



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



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www.ne-rugsociety.org

November Meeting: Alberto Boralevi on

"Prayer Rugs or Curtains for the Gate of Heaven—The use of niche-shaped rugs in the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian houses of worship"

In recent times there has been a growing interest in rugs of the so-called prayer format. The 2002 Sackler Museum exhibition *The Best Workmanship, the Finest Materials: Prayer Carpets from the Islamic World* and the on-line exhibition posted at the same time by The New England Rug Society are evidence of this interest.

In this PowerPoint presentation Alberto Boralevi will expound his ideas about this peculiar rug type. He believes that this pattern should be considered as multicultural and linked to various religions, having arrived at this opinion from some of his previous studies on Jewish rugs and, more recently, from the visual impact of so many prayer, niche, or arch-shaped rugs seen in evangelical churches in Transylvania. The presentation will discuss some recent studies, like those of Walter Denny, Michael Franses, Jeff Spurr, and others.

Attendees are encouraged to bring interesting prayer rugs—including ones from the NERS on-line exhibition—for discussion.

Alberto Boralevi comes from a family of art dealers who have been in the antique carpet and textile business in Venice and Florence since the beginning of the twentieth century. He has a degree in architecture. He has been lecturing on oriental carpets since 1976, while

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November Meeting Details

Date: Friday, November 11

Time: 7:30PM

Place: First Parish, Bedford Road, Lincoln

Note: \$5 guest fee for non-members

Directions:

From Rte. 95 (128) take the Trapelo Road West exit (#28B) in Waltham. Proceed west about 2.5 miles to a stop sign at the five-way intersection in Lincoln (there is a white planter in the middle of the intersection.) Go right on Bedford Road for 0.1 miles to Bemis Hall, a large brick building on your right. **The parish house is on your left.**

From Rte. 2 take Bedford Road, Lincoln Center exit (eastbound, turn right at light; westbound, go through light, turn right, and circle 270 degrees to cross Rte. 2 at the light.) Proceed 0.9 miles and you will see Bemis Hall, a large brick building on your left. **The parish house is on your right.**

Parking:

In back of the parish house plus along the street. It's OK to park in front of Bemis Hall **provided the building is dark and not in use.**

January Meeting: Tour of the *Silver and Shawls* Exhibition

Led by Jeff Spurr at the Sackler Museum, Cambridge

See directions on page 2.

The NERS meeting on Saturday, January 14th, will consist of a tour of the exhibition entitled *Silver & Shawls: India, Europe, and the Colonial Art Market* at Harvard's Sackler Museum. The tour will be highlighted by a gallery-talk by Jeff Spurr, NERS member and co-curator in charge of the shawl part of the exhibition. (Jeff's co-curator is Kim Masteller, Asst. Curator in the Department of Islamic and Later Indian Art at the

Harvard University Art Museums. She is responsible for the silver.)

The tour will start promptly at 10:30 AM, so attendees should arrive early (the Museum opens at 10AM). Because of limited space at the gallery, attendance is restricted to 40 people. **If you wish to attend, you must make a reservation (see box on page 2)** Call soon to make sure of your place!

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November Meeting

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working in his father's gallery, and in 1978 he became the Italian representative of Hali Magazine, editing and publishing an Italian supplement from 1981 to 1986. In 1982 he discovered in the Pitti Palace two previously unknown Cairene carpets which were exhibited in London during the third ICOC (1983).

Since 1986 Alberto has run his own galleries where he organized a number of exhibitions of carpets and unusual textiles.

Since 1986 Alberto has been a member of various ICOC committees and is currently chairman of the ICOC Academic Committee. He organized the lecture program of the 9th Conference in Milan and curated the

exhibition of classical carpets from the Bardini collection (*Oriental Geometries*) held in Florence during the Conference.

Alberto has presented papers in many carpet conferences around the world in the last 25 years. He has published several books and catalogues including *Sumakh* (1986); *L'Ushak Castellani-Stroganoff* (1987); *From the Near West (on Sardinian Rugs and textiles)*; *Oriental Geometries*; *Stefano Bardini and the antique rug* (1999). His last work is *Antique Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania*, edited and co-authored by Stefan Ionescu. He has also contributed about 40 articles on oriental rugs to Italian and international Journals.

January Meeting

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The Sackler Museum's website (http://www.artmuseums.harvard.edu/exhibitions/sackler/silver_and_shawls.html) describes the exhibition as follows: "This exhibition highlights the evolution of shawls and silver table wares produced in India during the Colonial period, mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries. That era witnessed the greatest expansion of the international market for Indian textiles and other luxury goods. The

exhibition focuses on two opposing stylistic developments: shawl design evolved from traditional Indian compositions and decoration to patterns that responded to European tastes, while Indian silver production grew from small studios of foreign artisans producing restrained, Georgian-styled objects into a large industry employing local artists and incorporating imagery native to South Asia."



Next Meeting Details

Date: Saturday, January 14

Time: 10:30 AM (please arrive early)

Place: Sackler Museum, 485 Broadway, Cambridge

Note: The Museum has limited our attendance to 40 people, hence you must make advance reservations! Call Mark Hopkins at 781-259-9444; or email mopkins@comcast.net

Directions:

The Museum is located on the north-east corner of Broadway and Quincy street. Take the subway (red line) or a bus to the Harvard Square station, then walk across Harvard Yard to Quincy street, where you turn left towards Broadway. It's about a 10 minute walk. If you come by car, there are a few parking lots and garages in the Harvard Square area.



September Meeting: Jon Thompson on “How the Great Carpets Were Made – Some Observations” By Jim Adelson

On September 16th, a large group of 80 or more enthusiasts gathered to hear rug world luminary Jon Thompson open this year’s NERS sessions with a talk entitled “How the Great Carpets Were Made—Some Observations.” Jon’s talk marked a return visit to NERS, after speaking to the group many years ago. The talk took place in the recently opened Collins Gallery in Watertown.

The talk focused on the methods by which rug designs were transmitted from the originators to the weavers. He illustrated how, all too often, we have unquestioningly accepted certain assumptions about how designs were handled. Jon started his talk at a very elementary level, apologizing to the many in the audience with a higher level of knowledge. He began with the point that the knotted pile carpet is very different from a hooked rug. Knotted pile carpets are made on looms, which range from the simplest horizontal ground looms used by many nomads, to the village vertical looms, to large metal-framed looms like those in Kerman. In any case, the design has to be worked a row at a time, and then broken down by color within the row, with transition points marked in black. Once the colors have been completed, one or more weft threads are added, beaten down into place, and the process repeated with the next row. So the question arises: how does the weaver know how to render a complex design?

The approaches to design transmission divide into two major categories: with and without “hard copy” patterns. Jon spoke first about techniques and practices when there is no pattern to work from. One possible approach would be improvisation on a large scale, but this is relatively infrequent in the Middle Eastern weaving world. Smaller-scale improvisation has been much more common, with small motifs inserted and varied. Memory-based designs, both small and medium-size, were transferred from mother to daughter. With this transmission, the designs sometimes remain very consistent over long periods, as much as hundreds of years. The most stable designs were small in scale, rectilinear, with the overall design built up from extensive repeats of

small motifs with color variation among individual elements or groups of elements.

Jon illustrated several methods for working with a pattern. The simplest was to copy another carpet. He showed pictures, one of a Qashqa’i weaver and another of a Turkish weaver, where the “model” carpet was placed right above the one being woven. There are even *wagirehs* (samplers) that have sections of a number of field and border motifs packed together, specifically made as “copying carpets” which weavers could observe while working. When another carpet was not available, alternative sources were sometimes used, like book illustrations or other types of textiles. The results can be appealing, but at other times—according to Jon (using an example of a carpet with a rose motif that was copied from a Russian textile)—they can be “rather pukeworthy.”

Jon shared some thoughts on the effect of designs crossing from one medium to another. He commented that “the design originates in the medium with the greater technical limitations.” He went on to say that “when the technical limitations decrease, the design stability decreases as well.” He illustrated this point with a silk textile and an embroidered rendition of the same design, where the “freedom” of embroidery led to less precise rendering of the design. Similarly, he observed how a slit-tapestry weave design, with its necessary avoidance of long vertical lines of color transition, can be transmogrified when executed in pile.

Speaking more generally, Jon noted that “copying gives rise to certain non-reversible, law-abiding changes.” He went on to list the laws: 1) copying is always imperfect; 2) mistakes or inaccuracies compound, with progressive distortion or loss of detail; 3) curves become lines and angles; 4) design logic is not understood with successive copies; 5) the design is adapted for memory transmission; and 6) secondary levels of elaboration come into the design. Jon showed many slides of the transformation of an Ushak design over hundreds of years, illustrating these laws. He la-

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September Meeting

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beled this “the visual game of telephone,” referring to the party game where a phrase or sentence is whispered from person to person, leading inevitably to its divergence from the original. Generalizing, Jon stated that designs are elaborate at the start and become simplified, not the other way around. He commented that people sometimes use the concept of design evolution to try to date carpets, but this type of analysis only yields a relative chronology, not absolute dating.

For complex carpet designs, Jon spoke about the most common method of rendering: paper. The design is drawn out on a grid, using what we would now call graph paper, with one square equal to one knot. Jon called these “knot plans” or “point plans.” He showed an example from Nain. Rug enthusiasts tend to associate this method with urban weaving, but in recent years knot plans have been available to virtually everybody, as Jon demonstrated with a Qashqa’i example. This method makes possible not only complex curvilinear designs, but many other possibilities—even realistic pictorial carpets, such as a depiction of the Eiffel Tower, a reproduction of a European painting, and a pile version of a Persian miniature painting.

While the knot plan is the most common system of paper recording of a design, Jon also described another system that is used in certain weaving areas of the Indian subcontinent. In this system, rather than being drawn out on a grid, the design is described row by row in an exact notation of the number of knots in each color. Jon concluded this portion of the talk saying “that summarizes the known methods of design transmission, but that’s really just the beginning.”

According to Jon, it has been assumed that the great court weavings were done from knot plans. But close inspection reveals that the designs in many such carpets seem to have too many minor irregularities to have been woven from exact

knot plans. Jon believes that the carpets were woven following shapes on paper—i.e., cartoons or drawings—rather than by counting squares or knots. Another explanation along these lines is that weavers were not working directly from paper, but that someone was verbally calling out the design for individual or multiple weavers, and this verbal transmission is what introduces the irregularities.

We thank Jon Thompson for sharing his insights on this topic, and for his entertaining presentation. Thanks, too, to John Collins for his generous hosting of the large turnout.

Right:
Jon Thompson

Below: Border
detail, Ardebil
carpet.
Note minor
asymmetries





October Meeting: Erik Risman on “Trappings of the Middle Amu Darya – an Excursion into what is commonly called Ersari/Beshir”

By Yon Bard

Note: numbers in square brackets refer to the illustrations on pp. 6-8.

On the evening of October 14th about 40 NERS and ALMA members and their guests gathered at the Armenian Library to hear Erik Risman discuss Ersari weavings and admire the splendid pieces that he brought with him, as well as the many relevant pieces that NERS members brought for show & tell.

Given almost any Turkmen pile weaving, a reasonably knowledgeable connoisseur will have no trouble attributing it to one of the Turkmen tribes, based on structure, design, handle, and palette. That is so at least for the well known nomadic tribes, the Salor, Saryk, Tekke, Yomud, Chodor, and Arabachi. Things are different, though, when it comes to the weavings generally referred to as “Ersari,” including the “Beshir.” While there is usually no problem in attributing weavings to that general class, the question of who actually made them remains open. The Ersari, alone among the Turkmen tribes, abandoned their nomadic ways and settled down as early as the 17th century, primarily in the middle Amu Darya (“MAD”) valley—the region from north and west of Bukhara (Chardjui) and south to Kerki. The same area, however, is host to diverse other tribes, both Turkmen and other, and it is virtually impossible to disentangle the weavings produced by the various groups. Furthermore, their sedentary existence has freed the Ersari and their neighbors from the tradition-bound and insular ways of the nomadic tribes. This, as well as interactions with cultures of nearby countries, has resulted in a greater diversity of designs employed in their weavings.

Our speaker, together with Peter Poullada (who addressed us last year), has embarked on a project whose aim is to gain a better understanding of the MAD weavings. The objective is to classify these weavings by structure, design, and palette, and then see whether anything can be inferred about where and by whom the various classes were made. This is an ambitious undertaking, particularly given the scarcity of archival material. The project is still in its infancy, and Erik is as much looking to learn as to instruct. Thus, he was more than

happy to contrast and compare the splendid rugs from his own collection to those brought by many of the attendees. Indeed, the latter provided several confirmations for the adage that “as soon as you think a Turkmen piece is unique, an analog is bound to show up.”

Erik recognizes two main categories of MAD pieces: those woven on the left and right banks of the river. The left-bank pieces exhibit traditional Turkmen designs: common schemes such as the 3x3, 3x4, etc. gul arrangement [1], motifs associated with specific other tribes such as the Chodor Ertman gul [2], as well as uniquely Ersari designs such as the large trappings with central star medallions [3,4], the leaf and vine border [3], the diagonal lattice [11], or the ak-gaimak gul [5]. The right-bank pieces show foreign influences, such as the Persianate Herati [8] and Mina-Khani [9] motifs, the Bukharan ikats, and the Chinese “dragon” or “cloud-band” motifs. These weavings have come to be carelessly referred as “Beshir,” after a right-bank town of that name. To these two classes Erik adds another group of weavings that have a darker palette, previously thought to be merely an indication of later date [11,12]. Erik, however, believes that they come from a different region, probably north-western Afghanistan, where Ersari people settled in the 19th century. Yet another group of weavings, such as the ubiquitous “Beshir” prayer

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**Erik Risman
contemplating
an amusing
Ersari**





Left-Bank pieces

Prototypical Turkmen



[1] A 3x3 gul chuval, with elaborate chemche secondaries. A piece with similar chemches materialized from the audience

Influenced by other tribes



[2] A truly splendid piece, with the Chodor Ertmen gul design

Uniquely Ersari designs



[3] A common Ersari animal trapping design. Erik showed several examples, from an archaic one to newer ones, of gradually diminishing spaciousness. This one was contributed by the audience, and falls roughly in the middle of the range



[5] Magnificent chuval with lattice of ak-gaimak guls; similar to piece in Textile Museum. An additional one was brought by an NERS member!



[4] A unique kapunuk (door surround). The cross piece at the top is adorned with a medallion similar to the one of [3]



Uniquely Ersari designs (cont.)



[6] Small main carpet of unusual design

Right-Bank Pieces with Persian Influence



[7] Floral ("tarantula") design with botehs



[8] Elements of Herati design ("cat's face")



[9] Mina-Khani design
(NERS collector's; Erik showed a similar piece)

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October Meeting

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rugs [13], may actually have been woven in Bukhara, home of Central Asia's most devout Muslim community.

The accompanying pictures of some of Erik's pieces illustrate many of the points made above.

We thank Erik for his illuminating presentation and for his extraordinary effort of bringing 46 pieces all the

way from Indianapolis for our delectation, and we wish him success in his project. We also thank his wife Benji for literally holding up her end of things (see Fig. 6 on page 7); the many NERS members who brought their own Ersaris; and, finally, we thank ALMA for once again generously hosting one of our meetings.

Dark-Palette Pieces, Perhaps N.W. Afghanistan



[11] Chuval with diagonal grid



[12] Ensi (door rug)



[10] Saddle bag with Uzbek and Kirghiz influences



[13] "Beshir" prayer rug with unusual design, lacking the ram's-horns at apex of niche. Perhaps Bukhara



Upcoming Rug Events

Future NERS 2006 Meetings:

February 24: Mike Tschbull on N.W. Persian bags

March 17: JennieWood on natural dyes

April: no meeting (ACOR)

May 20: Picnic and show & tell.

Auctions:

Nagel, Stuttgart, 11/8

Bonhams & Butterfields, 11/11 & 12/20, Los Angeles & San Francisco

Rippon Boswell, 11/19

Grogan, 12/4 (including rugs)

Koller, 12/8-9, Zurich

Christie's, New York, 12/14

Sotheby's, New York, 12/16

Skinner, Boston, 4/22/06.

Conferences:

ACOR 8: Boston, MA, 4/20-23/06. Reservations are

now being accepted at www.acor-rugs.org.

11th ICOC: Istanbul, 4/19-22/07. Their website is www.icoc-istanbul.org.

The following ICOC will be held in St. Petersburg in 2009.

Exhibitions and Fairs:

Silver and Shawls: India, Europe, and the Colonial Art Market, Sackler Museum, Cambridge, until 1/29/06. See page 1 for NERS visit details.

Ottoman Imperial Textiles from the 16th & 17th Centuries, Sackler Gallery, Washington, until 1/22/06

Ottoman Embroideries, RISD Museum of Art, Providence, until 1/16/06

Textile Museum, Washington:

Silk & Leather, Splendid Attire of 19th Century Central Asia, until 2/26/06

Rozome Masters of Japan, until 2/12/06

Huari Ceremonial Textiles, until 1/8/06.

NERS News

New members: NERS has instituted a new membership category for students, with an annual fee of \$25. Our first student member is *Felix Elwert*, a doctoral candidate at Harvard. We welcome him, as well as the following new regular members: *Eva Fridman*, *Tim & Maxine Horrigan*, *Rob Parker*, and *Rick & Suzanne Wynn*.

NERS Steering Committee: We are happy to announce that *Lloyd Kannenberg* has joined our Steering

Committee. He is in charge of providing the refreshments at our meetings. His helpers are Gillian Richardson and Margaret (Peggy) Simons, and sometimes Tom Hannaher. Lloyd can always use more help, though; **to volunteer**, call him at 781-647-9666 or email Lloyd_Kannenberg@uml.edu.

Phil Lichtman's article *Moth Wars* has appeared on page 65 of *HALI* 142 (September-October 2005). This is part 1 of a series dealing with our worst enemies!

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. Its meetings are held six to eight times a year. Annual membership dues are: Single \$45, Couple \$65, Supporting \$90, Patron \$120. Membership information or renewal forms can be obtained on our website www.ne-rugsociety.org, or by writing to **New England Rug Society, P.O. Box 582, Lincoln, MA 01773**, calling Mark Hopkins at 781-259-9444, or emailing him at mopkins@comcast.net.

NERS 2004/5 Steering Committee:

Mark Hopkins (President)

Jim Adelson

Robert Alimi

Julia Bailey

Yonathan Bard

Tom Hannaher

Lloyd Kannenberg

Jo Kris

Gillian Richardson

Janet Smith

Jeff Spurr



Confessions of a Mad Collector's Wife

Dreaded call from rug dealer. Wife hears one end of conversation. "Really? Sounds interesting. Why don't you send it to me". FedEx delivery. Much excitement (and foreboding on wife's part). Bright light put on pieces of what was once a rug. "Look at these wonderful colors (+\$2,800) and this amazing border (+\$1,400). I don't have anything like this in my collection (+\$1,000). Feel this lovely wool (+\$1,000)." Collector's Wife: "It looks very worn (-\$15.) And these silk areas are all

corroded (-\$10). Isn't it missing a border? (-\$20.) Where are you going to put it?" Collector: "I'll find somewhere." Happiness on part of Collector (and dealer). Priceless. Worry on part of Wife—house needs a new roof; Collector: "It's not leaking very much." Interior needs painting; Collector: "Looks fine to me." Chair needs re-upholstering; Collector: "Nobody sits on this one anyway." Long sigh of resignation.

Anonymous

RHYMES WITH ORANGE by Hilary Price



Reproduced from Boston Globe; submitted by Sharon & Phil Lichtman



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