



View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



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February Meeting: Alberto Levi on “Primitivism and Abstraction in Persian Tribal Flatweaves”

At our next meeting, Alberto Levi, a well-known scholar/dealer from Milan, Italy, will share his fascination with bold flat-woven Persian textiles in a talk on “*Primitivism and Abstraction in Persian Tribal Flatweaves*.” The meeting will be held on February 5th at the John Collins Gallery in Watertown.

A few years ago Alberto became enthralled with these strong yet mysterious weavings. Many resemble Western abstract art, and, in fact, some have even inspired modern artists. The textiles were originally woven by tribeswomen as utilitarian objects. Often parts of dowries, they were used daily in nomadic life.

Jajims, long warp-faced flatweaves, were used to decorate the inside of the tent by covering the storage pile. *Perdehs* were made from simple weft-faced textile panels which were individually dip-dyed in a bath of a specific color. These panels were then joined together, often in dazzling combinations, for use as tent dividers. *Sofrehs*, small, square-format flatweaves, were used to store bread or as dining cloths for guests. Many *sofrehs* are almost pictorial with their bold brushstrokes of brightly colored wool.

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February Meeting Details

Date: Friday, February 5

Time: 7:30PM

Place: Collins Gallery, 694 Mount Auburn Street, Watertown

Directions:

From Harvard Square take Mount Auburn street west 1.5 miles. The Collins Gallery will be on your right, just before a sign saying “Celebrity Pizza.” If you get to the Arlington street intersection you’ve gone a little too far.

From Watertown Square take Mount Auburn street (Rte. 16) east for 1.6 miles. The Collins Gallery will be on the left, just beyond the “Celebrity Pizza” sign, a little after you cross the major Arlington street intersection.

You can also get there by taking the MBTA bus line 71 from Harvard or Watertown Square.

Parking: Parking lot in back of gallery (driveway is between the gallery and the pizzeria), and on street

March Meeting: Jeff Spurr on

“Style and Identity, People or Place: The Case for Lakai Suzanis”

See meeting details on page 2.

In his talk on March 19, Jeff Spurr will discuss a complex group of striking suzanis (dowry embroideries) attributed in recent decades to Shahrizabz. Jeff has long puzzled over these dramatic textiles, and has concluded that the suzanis in question were urban equivalents of the well-known small, embroidered trappings of the rural Lakai Uzbek, and that both classes were essentially similar in style and produced during the same period. The talk will emphasize the importance of style in the representation of group identity, and will attempt to explain what is meant by *style* in the Lakai context. Jeff will make the case for an essential identity in design val-

ues, design characteristics, and spirit between these two groups of textiles, rural and urban, produced over the limited period ranging approximately from 1875 to 1925. The talk (originally presented at *Volkman Treffen 2009* in Berlin, October 23-25, 2009) will also describe the political and historical context of the emergence of this well known Lakai style, which came about as a result of forced settling of the Lakai, initiated by the Emir of Bukhara in 1869, and fully accomplished over the course of the following decade. The effects of the Russian rule will also be addressed.

Jeff will bring examples of both Lakai suzanis and

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February Meeting

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The Bakhtiari tribe of Western Persia used large bags called *tachehs* to hold grain. When opened flat they are among the most visually striking of tribal textiles. A multitude of weaving techniques were used in their construction, some of which had no structural basis but served only as embellishments. The abstract motifs formed by these embellishments may be related to the Zoroastrian origin of the tribe and probably were amulets, protecting the bag and its precious contents.

In the Mazandaran region of Northern Iran near the Caspian Sea a group of flatwoven textiles were recently discovered. These textiles are distinguished by uniquely primitive patterns and minimalist color combi-

nations which reflect a staggering modernism. Alberto will also discuss these textiles, which are the subject of a forthcoming book.

Alberto has been studying Persian rugs and textiles for many years. He has published a number of papers on Kurdish weavings in both *Hali* and *Ghereh*. He has also presented papers at several ICOC conferences and was the Chairman of the Organizing Committee for the ICOC in Italy in 1999.

Alberto always gives an enthusiastic and well-informed presentation and is not to be missed. He will bring some examples of these very striking tribal weaving to show. Members are encouraged to bring tribal flatweaves for show and tell.

March Meeting

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other embroideries (see pictures below). Attendees are also urged to bring examples, particularly of the suzani, for show and tell.

Jeff Spurr is a long time member of NERS and its Steering Committee. We all know him from the many wonderful textiles that he has brought to our show and tells and other meetings, and for the museum tours that he has led. He is an independent scholar of the history of photography in the Middle East, and of Islamic textiles and rugs. Until recently he was Islamic and Middle East Specialist at the Documentation Center of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Fine Arts Library, Harvard University—a position he held for 26 years. He has a sustained interest in human rights, cultural heritage, and the fate of libraries in countries subjected to conflict. In this regard he has led efforts in support of damaged Bosnian and Iraqi libraries.



Lakai embroidered panel
and suzani



March Meeting Details

Date: Friday, March 19

Time: 7:30PM

Place: First Parish, Bedford Road, Lincoln

Note: Non-members welcomed for \$10 fee

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.**



November Meeting: Robert Mann on “Cleaning Oriental Rugs: Making Sense of the Options” Reviewed by Jim Adelson

On November 6th, Bob Mann enlightened about 40 NERS members and guests on the topic of cleaning hand-made carpets, in a talk given at John Collins’s gallery in Watertown. Bob heads one of the leading U.S. cleaning and restoration firms, and he spoke about this subject that all rug lovers have to confront—whether with ancient collectible textiles or decorative carpets.

Bob opened with the comment, “I have a friend who says ‘Dirt never sleeps.’” He went on to note that despite the ubiquity and relentlessness of contaminants, information on cleaning is not easily available. He then proceeded with a short historical perspective on rug cleaning.

Sheep were domesticated ten to fifteen thousand years ago, and carpet weaving began at least three thousand years ago. Cleaning most likely started with plain water washing in rivers. Commercial, specialized cleaning began in the 1880s and 1890s as a result of the growth of carpet exports to the west. Today, similar equipment and techniques have spread to many areas. Bob showed pictures of a recently established cleaning plant in India that uses water, chlorine, and wood-bladed squeegees, and dries the rugs in the sun. Another plant in Romania uses a similar cleaning approach for new rugs. A larger-scale plant in China exhibits a higher degree of automation, with rugs tied together to be pulled through the cleaning equipment. Finally, Bob showed some slides of his own plant, with a variety of equipment for different

cleaning efforts. He noted that in-plant cleaning is what is needed for most home carpets.

He then proceeded to describe the cleaning process as practiced across all cleaning facilities, including his own, illustrating each phase with a number of slides.

The first major step is the removal of dry particulate matter. For heavy commercial carpets this occurs in a tumbler; with a beater used on the back of the rug; and/or with a dusting machine. For smaller, more fragile or collectible pieces, compressed air pushes the particulates out of the piece.

Water also plays an important role in particulate removal. Soaking in warm water (80-90 degrees) is common and useful. Power washing is effective, too, but has to be done appropriately; this approach is usually good for large decorative rugs. Even a rotary scrubber can be OK, although customers sometimes prescribe only hand-washing, since they have a built-in fear of power equipment for rug cleaning.

Cleaning fringes often requires additional passes. Bob described an interesting cleaner’s dilemma relating to fringes: on the one hand, they are one of the more vulnerable parts of a piece, so the cleaner doesn’t want to chance damaging the fringe. On the other hand, cus-

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This is how it’s done in Romania



One is never too young to start in this business



November Meeting

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tomers expect the fringes in particular to look cleaner after the work, so their expectations can prompt more aggressive and possibly risky techniques.

Removal of particulate matter from smaller or more fragile textiles dictates a different approach. Bob's firm uses frames with nylon screens, securing the piece between two such frames, and then blowing compressed air through the supported textile to get the dirt out.

Stain removal is the second major stage of cleaning. Again, there is an interesting disparity between customer expectations and the technical and practical realities of cleaning, this time in a favorable way: many customers believe that red wine, Kool-aid, and urine represent unsolvable stain problems, when in fact it is often possible to get very good results eliminating such discolorations. On the other hand, in response to a later question, Bob responded that some furniture varnishes and old India ink are among the most difficult stains to remove. Bob also felt that painting can be an acceptable method in situations where the stain has actually removed the color from the textile. In some cases, the paint itself can be removed later if desired.

Drying represents the third major stage of cleaning. In some cases, pieces can be laid out or hung and dried in the sun, if weather permits. Some pieces require blocking and sizing to stretch and straighten them, and they may need to be nailed down for this step. In a few cases shearing may be required if the piece was not well finished initially, or if certain stains have remained.

The final stage, required only by some pieces, is repair. Bob did not cover this very broad area in detail, commenting only that they have a small repair set-up at the Denver facility, and that they also use outside repairers for certain work—as do other cleaners.

Upon conclusion of his prepared remarks and slides, Bob took many questions from the audience. The first had more to do with condition/repair, when an audience member asked why so many Turkmen pile weavings show a tendency to curl in the lower right hand corner. Bob, along with Gerard Paquin, indicated that it was due to the spin of the wool, which makes such pieces more prone to a particular curl.

The second question had to do with removing

wrinkles in pile rugs; the answer was that steaming is generally the best way. Another audience member asked what to use as a cleaning agent. Bob recommended using dishwashing detergent, and cautioned against Woolite, which he explained contains optical brighteners and other things that are not good for rugs.

In his responses to questions, Bob also interjected that “there are things that are too fragile to be cleaned.” He noted that you just wouldn't clean archeological textiles.

Another audience member commented that sometimes the nap of a piece gets matted from washing, and asked what might be causing that problem. Bob indicated that the rug may not be getting adequately rinsed. Another possibility is that the rug may need more grooming (combing) while drying.

An audience member asked about using vinegar when an acidic solution is needed. Bob responded that vinegar's acidic action can be OK, but it can leave a smell. He also encouraged great care here, as well as elsewhere in his talk, in using appropriate quantities and concentrations of cleaning agents. For vinegar, Bob recommended a 2% solution applied at the rate of a quarter cup per square foot of carpet. Bob noted “water does most of the work.”

The next question dealt with the removal or application of lanolin. Bob replied that virtually all wool that you encounter these days has been boiled, and whatever lanolin was going to come off has done so already. He also said that he doesn't consider it possible to put lanolin back in effectively if it has been removed; efforts to do so lead to a greasy slick on the surface of the piece that will trap additional dirt. The same applies to glycerin.

The final question concerned checking for colorfastness of dyes. Bob recommended conducting a very small “blotter” test on each color to determine whether it would run.

Following the question and answer session, members showed several pieces they had brought, for which Bob offered his initial thoughts on cleaning and repair. The first was a Ninghsia rug with a red stain. Bob felt that “stripper” (sodium hyposulfide) might be effective.

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Upcoming Rug Events

Future NERS 2009/10 Meetings:

Apr 16: Thomas Farnham on *The History of Great Classical Persian Carpets* (ALMA, Watertown)

May 15: Picnic and Show & Tell (Gore Place, Waltham).

Auctions (*major carpet sales in bold; dates may change—inquire before you go*):

Grogan, Dedham, 2/21

Nagel, Stuttgart, 3/16

Christie's, London, 4/15, 4/16.

Exhibitions and Fairs:

Traveling the Silk Road: Ancient Pathway to the Modern World, American Museum of Natural History, NY, NY, until 8/15.

Tours:

Discover Transylvania 2010, 5/20-29 and 6/11-19, organized by Susan Scollay and Stefano Ionesco. For information access www.transylvanianrugs.com/wp-content/ups/discover_transylvania-2010.

November Meeting

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He explained that the basic principle of stain treatment was to find a solvent that the stain responds to but the dyes in the piece do not, so only the stain gets removed.

The next example was a runner with both pile and selvedge damage. In analyzing potential actions Bob commented that the repair services he uses in Turkey cost approximately \$100 per day with consistently excellent work; you can get “bazaar repair” for half that, but the quality of the work is unreliable. Bob’s repair

people can handle a selvedge at a rate of roughly one foot per day. The runner also had multiple worn bands, each of which Bob estimated would take a couple of days to repile. Bob concluded that it would not make commercial sense to execute such repairs on this piece, since the total would probably be \$2,500-\$3,500, and this particular runner wasn’t of high enough value to warrant such an expenditure.

The final “show and tell” piece was a broadcloth

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We welcome the following new members: *John & Kathleen Rutter*

Newsletter contributors and helpers: Yon Bard (editor), Jim Adelson, Dora Bard, Mark Hopkins, Ann Nicholas, Janet Smith, Jeff Spurr.

Comments/contributions/for sale ads to: Yonathan Bard, doryon@rcn.com

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, Student \$25. 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@verizon.net.

NERS 2009/10 Steering Committee:

Mark Hopkins (President)

Jim Adelson

Robert Alimi

Julia Bailey

Yonathan Bard

Tom Hannaher

Lloyd Kannenberg

Ann Nicholas

Gillian Richardson

Janet Smith

Jeff Spurr



November Meeting

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Ottoman appliqué with stains. In this case, Bob felt it was hard to predict how the stains would respond and whether they could be effectively removed. His first solvent choice here would be citric acid.

Seeing this example prompted another question from the audience, dealing with removing adhesive from the backs of rugs. Bob recommended pure orange sol-

vent (terpenes) as very effective for adhesives. He preferred the clear orange versions, rather than those that are cloudy or milky, since those have additional undesirable ingredients.

Our thanks to Bob for sharing his practical guidance, and doing so in a very entertaining fashion! Thanks, too, to John Collins for making his gallery available to host the session.



Emerging from the machine



On the stretcher



Hanging to dry



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