, he replied that one of the embroidered asmalyks he'd showed was theorized to be Salor. While not sure, he suspected that the earliest ones were produced around 1800; even if they were valued and stored away in a dowry chest, their more fragile materials were likely to deteriorate, so there may have been older ones that haven't survived.

Another participant asked about the greater number of asmalyks from the Yomud and Tekke tribes, and whether other tribes might have used rectangular trappings in the same role. Alan answered that he didn't know the reason for the quantitative difference, but that it might have to do with relative tribal population numbers. Based on the apparent regard the Yomud had for wedding items, he added, it was likely that every Yomud woman had asmalyks, although he was less sure about other tribes. He didn't comment on the use of rectangular trappings.

Asked about how asmalyks were treated after the wedding, Alan said that they likely did not see everyday use as did bags; instead they were probably brought out only on special occasions and otherwise stored away.

Another participant wondered if all the tribes kept their own sheep and goats to provide weaving materials, or instead purchased them. Alan replied that all the tribes kept flocks, with the possible exception of the Goklan or the producers of certain Eagle-Group weavings who practiced sericulture. These latter were not the weavers of asmalyks, however.

Jean posed the final question—her own—preceding it with a comment: at the last Rug Collectors' weekend, she said, she had been struck by Alan's Tekke bird asmalyk, which was one of the most beautiful things she'd ever seen. Would Alan be bringing another asmalyk to this year's event? Not this year, Alan answered, but he planned to bring chuvals that he hoped would come close to making Jean feel the same way.

We all appreciate Alan's showing us so many great asmalyks and sharing his knowledge about them. Whether or not they offer a view into the next world, they certainly provide plenty of beauty in this one.

Webinar Review: Michael Rothberg on Saddlebag Design Motifs

By Jim Adelson



1. Michael Rothberg

On April 9, NERS hosted its last webinar before a summer break; it featured collector and author Michael Rothberg (1) presenting “Saddlebags from Persia and The Caucasus: A Selection of Design Motifs.” Examples from Michael’s collection illustrated in his 2021 book, *Nomadic Visions: Tribal Weavings*

from Persia and the Caucasus, provided the basis for his categorizing of motifs, whose original meaning, he admitted, would likely never be known. In addition to saddle bags, he said, the items he would discuss included saddle blankets, personal bags, and a salt bag.

Showing a khorjin, or double saddlebag, made by a woman of the Qashqa’i tribe in southwest Persia, Michael noted that saddlebags were always woven in pairs (2), each

with typical dimensions of approximately two feet square. The pile material of these bags was wool, while their foundations might also include silk, cotton, or camel hair. Natural (plant-based) dyes were used to produce their colors. Made to hold and transport items, khorjin also conveyed tribal identity and served to demonstrate their weavers’ skill and pride. They represented stored value—a tribal asset that could if needed be sold in hard times. Finally, their magic symbols offered protection to the weaver and her family.

To clarify to viewers the areas where his bags originated, Michael showed maps of various weaving areas in Persia and Caucasian Azerbaijan. Despite nineteenth-century Russian incursion into some regions, he noted, tribal peoples largely continued their nomadic ways (3). Before turning to individual design motifs, he discussed favored bag layouts, including central medallions (4) and hexagonal lattices (5).



2. Complete Qashqa’i khorjin



4. Saddlebag with central medallion, Persian Azerbaijan



3. Qashqa’i migration (photo by Robert Harding, National Geographic Image Collection, 256020)



5. Shahsevan saddlebag front with hexagonal lattice, Moghan-Savalan area

Michael's first category of motifs was flora: his examples included an inscribed Armenian salt bag from the Qarabagh region and a Kurdish bag with diagonally-arrayed flowers.

Some floral motifs on bags were derived from larger pile weavings. For instance, Michael traced the bold motif of a South Caucasian bag face (6) to the lotus palmettes on large, eighteenth-century carpets from the Caucasus (6a).

One of the most popular and widely used bag motifs, he said, was a rosette, or flower blossom as seen from above, with four heart-shaped sections. He showed several nineteenth-century bags from Persia (7) or the Caucasus featuring this motif, and noted its prior use in earlier Anatolian carpets, where it was often part of a more complicated design or even repeated to fill an entire field (7a). He then identified design variations—squared-off or angular—of this rosette form.



6, 6a. Palmettes on a Caucasian saddlebag front and an 18th-century Caucasian floral carpet (det.), TIEM inv. no. 881

Michael's next design motif was the boteh (8), a device developed and popularized on Kashmir shawls (8a). Pile bags, in particular those from southern Persia, utilized the boteh in a variety of forms; even within a single tribe there were very different renditions of the motif.

Michael then turned to abstract geometric motifs. Hooked medallions, for instance, appeared not only in the familiar Kurdish bags from the Jaf tribe but also in earlier carpets. The eight-pointed stars on many nineteenth-century bags had counterparts in much older Anatolian carpets and in media such as tilework.

Other saddlebag motifs displayed less abstract themes. Considering a Khamseh Confederation bag face (9), Michael showed that its curious design, which superficially resembled a European-inspired rose-bouquet motif known as *gul-e farang*, was actually derived from circa-1800 Persian garden carpets (9a), with their flower- and tree-filled plots.



8, 8a. Afshar chuval (large bag) front with botehs; Kashmir moon shawl (det.), ca. 1805–1810, Tapi Collection 00.200



7, 7a. Qashqa'i chanteh (small bag) with central rosette; Anatolian carpet fragment (det.) with overall rosettes, 17th century, MIA Doha (ex-Heinrich Kirchheim Collection)



9, 9a. Khamseh saddlebag front with stylized garden design adapted from a Persian garden carpet (det.), ca. 1800, Harvard Art Museums 1957.137



10 (above). Caucasian saddlebag front with peacocks, Shirvan district

11 (right). Qashqa'i sumak shoulder bag with peacocks



13, 13a. Shahsevan saddlebag front with border of kochak (ram's-horn) motifs, seen in large scale on an Anatolian kilim (det.), de Young Museum 1997.191.3



12, 12a. Jaf Kurd saddlebag with ornaments known in Turkmen weaving as ak-su; Salor trapping (det.) with ak-su field design, first half 19th century, Rippon Boswell



14, 14a. Caucasian storage bag front with so-called Memling guls; Hans Memling, *Flowers in a Jug*, ca. 1485, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum (Madrid) 1938.1.b



Birds, whether combined with plants or on their own, were commonly represented motifs. Michael showed differing renditions of broad-tailed peacocks on Caucasian (10), Baluch, and Southwest Persian bags, including a Qashqa'i sumak shoulder bag whose six peacocks had heraldic-looking, shield-like tails (11).

Turning again to abstract motifs, Michael explored some with a Turkic origin. A square with projecting prongs appeared as a repeat motif on Caucasian and Kurdish (12) bags from his collection. In Turkmen weaving, Michael pointed out, this pattern was known as ak-su (12a). An ancestral variant could be seen on a circa-fifteenth-century

Fustat fragment discovered by Carl Lamm in Cairo. Another motif, termed kochak, or ram's horn, was also utilized widely, on Shahsevan (13) and Turkmen pile weavings as well as Anatolian kilims (13a). Michael postulated that the ram's-horn motif, turned on its side as on one of his Shahsevan bagfaces, represented two animal figures flanking a tree of life.

The so-called Memling gul was named for the fifteenth-century Netherlandish painter, Hans Memling, who depicted rugs with this motif—a stepped cruciform shape with projecting hooks (14a). As Michael showed, Memling guls could be found in Anatolian, Caucasian (14), Baluch, South Persian, and Turkmen weaving.



15, 15a. Shoulder bag with animals and cruciform central motif, Persian Azerbaijan; cruciform motif on a Scythian felt appliqué hanging (det.), third century BCE, Hermitage Museum inv. no. 1687-94

The variety of animal motifs on pile bags is nearly endless, and their depictions range from realistic to fantastic. Michael illustrated many different examples: two- or four-legged (15) and even two-headed. Abstract cruciform motifs showed similar variety, appearing on pile weaving ranging from Persian bags (15) to Yomud Turkmen main carpets. Michael traced the cruciform motif to Anatolian and Caucasian pile-woven predecessors, and even found a distant ancestor in a third-century BCE Scythian appliquéd felt found at the Pazyryk burial site (15a).

Following Michael's presentation, webinar host Jean Hoffman posed participants' questions. One viewer asked whether Michael had ever encountered bits of salt in a salt bag. No, he answered, but he hadn't been to Iran; others who had spent time there, such as Mike Tschbull and John Wertime, might have seen bags with traces of salt still inside.

Asked about storing bags, Michael replied that the main danger to them is moths. Mothballs may be a deterrent but are hazardous to human health. If moths are detected, rugs should be treated and, if feasible, put in a commercial freezer. Michael stores his collection in plastic bags.

Another participant wondered whether Michael had ever seen signed or dated bags. "Definitely," he responded; although they're unusual, there were several signed, dated bags included in his book.

What dye, another attendee asked, produced the appealing cornflower blue in a number of Michael's bags? Indigo, Michael answered; this was a widely used and highly

prized dyestuff, not only in Persia but also in Indonesia and virtually all other parts of the weaving world.

Another questioner asked Michael to describe in more detail how bags were attached to the pack animal, to which he explained that bags were made in joined pairs and the whole ensemble placed over the animal, with one bag on each side. Inside the tent, they could be hung.

The next inquirer wondered if Qashqa'i bags were particularly fine, and too fragile to be functional. Michael agreed that Qashqa'i weaving tended to be fine, but added that since the wool quality was high, the bags were very tough.

Another questioner asked when commercial dyes came into common use in the areas Michael had focused on. Michael noted that there was limited use of the synthetic dye fuchsine in the late nineteenth century. Wider use of synthetic dyes—especially orange—came about in the early twentieth century, but by this time weaving quality had declined, so collectors tend not to favor bags from this later period.

Having shown many Shahsevan bags, Michael was asked about their distinctive characteristics. Noting that Shahsevan weaving could be the subject of an entire webinar, he nevertheless explained that there were two main Shahsevan groups—one from the Moghan plain, in the Caucasus, and the other from Azerbaijan. Shahsevan bags, he said, tend to have ivory borders and Turkic motifs and to be very well woven, using high-quality wool. He cautioned that many bags labeled Shahsevan are not actually Shahsevan products.

What types of looms were used for weaving the bags Michael had shown? Small, horizontal looms, he answered, in contrast to the larger, vertical looms used for workshop-rug production. These horizontal looms were portable and if necessary could be packed up for moving.

Did Michael have a favorite bag? He replied that he'd anticipated that question and could perhaps narrow his favorites down to fifteen bags from different regions, but that he wouldn't name a single favorite.

Finally, would Michael be bringing some of his bags to show at Rug Collector's Weekend? He would show parts of his collection in three different sessions at that event, he answered, and yes, some of his bags would be included; he planned to display a bag from each of the ten chapters of his book, as well as Baluch pieces and Turkmen chuvals.

Our great thanks to Michael for throwing light on design motifs, their varied treatment in bags of different groups, and their ancestry in older weaving and other arts. With its wide reach, his presentation was a fitting culmination of webinars until fall. See you all then!

An Avalanche of Dixon

By Richard Belkin

Editor's note: This report was written prior to the live (May 4) and online (closing May 5) Bonhams Skinner auctions. Selling prices, with buyers' premiums included, have since been added in the captions.

First let me indulge myself with a bit of introduction. I have been an avid collector of eastern Caucasian weavings for the past thirty-five years, and in their pursuit have gained just enough knowledge of other types of rugs and storage bags to author the following article. I am also, as of this writing, a Specialist in Rugs and Carpets at Bonhams Skinner.

Last March I was informed by my employers that they had secured most of the rugs of a noted California collector, Jim Dixon. At the time I didn't think much about this, as I was concentrating on organizing my first rug auction and didn't have room in my consciousness for any information about future sales or additional inventory. But as I passed in and out of my office, on the first level of Skinner's large industrial facility in Marlborough, I did notice that an adjacent room had been cleared out and thirty big, sturdy steel racks of heavy-duty industrial shelving had appeared. And I distinctly remember being told that "we (Skinner) have a lot of Jim Dixon's rugs coming in, a large collection. . ." Thinking only of my increased workload rather than the extraordinary opportunity of evaluating Jim Dixon's rugs, I wondered, "just how many is 'a lot'?" Well, the staggering number of rugs that Skinner has been fortunate

or skillful enough to get consigned to them by the heirs of Mr. Dixon's estate—the Krishnamurti Foundation of America—is not 300, not 600, but over 1400, and that is a *lot* of rugs.

Shortly thereafter, the collection appeared, having been transported—in Skinner's own large truck, driven by Skinner's own driver—from its California home to the Marlborough facility. Fourteen hundred rugs and rug fragments take up more space than one would think. There are so many that they completely fill the room assigned to them, occupying every inch of the thirty 8' x 4' shelves therein. And there are still more, in an additional twenty large boxes that remain unopened. So in addition to the ones inside the building, each day as I come to work I pass by a mountain of as-yet-unseen Dixon rugs that will eventually have to be handled, assessed, and evaluated. Whether or not there will be treasures in those unopened boxes, or just interesting but not-very-valuable old pieces, has yet to be determined, but one thing is for sure—Jim Dixon spent a hell of a lot of time amassing such a huge number of rugs.

Some, maybe most, would find this volume of material overwhelming, but I have not. It has offered an opportunity to view many old and rare weavings that I would never have seen in person in the usual network of rug shops or online platforms and auctions. How many green-field Talishes (1), or eighteenth-century Ladik prayer rugs, or circa-1800 Northwest Persian gallery carpets (2), or silk-foundation Shirvan prayer rugs (3) would I ever get to see close-up in the usual rug-collecting



1. Lot 81, green-field Talish, \$7,500 (all prices include premium)



2. Lot 61, 18th-century Northwest Persian gallery carpet, \$12,500



3. Lot 98, silk-foundation Shirvan prayer rug, dated to 1807, \$36,250

venues? Over the course of the past month I have gotten to handle all these and more that are in this remarkable collection.

I would be remiss if I did not here note the hiring of Ben Mini as Director of Skinner's Rug and Carpet Department and acknowledge his collaborative organizing of the latter stages of the Dixon sale catalogue and the auction itself.

Of course, as I view these rugs I am comparing my own collecting knowledge and philosophy with Mr. Dixon's. I like rugs in really good condition. His preferences were different. He valued age: most of his rugs were woven before 1870, with a good twenty-five percent woven before 1830, and quite a few dating from the seventeenth or eighteenth century. He wanted natural dyes: I found fewer than ten of the fourteen-hundred-plus rugs that I have handled had any chemical dyes. He especially liked rugs with Memling gul's evenly spaced in the field, whether made in the Caucasus, Northwest Persia, or Anatolia (4): his collection has at least forty of them. And he preferred Caucasian and Anatolian weavings: eighty percent of his collection is from those areas.

Equally noteworthy is what Mr. Dixon *did not* collect. He did not look for good condition: seventy percent of his rugs have substantial wear, with fully half having extensive damage, and more than twenty percent being so worn as to have only minimal monetary value. He did not like formal Persian rugs: there are no nineteenth-century Kashans or Tabrizes in the collection, not one fine Farahan. In addition, he had no truly great Turkmen rugs: there are some average

Yomud chuvals and some notable Beshir long rugs and carpets, but not one top-quality Tekke chuval or six-gul torba, and no early Saryk, Chodor, or Salor weavings of any kind. Finally, there are no great sumak bagfaces, or full khorjin, or individual saddlebags. These are all types of weavings that I collect, so I can truthfully report that I have better examples than are in the Dixon Collection. Perhaps such rugs actually were in his collection but were retained by his estate and not consigned to Skinner—this I do not know. What I do know is that Mr. Dixon amassed many outstanding, wonderful, and valuable early Persian, Caucasian, and Anatolian rugs.

After looking repeatedly at so many of them, I could see that he sought and purchased examples with spacious field designs; soft, flexible foundations; bright, clear colors; and superior wool quality. He had many more South Caucasian and Kazak rugs than Shirvans or Kubas, perhaps because eastern Caucasian rugs are a bit dark, with indigo dyes dominating, and their handle is somewhat stiff.

Mr. Dixon's selection of pre-1850 Anatolian rugs is extensive, with many early Ghiordes and a few noteworthy Transylvanian examples. But the most attractive of these rugs to my eye are his Mudjur and Milas prayer rugs, again with the best soft wool and clear, colorful dyes. Another feature that I noted as I lugged around his carpets was how *big* many of them were. His huge old Caucasian carpets (5) are really heavy and, from a schlepper's point of view, I wish he had acquired fewer of them.



4. Lot 1038, West Anatolian rug with Memling gul's, \$1,100



5. Lot 95, Caucasian sunburst carpet (lower end), \$3,750

As for the rugs themselves, here are some of my favorites, chosen (with only my personal taste as criterion) from among the 350 rugs currently being sold. You will note that the famous sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Ming dragon carpet is not mentioned in the following list, nor are any Chinese weavings at all. Although I would expect the Ming carpet to sell for a small fortune, and I doubt that I will ever again get to touch and handle a weaving as old or valuable, it is not among my favorites. But here are some that are.



Lot 98: As noted above, a two-hundred-year-old Shirvan prayer rug **(3)** with a silk foundation and a light yellow, curved mihrab arch—a delicate masterpiece of fine weaving and materials.

Lot 69: Although damaged, with a large vertical repair running its entire length, this gold-field Mudjur prayer rug **(6)** is a lovely Anatolian weaving that imparts a sense of tranquility.

Lot 1245: An interesting weaving—is it a seventeenth-century Transylvanian rug in remarkably good condition, or a twentieth-century reproduction, possibly one woven by the infamous forger Teodor Tuduc **(7)**? The design is spartan and spacious as one would expect, but the field color is not quite right, and the color and materials used in the selvages are also not what one finds in original Transylvanian rugs. But repro or not, it's still a fine weaving. Joseph McMullan was fooled by one a bit more obvious, so I am not in bad company to have thought at first that it was a 350-year-old rug.

Lot 1293: A late nineteenth-century Kirman carpet **(8)** with design elements from an earlier era. Beautifully drawn, with the best dyes and a superior and colorful floral appearance—one of the very few purely decorative carpets in Mr. Dixon's collection.



6 (upper left). Lot 69, Mudjur prayer rug, \$1,500

7 (left). Lot 1245, Transylvanian rug reproduction, \$900

8 (above). Lot 1293, Kirman decorative carpet, \$2,700

Lot 93: A fragment of a circa-1800 blossom carpet **(9)**, with large-scale floral motifs, a prototype for the following centuries of Karabagh and other South Caucasian rug design.

Lot 66: A 5" x 12" fragment of a circa-1600 or earlier Lotto carpet **(10)**, with wool quality and dyes of the best Mohtesham Kashans—a fabulous little piece.



9 (upper left). Lot 93, fragment of a Persian blossom carpet with trefoil border, \$10,625

10 (above). Lot 66, fragment of a Lotto rug, \$2,750

11 (left). Lot 67, Central Anatolian rug with Memling guls, \$4,375

12 (right). Lot 1098, Caucasian Moghan rug, \$7,500

Lot 67: An Anatolian Memling-gul rug **(11)** with some full pile remaining and a luminous Cappadocian lemon-yellow dye.

Lot 1098: A Caucasian Moghan rug **(12)** with a well-balanced composition, in good condition with excellent dyes and no bad abrash or structural issues.

My exposure to this trove of top-quality rugs has resulted in an appreciation of both the enormous amount of time and effort Mr. Dixon spent building this collection and the beauty and artistic merit in the design and dyes of many of them. But generally I found these rugs too worn to generate the enthusiasm one might expect. I would rather spend a million dollars on fifty nineteenth-century rugs in good condition than the same amount on five hundred quite-a-bit older but severely worn and damaged rugs. Call me philistine or contrarian: this is just one man's opinion.



Rug Collectors' Weekend 2022

By Jean Hoffman



1. Organizers Bethany Mendenhall and Brian Morehouse

For two-and-a-half days in April, sixty-nine collectors and dealers gathered in California wine-country sunshine for the fourth year of this vibrant conference, organized by Brian Morehouse and Bethany Mendenhall (1), with hospitality by Stephanie Morehouse. Rug Collectors' Weekend (RCW) 2022 included seven presentations, on topics ranging from Anatolian divan covers to rugs from the Golden Triangle, each featuring multiple examples. Fourteen knowledgeable dealers brought special pieces for sale in a Dealer's Row room and shared their expertise in discussions. There was again a group show-and-tell, one of the most beloved features of RCW. For the first time, NERS member and photographer Simon Ferenc Tóth offered conference participants a free, high-resolution photograph, taken on the spot, of a rug they'd brought. Joyful, relaxed discussions and fellowship prevailed throughout the two-plus days.

Retaining its short, informal conference model, RCW resumed after a two-year, COVID-induced hiatus. Despite its name, this year it was not held on a weekend but started with a Tuesday-evening wine gathering on the terrace outside the Santa Ynez Valley Marriott, and continued through two days of presentations, on Wednesday and



2. Jim Burns discusses one of his Caucasian prayer rugs

Thursday, April 26–28. Most participants stayed through Thursday night for a final evening of socializing. Vaccinations were required; as far as the organizers know, no one got sick. For many, the relaxed setting and rich material contributed to the most ruggie fun we've had in more than two years.

Feedback to the organizers included profuse thanks and assurances that everyone had had a very good time. Several people said they thought the caliber of the pieces presented was "hugely impressive," even "world class." Fourteen participants attended RCW for the first time.

West Coast collectors were the most numerous attendees and formed a nucleus of group dinners at local restaurants; other participants came principally from across the U.S. Dealers came from Turkey, the U.S., and Europe. The New England Rug Society's broadening membership was well represented among participants.

NERS members took part in several presentation sessions, including, on the first day, "Anatolian Divan Covers" (Brian Morehouse and Bethany Mendenhall), "Nomadic Bags from Persia and the Caucasus" (Michael Rothberg, who had presented part of his collection in a webinar for NERS), "Turkmen Chuvals" (Alan Rothblatt



3. Hands-on study: more Caucasian prayer rugs, with Turkmen chuvals displayed along the walls

and Michael Rothberg; Alan's NERS webinar had focused on asmalyks), and "Caucasian Prayer Rugs" (Jim Burns (2) with colleagues; Jim had given two NERS webinars on Caucasian rugs).

Presentations on the second day featured "Anatolian Yastiks" (Brian Morehouse, who had presented an NERS webinar on the subject, plus members Bethany Mendenhall, Gerard Paquin, and this author, as well as Dennis Dodds). Fred Mushkat and NERS member DeWitt Mallary gave a talk on Baluchi rugs, and Alberto Levi presented "Rugs from the Golden Triangle," his subject in another of our webinars.

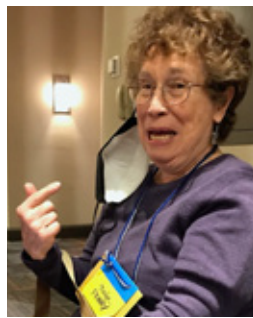
RCW brings people together for a hands-on, collegial approach to learning about oriental carpets, and fosters a warm, energetic social dimension with rug and textile lovers from many places (3). Each year Brian Morehouse organizes speakers on a range of subjects. I was not alone in feeling that this year's topics and examples, even those outside my own collecting areas, were of great interest. Furthermore, this year's format, with several people presenting on some of the topics, brought more perspectives and encouraged attendees who are not experts to feel comfortable participating in discussions.

The presentations were brief—about twenty minutes—with no one reading or using slides. After the presenter(s) concluded, discussions took place in front of the rugs presented, which were pinned to boards and placed around the large room. Examples included many strikingly high-quality, unpublished pieces. Even after viewing webinars on several of the RCW topics, I delighted in being able to examine and touch things I'd only seen virtually and listen to comments about them. In particular, I enjoyed Alberto Levi's chronological display of Golden Triangle fragments and my fellow presenter Bethany Mendenhall's idiosyncratic examples from the yastik collection she has built over thirty years. The divan covers she and Brian Morehouse also presented were new to most of us, beautiful, and a treat to ponder with the yastiks.

Time was allotted for a show-and-tell in which every attendee had the opportunity to show one or two examples from his or her own collection. It was fun to receive comments about my pieces, from Jim Burns, who complimented my old Fachralo Kazak and offered his opinion on its dating, to the multiple Turkish dealers and fellow collectors who generously gave me new perspectives on some of the nine yastiks I had presented.



4. Ben Mini presents a Dixon Collection small-pattern Holbein fragment, to be offered at a future Skinner sale



5a, b. Gerard Paquin shows his Dazkırı yastik



6a, b. Marilyn Denny, too hoarse to talk about her rare, silk-embroidered Uzbek braid covers

Also at the show-and-tell, NERS member Ben Mini, the newly appointed Director of Skinner's Rug and Carpet Department and Regional Director for Maine and Northern New England, whetted our appetites for future Dixon Collection auctions with a mounted fragment of a small-pattern Holbein carpet (4). He dated it to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, noting, "It could be the oldest blue-ground Holbein out there."

Gerard Paquin (5a) showed his vivid Dazkırı yastik (5b), similar to one in the McMullan Collection. On behalf of a hoarse Marilyn Denny (6a), he also shared two rare Uzbek embroideries (6b), each made to a cover a woman's braided hair (the one at right recently acquired from Jeff Spurr's collection).

The next Rug Collectors' Weekend will take place at the Santa Ynez Valley Marriott from Tuesday, May 2, through Thursday, May 4, 2023. Whether new or experienced, all collectors of antique rugs and textiles will once again be welcome to participate.

COVID has accelerated many social changes, including in the world of rug and textile collecting. Attendance at in-person meetings of local rug societies, already on the wane, has for two years been largely curtailed. Webinars, even though they do not allow for personal interaction, have demonstrated the power to reach international audiences in the hundreds. I believe that the model of Rug Collectors' Weekend—featuring multiple, short presentations, informal discussions, social events, and the opportunity to see fine examples of various rugs and textiles—represents one part of the future of rug collecting and fellowship, along with webinars.

Remembering Gillian Richardson (1931–2022)

Gillian Richardson (1), longtime member and generous supporter of the New England Rug Society, died on June 8, 2022. A Cambridge resident since 1968, she had moved from her Sacramento Street home to a Cadbury Commons apartment in 2014. She was 91.

After Gillian gave up driving, my husband, Doug, and I transported her to and from NERS meetings. During our rides, she serenaded us with clear-voiced renditions of her favorite childhood ditties. But other than those hints of her musicality, she shared little of her early life. So for this remembrance I asked her half-brother, Dr. Robert Mandeville, of Glasgow, Scotland, a few questions about Gillian's past. In response, he sent the following wonderful account, to which former NERS co-chair Ann Nicholas has added some fond memories of Gillian's passion for rugs and rug books—and of her enduringly English cooking habits.

—Julia Bailey

Gillian Richardson was born in London on January 18, 1931. Her father was a physicist born in Princeton, New Jersey, and her mother was a teacher with a degree from London School of Economics (LSE), who had been obliged to give up her career when she became a mother, as was the custom in those days. Her parents fairly soon realized that they were people of strong individuality, and they separated amicably before Gillian was six, although they remained in close contact thereafter. Her mother kept Gillian by making her own way, training as a manager at J. Lyons & Co. catering firm, and then with a large department store, John Lewis. In her childhood Gillian met many intellectuals who had been with her mother at LSE, such as the economist Thomas Balogh.

Gillian was only eight when the Second World War broke out and she was evacuated from London, with her whole school being moved out into the country. She used to recall that once there was an air-raid alarm while she was eating party food; she had left the best for last, only to discover when she came back that the food she was looking forward to had all been cleared away!

When Gillian was in her final years of school, she was assessed by educational psychologists, who said that since she seemed only to be really good at science and maths they would recommend that she should train to become a secretary. So she never went to university, in spite of the fact that her father became a professor of physics; her grandfather, Sir Owen Richardson, was a Nobel prize winner in physics; and her great uncle, Oswald Veblen, was one of the principal founders of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study.

Gillian always regretted that she had never had the opportunity to study at university, but, with the best available advice, this was her decision at the time.



1. NERS Life Member Gillian, at the 2017 NERS picnic



**2. Gillian in the late 1950s
(Philip Greenhalgh photo)**

She was happy to make her own way as a secretary, working for the magazine *Picture Post* and then for the author Arthur Koestler. In her early twenties she was diagnosed with advanced pulmonary tuberculosis and had to choose between the standard curative surgical treatment and an experimental drug triad including streptomycin. She chose the then-safer surgical option and had a radical thoracoplasty, with the removal of her right lung and the partial removal of her left lung. She shared a ward

with two other young women who had the operation before her and both died on the table. Gillian survived and then went for rehabilitation for a year at a TB sanatorium, where she learned chess from the British champion Leonard Barden, who was also recuperating there. She emerged with a permanent asymmetry of her chest, which she tried hard to disguise.

When Gillian reentered the world (2), her stepfather, John Mandeville, who ran his own data-processing firm, persuaded her that her talents were going to waste and paid for her to retrain as a computer programmer. She thrived as a pioneering programmer and soon moved on to Princeton University, staying initially with her great uncle and then living independently. She returned to London to work for five years with commercial companies before being tempted back to Princeton by a job offer there. During this time she developed a knowledgeable enthusiasm for oriental rugs and English caricaturists (such as James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson) that she continued to indulge for the rest of her life.

In 1968 she realized that there was a lot of work for contract computer programmers in and around the Boston Beltway, and she moved to Cambridge to take advantage of this opportunity. She was a highly successful Cobol and machine-language programmer, working for Wang, Dell, Interactive Data, and various banks, among others. She was known as a meticulous and innovative programmer, documenting every step, which meant that future revisions could be carried out easily and safely.

Gillian really loved the intellectual buzz around Harvard and joined many associations there, including the Early

Music Society and the New England Rug Society, all the while making annual pilgrimages to the U.K. to keep up with her family there and buy caricatures and rugs. Persuaded by her family to purchase her own house, she chose one on Sacramento Street; it was in a dreadful state when she bought it, but she rented one side while living in the other, and soon totally renovated it.

Realizing that her commercial jobs would leave her vulnerable later in life, Gillian made the decision to go to work for Harvard University in developing the computer software to run their payroll. She did this for many years, entitling her to their health and pension benefits when she finally retired.

Gillian had many long-term friends in both the U.S. and the U.K., but she had a strange aversion to reading letters. Those who wrote to her did not realize this, and their letters lay unopened in her cupboard for the rest of her life. She was able to communicate by telephone and internet, so most people failed to spot her idiosyncrasy, but it must have led many others to conclude that they were being shunned—a great pity, as Gillian was by nature warm, loving, and supportive, while being extremely good and intellectual company.

—Robert Mandeville

Gillian was the original Life Member of NERS; in fact that membership category was created specifically to honor her contributions to NERS. For many years she organized a splendid refreshment table for each meeting and baked an orange cake from an “old family English recipe.” (She was brought up in England and maintained many English mannerisms, including a fine English accent.)

Gillian enjoyed owning oriental rugs and textiles, but I think she enjoyed studying and learning about them even more. She had an enormous collection of rug books and periodicals. When she got older and decided to move to a smaller apartment, she chose to turn most of them over to NERS to sell at reasonable prices so others could enjoy them as she had. The proceeds would be evenly split between her and NERS. Not realizing just how many books she had, Rich Blumenthal agreed to take care of the sales.

Rich and I went to Gillian’s one afternoon to look over her library and develop a plan. Books were everywhere, even in bookcases in the kitchen. While there, I noticed the oven dial on her stove had prominent red markings. When I asked her about them, Gillian said, “Oh, they show the setting for English recipes which use Gasmarks to indicate temperature.” Ahh, I thought, I’ll ask her for that orange-cake recipe. She rummaged around and found a tattered old piece of paper and let me copy it. The recipe is truly English: the ingredients



3. Gillian in her Cambridge apartment with some of her rugs and English caricature prints, 2014



4. Gillian's Chinese seat cover, acquired "at a good price" from a Skinner auction

are measured by weight and fluid ounces and baked at Gasmark 4. I haven't yet successfully converted it for an American kitchen!

Selling the books was a slow process; parting with them was difficult for Gillian. But every six months or so she would call Rich; she had chosen some more to deaccession. Rich and Joel Greifinger would pick them up, list them on a spreadsheet, and email all the members once again. After three years Gillian had donated most of her books, Rich and I moved to Austin, and the NERS treasury was augmented by a tidy sum.

No one remembers when Gillian joined NERS. But she loved the socializing, learning new things about rugs and textiles, and the show-and-tells. NERS was an important part of her American family, and Rich and I were happy to be members of that family.

In my files I found an email Gillian had sent me in 2002; It captures her love of rugs and books. She wrote:

"A few years ago I bought a small yellow Chinese mat at a Skinner auction for a very reasonable price. This Ning Hsia seat cover has a large blue dragon in the middle with four smaller dragons in the corners. It looked splendid draped on the back of my living room chair [3, 4]. Two days later while browsing through the remaindered table at a Harvard Square bookstore, I found George O'Bannon's book, *Oriental Rugs*. Leafing through it, I found a picture [5] that was very similar to my new Chinese seat cover. I brought the book home and began comparing my piece to the picture. Detail after detail, they matched, even to the raveled threads on the ends. When I called Skinner they confirmed that my purchase had been published in the O'Bannon book. What are the chances of buying a new piece and then accidentally finding its picture in a book two days later? And both at a good price too?"

complement each other and assist not only in the identification of rugs but in their appreciation as well. When considering the identity of the weaver, you are hence made, in one, and the source of the materials. The geographic approach provides a broader view of the social, cultural, and political context in which a rug was woven, how the aesthetics of, say, a Safavid or an Ottoman court influenced the weaver and how that culture shows in the rug.



5. George O'Bannon, *Oriental Rugs* (1995), p. 24 (det.)

—Ann Nicholas

Coming in *View* (September issue)

- Previews of upcoming meetings, webinars, and field trip
- Review of Jeff Spurr's May 1 presentation, "Off the Beaten Path"
- Report on August 14 picnic, moth mart, and show-and-tell
- Auction action, including Cassin's coveted kilims

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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 webinars and meetings are held seven or more times a year. Membership levels and annual dues are: Patron \$170, Supporting \$110, Couple \$80, Single \$60, Student \$30. 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 newenglandrugsociety@gmail.com.



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