



# View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



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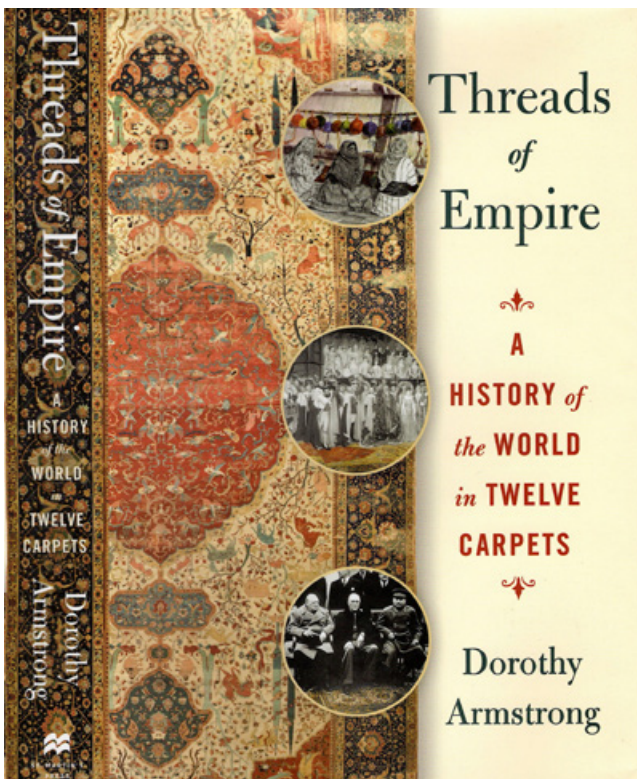
[www.ne-rugsociety.org](http://www.ne-rugsociety.org)

## February 14 Webinar Preview: Dorothy Armstrong, “The Past Beneath Our Feet”



The New England Rug Society is joined by The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum in co-sponsoring Dr. Dorothy Armstrong’s webinar, “The Past Beneath Our Feet.” Her presentation, based on her recently published book, *Threads of Empire: A History of the World in Twelve Carpets*, will trace the “biographies” of two carpets featured in the book, charting their influence by geopolitical shifts, noting their relationship with great figures of the past, and casting light on the lives of their weavers. The two carpets are dramatically different—one a modern “Pakistani Bokhara” and the other a sixteenth-century “chessboard” rug in the Burrell Collection, Glasgow. Together the two reveal histories of nomadism, of collecting, and of the rise and fall of empires.

Dorothy Armstrong is Honorary Research Fellow at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. She specializes in the history of the carpets of Asia and North Africa and the roles they play in their places of production, consumption, and display. Her career includes research at the Royal College of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the universities of Cambridge, Edinburgh, and London SOAS. *Threads of Empire* has been warmly and widely reviewed, in publications as diverse as *HALI* and *The Wall Street Journal*.



Dorothy Armstrong, and the cover of her book

### Webinar Details

**Hosted by the New England Rug Society  
and co-sponsored by GWU/Textile Museum**

**Date and Time:** Saturday, Feb. 14, 2026, 1 PM ET

**Venue:** Your desktop, laptop, or tablet

**Registration:** If you have registered for a previous NERS webinar, you will receive an email invitation to this one.

Or register with this link: <https://tinyurl.com/3xkx2j7s>



## March 7 Webinar Preview: Thomas Wild, “The Tuyuhun Gül: Tracking So-Called RKO Rugs in Eastern Central Asia”



**Thomas Wild**

Carpet scholar Charles Grant Ellis first attached the name “RKO” to a group of carpets from Eastern Central Asia. He derived the term from an American television test pattern used by the RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum) radio and television network in the 1940s and '50s. Arguably no designation for a carpet group is more out of context than “RKO,” which underscores the enduring mystery of these carpets, examples of which now number sixty.

Following leads provided by Hans König and Koos de Jong, presenter Thomas Wild will further explore the subject by discussing his field research in Central Tibet, where he was able to localize motifs directly related to RKO iconography.

### Webinar Details

**Hosted by the New England Rug Society**

**Date and Time:** Saturday, Mar. 7, 2024, 1 PM ET

**Venue:** Your desktop, laptop, or tablet

**Registration:** If you have registered for a previous NERS webinar, you will receive an email invitation to this one.

Or register with this link: <https://tinyurl.com/3z8nawc9>



**Detail of a so-called RKO rug, Yarkand or Gansu, ca. 1800**

One motif in particular, which he refers to as the Tuyuhun gül, takes center stage; its temporal scope ranges from China's Tang dynasty to the modern era of Eastern Central Asia and its geographic span from Central Tibet to the cultures of the nomadic horse peoples along the Silk Road.

Thomas, who runs a carpet shop in Berlin, is an independent researcher, collector, and dealer of rugs and textiles. His primary interest is in carpets from East Central Asia; since the late 1980s he has traveled there extensively, focusing particularly on Tibet. In 2021, he co-curated the exhibition *Drumze: Metamorphoses of the Tibetan Carpet*, at the Carpet Museum of Schloss Voigtsberg, in Oelsnitz, Germany.



# September 6 Webinar Recap: Deniz Coşkun on Anatolian Natural Dyeing



**Deniz Coşkun**

After a summer break, our webinar program resumed with Deniz Coşkun's "Natural Dyes and the Traditional Dyeing Culture of Anatolia," hosted by Textile Museum Associates of Southern California (TMA/SC) and co-sponsored by NERS.

Means of coloring, Deniz began, include painting (of object surfaces) and dyeing (of textile fibers). An indigo-dyed textile found in Peru dates from ca. 6500 years ago; known Old World examples are more than a millennium younger.

Most natural dyestuffs, derived from vegetal or insect sources, are attached to fibers via mordants—metal salts such as alum, iron sulphate, or copper sulphate—which differently affect the colors produced (1). Additional acidic

or alkaline materials—e.g., vinegar or lye—act to lighten or darken the colors.

In contrast, vat dyes (2)—chiefly indigo, but also Tyrian purple, produced from Murex sea snails—use no mordants. Indigo dyeing is a complex process generally practiced by specialists: leaves are rendered soluble in an oxygen-reduced, fermented alkali solution to which the fibers to be dyed are introduced; only upon their removal from the vat and their reaction with oxygen in the air does their blue color develop (3).

Deniz then turned to the specific colors of traditional Anatolian dyeing. Red, the color of blood and hence vitality, is considered a protective hue; red clothing was worn by Turkish brides (4) and women giving birth. The main red dyestuffs are madder root and insect-derived kermes and cochineal (5). Kermes was almost prohibitively expensive, whereas cochineal, sourced from the Americas, was far cheaper and more potent.



**1. Some vegetal dyestuffs fixed with mordants, and colors they produce**



**2. "Vat" dyestuffs, and colors produced**



**3. Indigo dyeing**



**4. Turkish bride (right)**



**5. Main sources of red**



Yellow, which can suggest either joy or sickness, has numerous sources, including weld, buckthorn, and other local plants. Weld is most colorfast, as evidenced by the enduring brilliance of yellow in classical Ushak carpets **(6)**; buckthorn, used in dyeing many Central Anatolian rugs, tends to mutate to orangish or beige **(7)**.

The ancient dyestuff indigo, imported from India and Indochina, became available in Anatolia with the securing of the Silk Road; it produces stronger blue hues than its native alternative, woad. Green, associated with nature and vitality, can be obtained by the more labor-intensive and expensive process of overdyeing indigo-colored fibers with yellow, or by combining copper sulphate with a yellow dyestuff. (In contrast to these benign natural dyes, Deniz noted, “poison green” an arsenic-containing industrial dye from the 1800s, produced a fashionable, bright shade favored for women’s dresses, but toxic—even deadly—to dyers and wearers alike.)

Purple was deemed “imperial” because of the enormous expense involved in obtaining and employing the Murex-extracted dye, a laborious and smelly procedure likely developed in Tyre, Phoenicia (modern Lebanon). But another means of achieving the color, via madder mordanted with iron sulphate, was used in dyeing Anatolian Turkmen weavings **(8)**, which feature, as Deniz pointed out, more purple than all the Ottoman treasures of Topkapı Palace.

Somber black suggests authority—e.g., of the clergy—as well as death. In Anatolia, a black color is obtained from iron salts combined with corrosive tannin derived from acorns, pomegranate peel, pinecones, or nettle. Iranian dyers, in contrast, avoid the corrosive effect by using consecutive dye baths of navy blue, red, and yellow **(9)**.

Deniz next expanded on what he called the “cult colors” of Anatolia. “Turkey red” dyeing was a lengthy and foul process used only for cotton. In India, Persia, and Turkey (and eventually Europe), the bright, fast red was achieved



6. Yellow in border of a large-medallion Ushak, 16th c., Bruschettini Foundation  
7. Buckthorn, used for beige-yellow in a Central Anatolian carpet (detail)  
8. Madder-based purple (and buckthorn yellow) in a Konya or Cappadocia rug  
9. Anatolian corrosive black-brown, compared to black in a Persian Afshar rug



by repeatedly boiling cloth or yarn in dung, ash, and rancid oil; mordanting it with tannin and alum; and finally adding it to a madder dyebath.

The blood red of classical Ushak carpets (10) was obtained with madder root, alum, and cream of tartar. Turkish blue is of medium saturation, unlike the dark navy of Persian carpets. Weld was used for the lightfast yellow of Ushaks (see 6), whereas both the beige or orangish yellows of Cappadocian or Konya rugs come from buckthorn (see 7, 8). The tannin and iron-salt composition of Anatolian brownish-black dye (see 9, left) made it highly corrosive—even capable of eating away a rug’s foundation as well as its pile (11). A distinctive coral shade (12) could be obtained from fresh madder; East Anatolian “cold reds” were cochineal based (13).

Deniz concluded his presentation with a tribute to three German scholars who independently revived interest in natural dyeing, knowledge of which had been lost during the rapid post-1923 modernization of Anatolia. Harald Böhmer (d. 2017)

subjected samples of rugs in museums to chromatographic analysis to [re]discover the plant sources of traditional dyes, and taught his formulae to village women. Manfred Bieber has likewise investigated dye sources, specializing in those that involve a fermentation process. Michael Bischof (d. 2023) worked to differentiate home-, workshop-, and court-based dyeing methods.

In the Q&A following his presentation, Deniz discussed issues ranging from how to distinguish natural from synthetic colors (via a “trained eye” or expensive but definitive chemical analysis) to the current preservation of natural-dyeing knowledge (unfortunately, university courses are insufficient, and industrialization continues to replace hand labor, leading to a sharp decline in carpet weaving and hence in demand for natural-dyeing expertise).

Our thanks to Deniz for his information-packed (and yes, colorful) presentation, and to TMA/SC’s Cheri Hunter for organizing and emceeing the webinar.



10. Lotto carpet, Ushak area, 16th c., its red ground dyed with madder, alum, and cream of tartar; Ballard Collection, Saint Louis Art Museum, 101:1929



11. “Pink Panther” Karapinar rug fragment, late 17th–18th c., ex-Christopher Alexander Collection, its black-ground side borders mostly lost to corrosion



12. Detail of an Erzerum kilim border with coral ground color derived from fresh madder



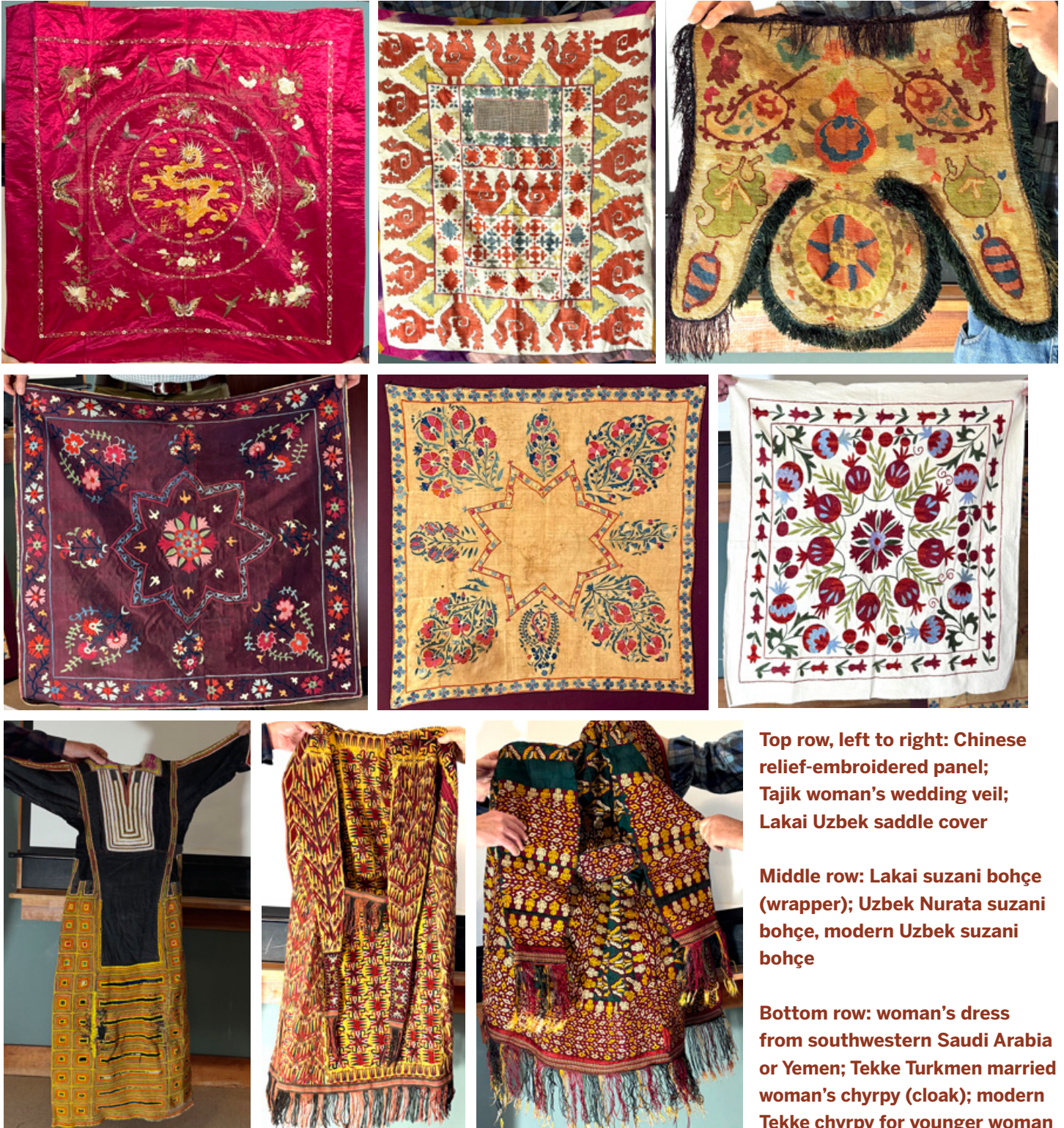
13. Cochineal-based “cold reds” of an East Anatolian kilim



## October 18 Show-and-Tell Meeting Recap: Embroideries

Boston-area No Kings rallies kept several regular meeting-goers from the most recent (and long-scheduled) show-and-tell at Durant-Kenrick House, Newton; others who did attend the meeting arrived fresh from rallying. The smallish audience notwithstanding, embroideries were in plentiful supply.

Central Asian, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish examples of various ages were predictably abundant, but the overall geographic range of the needlework shown was far broader, extending from China to Sweden to Mexico. A representative selection is pictured here.



**Top row, left to right: Chinese relief-embroidered panel; Tajik woman's wedding veil; Lakai Uzbek saddle cover**

**Middle row: Lakai suzani bohçe (wrapper); Uzbek Nurata suzani bohçe, modern Uzbek suzani bohçe**

**Bottom row: woman's dress from southwestern Saudi Arabia or Yemen; Tekke Turkmen married woman's chyrpy (cloak); modern Tekke chyrpy for younger woman**





**Top row: Sindh woman's abochhini (bridal shawl) and fragmentary blouse front, Pakistan**



**Second row: Kirman panel (patch duzi) and Rasht horse cover, Iran**



**Third row: Ottoman bohçe, panel (detail), and işleme ("Turkish towel") fragment, Türkiye**

**Across bottom: carriage cushion dated 1826 and seat cushion dated 1764, both Skåne, Sweden; NERS President Joel Greifinger wearing the huipil he bought in Mexico ca. 1974**





## November 15 Webinar Recap: “Flowers Along the Way: The Evolution of Christian and Dietlinde Erber’s Textile Collecting”



**Dietlinde and Christian Erber**

On November 15, in a webinar hosted by NERS, Munich-based collectors Dietlinde and Christian Erber told their audience how they discovered and began to purchase rugs and textiles from the Islamic world, and how, over the decades, their choices evolved.

Admitting that he had learned English chiefly by reading *HALI* and other English-language carpet-and-textile literature, Christian explained that the couple’s collecting interest had been kindled in April 1978, when they attended a private showing of rugs and textiles by the Bernheimer Company during the Second International Conference

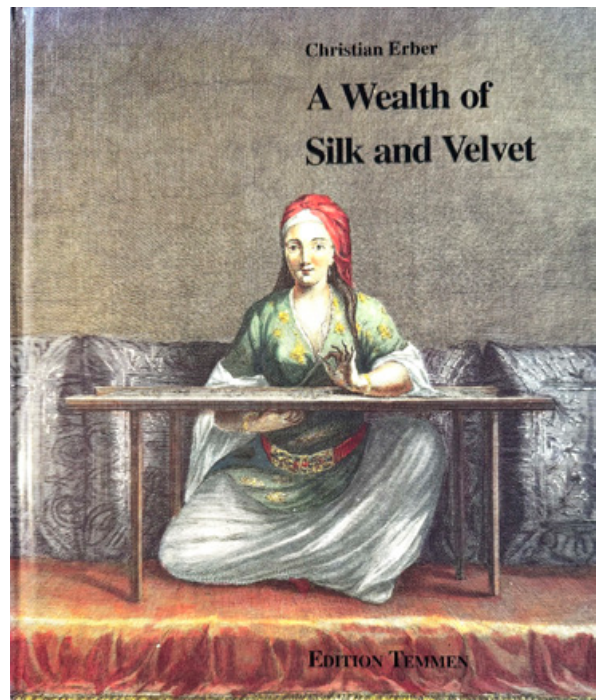
of Carpets, in Munich. (One of ICOC II’s organizers was Martin Volkmann; later the Erbers learned that he was also convenor of annual meetings of rug enthusiasts, the eponymous Volkmann Treffen. Eventually, in 1992, Volkmann named Christian his successor, and the meetings continued until ended by COVID-19.)

The Erbers’ textile purchases, mainly guided by their emotional or aesthetic responses to individual items, only gradually formed a “collection.” First were Baluch rugs, then Turkish flat-woven items including kilim fragments and an early zilü, then enchantingly embroidered “Turkish towels,” or işlemeler (1). For ICOC 7, held in Berlin and Hamburg in 1993, they allied with other German collectors and scholars in bringing about *A Wealth of Silk and Velvet*, an exhibition of Ottoman textiles [Christian edited its extensive color catalogue (2)], along with *Floral Messages*, a show of işlemeler.

Even more important to the Erbers than the available literature were the group travels they organized: to the San Francisco and Philadelphia for ICOC 6 and 8 (1990 and 1996) and post-conference meetings with American collectors. In 2012, when they were jointly awarded the Joseph V. McMullan Award for Scholarship and Stewardship in Islamic Rugs and Textiles, Dietlinde alone accepted the honor at the Textile Museum; too ill to attend, Christian was nevertheless cheered by his American well-wishers.



**1. Festive tents: the embroidered ends of two “Turkish towels” in the Erbers’ collection**

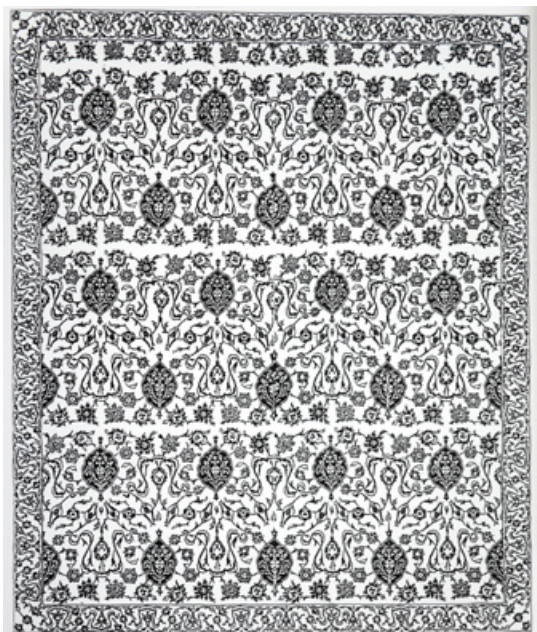


**2. Cover of *A Wealth of Silk and Velvet***



In 1990, while in San Francisco, the Erbers were shown four misjoined fragments of a once-large Ottoman embroidery with a striking design; after the fragments were separated, they bought one (3), which Christian speculated had been part of a wall hanging (4) meant to emulate a panel of Iznik tiles.

The 2010–11 exhibition *Embroidered Dreams: Embroidery of the Ottoman Empire*, at the L. A. Meyer Museum of Islamic Art, in Jerusalem (5), featured their collection; when they saw their pieces on view (6), Christian reminisced, “They never seemed more beautiful to us than there.”



3, 4 (left). Ottoman embroidery fragment and hypothesized design of entire textile, suggesting an Iznik tile panel  
5, 6 (right). L. A. Meyer Museum exhibition banner and Erber embroideries on view in 2010–11



Their fascination with Ottoman embroidery led the Erbers to Central Asian suzanis. In 1982, they bought their first example (7)—not in the best condition, but they didn't mind. More followed: in 1998, they acquired one with an unusually well-documented provenance, provided by a note sewn to the lining attesting that the suzani itself predated 1842. Yet example another had formerly belonged to a WWII German ambassador to Moscow ultimately executed by the Nazis.

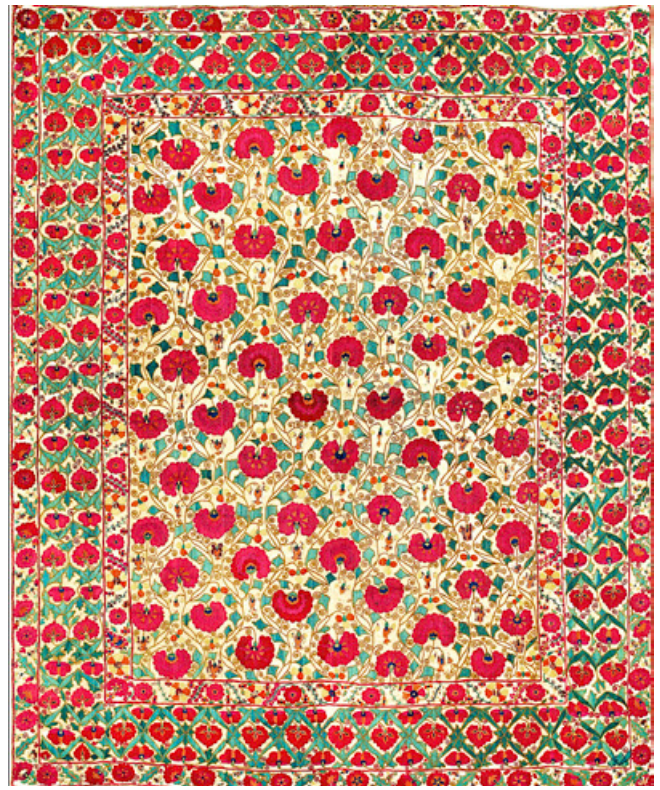
Conversations with fellow collectors and dealers were instrumental in the Erbers' suzani collecting. Christian fondly recalled a 2001 gathering in Munich that included "friends from Manhattan" and a "big pile of suzanis . . . spread on the floor, to the delight of all those who were present."

Their collecting of late, if slower paced, not only continues but has expanded to include Central Asian ikat velvets. And, at long last, a splendid suzani that eluded them forty years ago (8) is now theirs, just in time for its inclusion in the forthcoming catalogue of their suzani collection.

*Editor's note:* This recap is much condensed. Like all NERS-hosted webinars, a recording of the entire presentation, with its following Q&A, is available to NERS members and is highly recommended. *Suzani: Art of the Silk Road*, a multi-author catalogue of the Erbers' suzani collection, is slated for release by *HALI* Publications Ltd. on March 3, 2026.



**7. Large-medallion suzani, the Erbers' first suzani**



**8. Elusive but now theirs: the Erbers' latest suzani purchase**

## Upcoming Rug and Textile Events

### Auctions

Jan. 15, Boston, Grogan & Company

Fine Rugs and Textiles

Jan. 20, Philadelphia, Material Culture

Oriental Rugs from American Estates

February 25, Philadelphia, Material Culture

Oriental Rugs from American Estates

### Exhibitions

Until Jan. 4, St. Louis Art Museum

Patterns of Luxury: Islamic Textiles 10th–17th Centuries

Until May 4, San Francisco Fine Arts Museum

The McCoy Jones Collection: Textiles from Central Asia and the Middle East

**Photo Credits** p. 1 Dorothy Armstrong p. 2 Thomas Wild pp. 3–5 Deniz Coşkun pp. 6–7 Julia or Doug Bailey pp. 8–10 Zoom; Julia Bailey (fig. 3); Christian and Dietlinde Erber (figs. 1, 2, 4–8) p. 11 Al Saulniers



## In Memoriam: Suzanne Smith Saulniers



**Suzanne Smith Saulniers, 1944–2025**



**With Berber wedding shawls at the Saulniers' 2006 ACOR exhibition**

Suzanne Smith Saulniers, of New Bedford, MA—who with her husband Al was a longtime member of NERS—died of pancreatic cancer on September 23, 2025.

Suzanne was born in Syracuse, NY, graduated from Cornell University in 1966, and earned a PhD in Rural Sociology from the University of Wisconsin in 1974. After spending six years teaching at Huston-Tillotson, a historically black college in Austin, TX, she devoted most of her life to work in international development, which included long-term residence in Pakistan, Kashmir, Morocco, Iraq, Kenya, Congo, Peru, and China, as well as involvement with programs in a host of other overseas countries. In New Bedford, until COVID, she and Al ran the acclaimed Orchard Street Manor Bed & Breakfast.

During her nearly twenty-five years in Pakistan, Suzanne developed a personal preference for Central and South Asian weavings, including Lakai embroideries and Pakistani *ralli* (quilts). But NERS members mainly knew her (along with Al) as a proponent and collector of Moroccan rugs and textiles. In 2002, she assisted in Al's NERS presentation, "New Opportunities in Moroccan Tribal Weavings" (see <https://ne-rugsociety.org/newsletter/rugl96.pdf>). At ACOR 8, in 2006, she joined him in mounting an exhibition of their Moroccan holdings, which featured the finely woven Berber wedding shawls about which she had pursued field research.

Suzanne is survived by Al, a daughter and her husband, four grandchildren, a sister, and many nieces, nephews, and cousins. To Al and the rest of Suzanne's family, we in NERS extend our sympathy and condolences.



**Interviewing Berber women shawl weavers in 1995**



**In a Marrakech rug shop, 1997**



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**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 and forms for joining NERS or renewing your membership, go to <https://ne-rugsociety.org/membership/>

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