



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



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May 18 Meeting: Joel Greifinger on Scandinavian Peasant Textiles



Speaker Joel Greifinger in front of an *akdyna* (carriage cushion), and another *akdyna* from his collection, both SW Skåne, Sweden

On Saturday, May 18, NERS President Joel Greifinger will present “All Tradition is Change: Scandinavian Peasant Textiles 1750–1900.” From the mid-eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth, a tradition of art weaving flourished among the peasantry of southern Sweden, particularly in the Skåne region. Utilizing an array of weaving and embroidery techniques, women in farming households produced textiles that marked holidays and life transitions while providing festive decoration and enhancing their families’ status. In addition to highlighting the beauty of these textiles, and of some comparative examples from Norway and Finland, Joel’s presentation will place this Scandinavian tradition in the context of the economic, social, and sometimes individual history of the weavers. The rise and fall (and subsequent revival) of this peasant art form illustrates that “all tradition is change.”

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

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

His taste in rugs and textiles broadened in 2015: at ICOC 13, in Washington, he was captivated by the handful of Swedish weavings included in an exhibition of cushions. This encounter has led him down the rabbit hole into the social history of Swedish textiles as well as their Norwegian and Finnish cousins.

A compulsive researcher and categorizer, Joel sees himself less as a “collector” than an enthusiastic accumulator of pieces that provoke his research into their origin and cultural significance. He has headed NERS off and on since 2016. Not surprisingly, he has also been a bird watcher for the past forty years.

Meeting Details

Date and Time: Saturday, May 18, 3 PM

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

Getting there: Follow your GPS directions.

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

Food: To be provided by members whose surnames begin with **H** through **P**. Please arrive early to set up.

August 11: NERS Picnic, with Moth Mart and Show-and-Tell



Picking and picnicking in August 2023: the moth mart (top) and lunch

Please join other members (and guests) for a late-summer NERS picnic, to take place this year on Sunday, August 11.

We will again 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 attendees—mystery textiles or rugs, exotic specimens you think we should know more about, or new acquisitions you want to show off.

Please come! We welcome all who can attend this relaxed, convivial, and rug-rich event.

Picnic Details

Date: Sunday, August 11

Time: Noon to 4 p.m.

Place: Gore Place, 52 Gore St.
Waltham, MA 02453

Getting there: Set your navigation system to the address above.

Parking: Use the parking area on the estate grounds.

March 9 Webinar Report: Alberto Boralevi on Forty Years of Exciting Carpet Finds

By Julia Bailey



Alberto Boralevi

In a March 9 webinar hosted by NERS, Florentine carpet dealer and scholar Alberto Boralevi treated an international audience to his “Exciting Carpet Finds in Italy: Memories of Forty Years of Hunting for Unpublished Masterpieces.”

In the early 1980s, at the beginning of his career, Alberto was galvanized by reading German scholar Kurt Erdmann’s 1963 prediction that many undiscovered rug treasures were still to be found in Florence and Venice. Alberto’s resultant “home territory” searches soon bore spectacular fruit.

In a storeroom of the Pitti Palace, Florence, he found two large carpets in superb condition, one Mamluk **(1)** and the other of Ottoman-court design **(2)**. Both carpets were listed in the Medici inventories, where they were identified as Cairene; the gigantic Mamluk had arrived in Florence between 1560 and 1570, and the Ottoman-design carpet in 1623. In 1983 Alberto published the two in *HALI*, and they were both shown in the major London exhibition *The Eastern Carpet in the Western World*.



1. The huge Medici Mamluk carpet, Palazzo Pitti MPP.1911 no. 5279



2. The Medici Cairene Ottoman carpet, Palazzo Pitti MPP.1911 no. 5278



**3a, 3b. Two Savonnerie carpets, Palazzo Pitti
MPP.1911 no. 5280 (left) and MPP.1911 no. 5282 (right)**

Less renowned but also splendid are two French Savonnerie carpets (**3a, 3b**) that Alberto found together with the Cairene carpets. In 1669, the two had been given by Louis XIV to the future Medici Grand Duke Cosimo III (r. 1670–1723). The carpets retain their original bright colors and excellent condition, Alberto theorized, because the Medicis disdained their ornate French style and never used them.

Another of Alberto's discoveries from the same period was what is probably the earliest surviving *parokhet*, or ark curtain (**4**), belonging to the Synagogue of Padua. It had previously been published as an eighteenth-century Italian textile; Alberto, however, identified it as a pile rug: specifically, a sixteenth-century Cairene rug with Mamluk borders but a field design likely modeled after a Hebrew book printed in Italy. (Years later, he learned that, back in 1897, an agent for the renowned art dealer Stefano Bardini (1836–1922) had himself recorded the ark curtain as an early pile rug.)

These major classical finds notwithstanding, Alberto admitted that he was also drawn to more rustic textiles, including a kilim-like weaving (**5**) that he recognized as a rare Sardinian funerary rug (*tapinu e' mortu*), made to be placed under the body of the deceased during the wake. The few extant examples of such rugs typically have zigzag-striped wool fields and zoomorphic figures, such as the blue creature (**5a**) that dominates the center of Alberto's example (now with Tabibnia, in Milan). Despite its somber purpose, Alberto noted, this rug is curiously joyful in design.



**4. Cairene knotted-pile *parokhet* (ark curtain), now in the
Jewish Museum of Padua (Museo della Padova Ebraica)**



**5. Sardinian
tapinu e' mortu,
formerly Wher
Collection, now
Tabibnia Collection,
Milan**

**5a. Detail of the
central rectangle,
dominated by
a spritely creature
woven in blue cotton**



6. Castellani-Stroganoff Ushak, Bruschetti Foundation R.01.06



7. Ushak fragment with yellow ground and a previously unknown field design, Museo Piersanti Matelica

Returning to classical carpets, Alberto recalled that, in 1987, he had visited Bellagio, on Lake Como, to advise managers of the Rockefeller Foundation about what to do with two carpets in their headquarters, Villa Serbelloni. (This magnificent property had been bequeathed to the foundation by the wealthy American philanthropist—and, by marriage, princess—Ella Holbrook Walker.) The carpets both turned out to be large-medallion Ushaks; one, with a red ground, was none other than the Castellani-Stroganoff Ushak (6), which Wilhelm von Bode had published in 1901, calling it “the finest example known.” With unequalled colors and a border that includes interlaced Kufic elements, the carpet is perhaps the earliest of its type, dating to the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Alberto sold it to the prominent collector Alessandro Bruschetti, who then allowed him to exhibit it, along with other classical carpets, in his gallery—a success that made Alberto “very happy” even if it caused a subsequent problem: “Everybody thought I was just dealing in museum pieces, and it was difficult for me to sell normal carpets.”

More Ushak finds followed. In the small Central Italian city of Matelica, in the Piersanti family palace-turned-museum, Alberto came upon three fragmentary but beautiful examples, two of them of the large-medallion type, and one, in pieces, with a yellow ground and a previously unknown small pattern (7).



8. White-ground carpet of a type ascribed to the town of Selendi, West Anatolia, Palazzo Comunale, Assisi

8a. Detail of fig. 8, showing a repeat motif sometimes interpreted as a bird



9. Placement diagram by Alberto of the Bardini Mamluk blazon-carpet fragments, including the Textile Museum fragment (outlined at bottom left)

In 1996, Alessandro Bruschetti had noticed and reported to Alberto a Selendi “bird” carpet (**8, 8a**), folded up in a display case in a corridor of the Assisi Municipal Library. How it got there remains unknown, but, having been recognized, it was included in several subsequent exhibitions, including a major 2018 show at the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino.

Rugs in Stefano Bardini's personal collection remain in Florence, divided between the Bardini Museum and the adjacent Palazzo Mozzi-Bardini. Forty-seven of them were first exhibited in Florence in 1999, as the crowning event of ICOC 9. [Ed.: The exhibition and its catalogue, of which Alberto himself was curator and author, were titled *Oriental Geometries: Stefano Bardini and the Antique Carpet.*]

Most important among the rugs included was a large, three-medallion carpet (**9**) with corner blazons (heraldic emblems) of Mamluk Sultan Qaitbay (r. 1468–1496). The carpet consists of seventeen individual fragments—an eighteenth fragment, bearing a blazon, having been purchased by The Textile Museum in 1965 and subsequently published by Charles Grant Ellis.



10. Reconfigured Bardini Mamluk blazon carpet, as exhibited in 2018 at the Palazzo Ducale, Urbino

For the 1999 exhibition, Alberto raised the funds needed for a two-year process of conserving and positioning the seventeen fragments. Since then the carpet has been shown several times, most lately in the 2018 Urbino exhibition (**10**).



11 (top left). Lotto “prayer rug,” whose red niche, columns and “lamp” proved to have been added later

12 (left). Bardini-Pisa-Cini Mamluk carpet, now Louvre Abu Dhabi LAD 2018.011

13 (top right). Conserving the Mamluk carpet pair (Bargello inv. 531, 532) before their separation

Not all of Alberto’s finds were what they at first seemed to be. In 1996 he bought an apparently unique Lotto-design prayer rug (11). Only after selling it did he realize that, for some unknown reason, a standard Lotto rug in perfect condition had, in times long past, been altered—a columned niche replacing part of its overall pattern. The experience taught Alberto a costly lesson but led him to observe that the field designs of some Lotto rugs suggest a hidden prayer-niche shape.

Alberto was bested in his long search for another important three-medallion Mamluk carpet once belonging to Bardini (12). Later owned by collector Luigi Giuseppe Pisa (1890–1930), the carpet was sold at auction after Pisa’s death and spent the next eighty years unnoticed, in the castle near Padua of Count Vittorio Cini. Christie’s, not Alberto, relocated it first, but it was Alberto who catalogued the esteemed (albeit cut and patched) carpet, which is now in the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

In late 2021 the Italian Ministry of Culture asked Alberto for his opinion on whether two carpets slated for auction in London should receive export permits. In the dimness of the shipper’s warehouse, he found two identical, small Mamluks in good condition; the pair had been sewn together to make a single rug (13). They were furnishings of a sixteenth-century Medici villa just outside Pisa, which had been sold to the Niccolini family by Fernando II Medici in 1637; the rugs had likely been in the building throughout its existence. Given their artistic quality and Medici provenance, Alberto recommended against their export. To his surprise the Ministry agreed, paid for the carpets, and assigned them to Florence’s Bargello National Museum, which had other antique rugs but until then no Mamluks.

With that recent, happy outcome for his home city, Alberto ended his presentation. He then gave informed and fluent answers to a dozen disparate audience questions, posed by Jean Hoffman. Finally, he added information about the upcoming ICOC 15, to be held June 6–9 in Istanbul.

All NERS members can view the recording of the entire webinar, which this report merely summarizes. We’re most grateful to Alberto for so ably and charmingly sharing with us the saga of his decades-long, exceptionally fruitful search for carpet masterpieces in Italy.

Auction Review: Rugs and Carpets at Bonhams Skinner

By Richard Belkin

In New England, the name Skinner has long been synonymous with the auctioning of collectible Caucasian and other village and tribal rugs. In the year since Bonhams purchased Skinner, Inc. and renamed the firm Bonhams Skinner, the auction house has also attracted an increasing number of fine Serapi and other room-sized carpets from collectors and dealers worldwide; the international reputation and global footprint of Bonhams seem to have resulted in more, and better, of these decorative carpets than appeared in past Skinner auctions.

The most recent Bonhams Skinner auction (ending March 7, see <https://www.bonhams.com/auction/29556/>) had both collectible and decorative rugs of merit and interest. I was afforded the opportunity to view at length each of the 375 rugs in this sale, and here are some of my personal favorites.

The two best collectible rugs—lots 221 and 92—turned out also to be the two most costly. Lot 221 (1) was a gold-field Kuba in full pile, its excellent colors including a superb green that, used as a highlight alongside the dominant gold and blue of field and border, greatly enhanced the overall color scheme. The field design was a spacious all-over pattern

of small geometric and floral motifs; the generous four-cord selvages were wrapped with pastel teal cotton. Especially in the closeup detail of the reverse of this rug still available on the auction website, the vibrancy and beauty of the colors are apparent. Examples of village art of this quality are few and far between.

But lot 92 (2), an exceedingly rare eastern Caucasian rug, was a close competitor for the title of “best small rug,” and in some respects surpassed its more costly cousin. Its floral-and-tendrill field motifs were a rectilinear variant of the Afshan pattern. To the ivory tendrils, the weaver had added animal heads—with eyeballs! In the field she also included small boxes enclosing her favorite goats or sheep and, across one end, a unique row of four rectangles containing diamonds. The pile of two small, light-mauve motifs near the opposite end was probably silk. The wonderful colors of this rug (also best seen in the closeup view on the auction website) were more pastel and less exuberant than those of lot 221, and the pile was a bit worn in the field and around the ends and edges, but it was one of the most beautiful eastern Caucasian rugs to have come to the market in the past year.



1. Lot 221, Kuba rug, \$28,160 (all prices include premium)



2. Lot 92, eastern Caucasian rug, \$23,040

Of the formal Persian rugs in this sale, lot 108 **(3)**, a silk Heriz prayer rug, was the best. Slightly worn but in good condition overall, it had a beige and cream field and an even palette with no bad abrash or unsightly stains. Its foundation was flexible, without any of the cracking or tearing that usually plague 120-year-old silk rugs. A beautiful example of weaving art, it sold for a reasonable \$5,120 against a \$6,000-to-\$8,000 estimate.

The other top-quality formal Persian rug in the sale, lot 120 **(4)**, a Mohtashem Kashan carpet, sold for a strong \$19,200. While commensurate with the carpet's fine design and soft, full-pile Merino wool, this price—the third-highest

in the sale—was an anomaly, given the lower prices currently common for formal Persian rugs offered at auction.

There were a number of attractive room-sized decorative carpets, five of them approaching or surpassing \$10,000. The most appealing to me was lot 70 **(5)**, a Serapi with an uncommon soft-blue field and a nicely balanced composition with no distracting abrash.

Of the few Turkmen pieces on offer, the only worthy example was a classic six-gul Tekke torba, lot 58 **(6)**, with even, velvety pile, a fine, deep indigo, intact sides, and very little wear. In a soft Turkmen market, its respectable \$2,048 was at the top of current prices for good but not superb Turkmen weavings.

As for surprises, lot 80 **(7)** was a good-quality Serab runner with a soft beige ground and numerous folk-art figures and animals. It achieved a very strong \$4,352—welcome news for its consignor.



3 (top left). Lot 108, Heriz silk rug, \$5,120
4 (top center). Lot 120, Mohtashem Kashan carpet, \$19,200
5 (left). Lot 70, Serapi carpet, \$10,240
6 (bottom center). Lot 58, Tekke torba, \$2,048
7 (right). Lot 80, Serab runner, \$4,352

Other interesting rugs included lot 98 **(8)**, an older Caucasian prayer rug with great pile but damaged sides and ends; lot 216 **(9)**, a Chinese carpet with a yellow-green field that sold for \$2,560, a solid price reflecting the new interest in twentieth-century Chinese carpets; and lot 276 **(10)**, an attractively colored Central Anatolian village prayer rug.

With a bit of wear, lot 32 **(11)** belonged to a type of Sewan Kazak with lower pile, a softer palette, and a field design lacking the corner trees found on the more robustly colored and longer-piled Sewan type **(11a)**. The rug in this sale was dated 1911; it brought a strong \$5,632.

Some lots sold for less than expected, perhaps giving bidders hope of finding bargains in future sales. For instance,



8. Lot 98, Caucasian prayer rug, \$2,816



9. Lot 216, Chinese carpet, \$2,560



10. Lot 276, Central Anatolian prayer rug, \$1,792



11 (Near right). Lot 32, Sewan Kazak rug, \$5,632, compared with 11a. Sewan Kazak rug, also sold by Bonhams Skinner, Oct. 6, 2022, lot 197



lot 14 (12), an Akstafa long rug with good pile and intact ends and sides, brought a modest \$3,328. With similar examples selling in the past for \$5,000 to \$7,000, the buyer of this exuberant rug must have been happy.

Lots 281 (13) and 282 (14), both collectible Caucasian rugs in good condition, sold for prices on the low end of their estimates and were good values. Coming from the

same collector who had consigned lot 221 (1), they had an excellent provenance.

Lot 107 (15), a silk Kashan mat, might have brought twice its \$768 selling price. Lot 151 (16), a Baluch balisht, had full, glowing wool pile throughout but brought just \$640. And finally, lot 339 (17), an earth-toned, room-size Heriz carpet that was a perfectly acceptable floor rug sold for only \$768.



12. Lot 14, Akstafa long rug, \$3,328



13. Lot 281, Kazak rug, \$2,816



14. Lot 282, Marasali prayer rug, \$2,304



15. Lot 107, silk Kashan mat, \$768



16. Lot 151, Baluch balisht, \$640



17. Lot 339, Heriz carpet, \$768

Rug Note: Distracted by Design

By Lloyd Kannenberg



1. Battilossi lattice-design dais cover

I was working on an entirely different Rug Note when I chanced upon the image (1) of the Battilossi lattice-design dais cover (named for a previous owner, the dealer Maurizio Battilossi, of Turin). This image was so striking that my task at hand was temporarily forgotten. No wonder! The field of this Chinese pile weaving is a framed window open to a segment of an infinite lattice with no flora, fauna, or even curves to be found. Nor is that all; you would expect a repetitive geometric pattern to be aesthetically dull as dirt, but this one is so intricate that it demands serious scrutiny. Fortunately, this is not much of a challenge, since the item is Catalogue 58 in *Glanz der Himmelssöhne* [Splendor of the Sons of Heaven], Hans König and Michael Franses's excellent study of imperial Chinese Ming and early Ching carpets (London, 2005). Since the illustrious authors had access to *das Ding an sich* ("the thing itself"), a nontrivial amount of what follows has been shamelessly cribbed from their text.

They begin with the origin of the Battilossi: Ningxia; its date: last quarter of the seventeenth century; and, most relevant to my interest in the lattice, its size: 244 x 256 cm (8' x 8'5"), suggesting that it was intended as a dais cover. The foundation is cotton and the pile wool, asymmetrically knotted and open to the left. The pile is short (6–7 mm), ensuring that color boundaries are sharply defined.



2a, 2b. Lozenges with side-by-side and above-and-below triangles



2c. Rectangle within a tile



3. Detail of field, showing a complete central tile, eight surrounding partial tiles, and four complete lozenges forming a diamond shape

Dominating the field are seven staggered rows of lozenges, each composed of twin triangles oriented side by side (2a) or above and below (2b). Each triangle looks as if it is made of an ivory, light blue, and dark blue ribbon interlaced over and under reddish brown ribbons running in straight horizontal, vertical, or diagonal lines, the diagonals at an angle of about 50°.

The intersections of vertical and horizontal lines define a screen of 48 x 38 cm (1'6" x 1'3") rectangles (2c), which identify the basic, repeating "tiles" of the lattice. Although a single tile is too small to encompass even one lozenge of the field, intersections of the diagonal lines define a complete tile surrounded by eight tile components that together form a rectangle of 92 x 77 cm (3' x 2'6"), sufficient to enclose a diamond-shaped four-lozenge motif (3).



4. Azria circular platform rug



5. Dixon Collection seating mat, lot 42 in Bonhams Skinner *Woven Gardens*, May 4, 2022, \$5,000 plus premium

As noted in the text of Catalogue 58 and evidenced by all the other carpets in the volume, this lattice design is completely alien to the familiar Chinese patterns. Whence cometh it? I doubt we will ever know.

The text concludes with a list of twelve other known pile weavings with lattice patterns like that of the Battilossi. They range from dais covers to seating mats. My search for images of them was a flop; besides the Battilossi I found only the circular Azria platform rug (4), likewise named after an owner. Its place of origin and date are the same as those of the Battilossi; its diameter is 3.35 m (11 ft.). In 2002 it sold for \$54,970, against an estimate of \$6,000–\$10,000. What a letdown. These large examples were beyond my resources, regardless of condition, and even though the smaller seating



6. At last!—the author's lattice-design seating mat, 2' x 2'4", Ningxia, Kangxi period (1662–1722)

mats might be reasonable, so little information about them is provided in *Glanz* that pursuit seemed hopeless.

But that was until Bonhams Skinner's series of auctions of the Dixon Collection. Wonder of wonders, lot 42 of *Woven Gardens*, the first Dixon sale (on May 4, 2022), was a seating mat, possibly one from the *Glanz* list (5). This time I had direct access to *das Ding an sich*: Ningxia, 68 x 76 cm (2'3" x 2'6"). Even comparing its borders with those of the Battilossi dais cover was interesting. The evident wear was somewhat disappointing, but the moderate estimate (\$1,200–\$1,800) seemed reasonable. On the other hand, the Azria had taught me a lesson about serious collectors and deep pockets. Oh well, congratulations to the winning bidder.

At least the Dixon auctions revived my enthusiasm, and in just over a year I acquired another lattice-design seating mat (6): Ningxia, Kangxi period, 60 x 72 cm (2' x 2'4"). Whether or not it is among the ones noted in *Glanz* is unclear. It obviously has problems, such as its diagonal lines being almost buried by the long (about 1 cm) pile. But no worry, I am past distraction.

Sometimes I wonder if the existence of so few extant examples, all seemingly produced over a short time interval, is because the lattice design was a foreigner, a fad that never caught on. Who knows?

Upcoming Rug and Textile Events

Auctions

April 29–May 9, Marlborough, Mass., Bonhams Skinner,
Carpets and Textiles from Jim Dixon and Other
Significant Collections
May 22, Philadelphia, Material Culture, Oriental Rugs from
American Estates
May 25, Vienna, Austria Auction Company, Fine Oriental
Rugs XXXVII
June 1, Wiesbaden, Rippon Boswell, Major Spring Auction
June 12, Boston, Grogan & Company, Fine Rugs and Textiles
June 17, Philadelphia, Material Culture, Fine Antique Rugs
and Textile Arts: Featuring the John T. Wertime Collection

Exhibitions

Until June 1, Washington, GWU/Textile Museum
Irresistible: The Global Patterns of Ikat
Until Sept. 8, Cleveland Museum of Art
Carpets and Canopies in Mughal India
Until Sept. 22, Philadelphia, American Swedish Historical Museum
Swedish Folk Weavings for Marriage, Carriage, and Home

Symposia and Conferences

May 14–16, Buellton, Cal., Santa Ynez Valley Marriott
Carpet and Textile Forum 2024
June 6–9, Istanbul
15th International Conference on Oriental Carpets

Photo Credits

p. 1: Joel Greifinger **p. 2:** Julia Bailey **pp. 3–7:** Alberto Boralevi **pp. 8–11:** Bonhams Skinner **pp. 12–13:** H. König and M. Franses, *Glanz der Himmelssöhne* (figs. 1–3); *HALI* 126 (fig. 4); Bonhams Skinner (fig. 5); Lloyd Kannenberg (fig. 6)

Editorial contributors to this issue:

Julia Bailey (editor), Richard Belkin,
Lloyd Kannenberg

Distributor:

Jim Sampson

Current NERS Steering Committee:

Joel Greifinger (President),
Julia Bailey, Richard Belkin,
John Clift, Lloyd Kannenberg,
Jim Sampson, Jeff Spurr



The New England Rug Society

22 Robin Hill Rd
Holliston, MA 01746-1650

The New England Rug Society is an informal, nonprofit 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.

For more information on joining NERS or renewing your membership, go to:

<https://ne-rugsociety.org/membership/>

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