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Turkotek Discussion Forums > Rugs and Old Masters: An Essay Series > 5. Rugs in Paintings of the Dutch Golden Age.  
**Quest for the elusive Caucasian rug**

Welcome, [Filiberto Boncompagni](#).  
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September 22nd, 2013, 07:17 PM

#1

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 68

Quest for the elusive Caucasian rug

Hi all,

Being quite frustrated by the lack of official identification by experts of any Caucasus rug in old master's canvas.



I decided to initiate my own quest of the Graal

The result, so far, is an overweight post which the interested reader can find [here](#)



Edit Quote

September 23rd, 2013, 12:15 PM

#2

[Filiberto Boncompagni](#)  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008  
Location: Cyprus  
Posts: 54

Hi Pierre,

Nice résumé on the subject. Of course, I agree with your conclusions. 😊

Luckily there are those historical sources mentioning "Circassian" carpets...

Only thing, they cannot be Circassian in a strict sense because there are no traces of piled rugs produced by the Adyghe (that's how they call themselves) people. As far as I found after strenuous internets searches, the Adyghe only made felt rugs and dry-grass mats, both very similar to the felt rugs and *chibtas* made in Daghestan.

Here are some Circassian versions of *chibtas*:  
<http://wcb.adiga.net/gallery/thumbnails.php?album=178>

And a lot Circassian traditional motives, with some felts too (see files 52 and 53):  
<http://wcb.adiga.net/gallery/displayimage.php?album=30&pos=0>

So, the logical explanation is that, as you say, "Circassian" is not to be taken literally but as generic reference to Caucasus.

Regards,

Filiberto



Edit Quote

September 23rd, 2013, 08:30 PM

#3

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 68

Hi Filiberto,

Interesting that Europeans rug merchants would call Caucasus rugs "Circassian", despite the fact that these people were not weaving pile rugs.

To me, it may give us a few tinny informations:👍👍

- The rugs imported from the Caucasus into Venice etc.. were not mainly Armenian weaves, otherwise the importers would not have needed to pick an exotic name like "Circassian" to market them. Even more so since these business people were certainly largely Armenian themselves, or Jews.

- The rugs had probably many different Caucasian ethnic origins: A generic name was therefore needed since the importers did not care for making the ethnological education of Renaissance buyers 😊

- The name "Circassian" was probably a pretty good vector since these people were well known in Occident as supplying excellent slave-warriors (Circassians and Turks traditionally made the hard core of the Mamluk armies and of their leadership) and Circassian ladies were said to be the "crème de la crème" of the seraglio.(And were the mothers of many a Sultan).

Regards  
Pierre



September 24th, 2013, 09:36 AM

#4


[Filiberto](#)  
[Boncompagni](#)  
Administrator

Join Date: May 2008  
Location: Cyprus  
Posts: 54



Hi Pierre,

I recently read an article on a survey by British Airways asking passengers to situate their destination on a map. Most of them failed miserably. I distinctly remember that someone had situated an Irish airport on the coast of France. This is in the 21st century Europe, when everybody should have a compulsory education, access to every kind of information technology and so on.

In the contest of 15th or 16th century Europe, using "Circassian" for "Caucasian" makes – forgive me for the oxymoron - quite an *accurate approximation*, don't you think? 

Regards,

Filiberto



September 24th, 2013, 06:07 PM

#5

[Pierre Galafassi](#)  
Members

Join Date: Oct 2009  
Posts: 68



Quite true, quite true.



January 11th, 2014, 11:40 PM

#6

[Horst Nitz](#)  
Members

Join Date: Feb 2013  
Posts: 16



Hi Pierre, Filiberto,

if on this quest we are in for a trip on thin ice as you put it, the question of access is of some relevance. I appreciate your argument(-s) in the presentation and share the unease that perhaps too many early rugs with geometric patterns are attributed to regions much further west. Filiberto expressed it differently but perhaps meant the same when he suggested that the Scheunemann rug we have been discussing in the parallel thread has a Caucasian 'flavour' to it. It has indeed and to me, the Pohlmann rug even more so, it gives the impression of an older, more sophisticated relative of an eagle or sunburst Kasak rug. However, between those sensual attributions and the fact, that this type of rug (including the Pohlmann and Bode rug) and most others belonging to the 'classical' group, traditionally are being attributed to western Anatolia, exists a wide gap that needs to be addressed (question one) and, if possible, bridged with interpretation. For the time being, if we met a Caucasian rug earlier or other than belonging to the known type of dragon carpet in one of the 15th or 16th c. old masters' paintings, it remains open whether we would recognise it (question two). The oldest Caucasian rugs in the classical rug literature seem to be no older than ca. 1500 and the type already looks rather floral, the mentioned dragon carpets.

If we want to come to grips with the 'elusive Caucasian rugs' we need to put our classical text book understanding on the course of rugs through history on test. Very likely we'll need to revise it.

Since it is a somewhat lengthy argument that follows, I think I ought to offer a look ahead at what it will amount to and than return to details. The Caucasus has its own rug traditions, and also from early times on owes to the south for major impulses. The south that is present day Azerbaidjan, East-Anatolia, NW-Iran and Northern Mesopotamia, all Persian dominions during the period most formative of a style that, if one doesn't want to make too many word, can be generously circumscribed as carrying a Caucasian 'flavour.' We ought to help rug history catch up with real history and conceptually install that region in the function it always served, as a spin-engine of rug designs and turntable to their migration, long before the first Turkish tribes entered the scene.

To question one: The Berlin school of rug research was leading the field for a long time, starting with Julius Lessing who wrote the first rug book of all in 1877; Engl. edition London, 1879: Ancient Oriental Carpet Patterns. Kurt Erdmann was its representative in the 1950s to 70s. His ideas still act. The English translation by Ch. G. Ellis of his standard work had four editions between 1955 and 1976: Oriental Carpets, an account of their history. In the last German edition from 1975, early rugs of the 13th century are attributed to the Konya region, most other Anatolian 'classical' rugs (small and large patterned Holbein, Lotto and star medallion rugs to the west i.e. Ushak, Bergama, also the Berlin phoenix and dragon rug and the Marby rug. No rug is attributed to Eastern Anatolia; Persia features with floral rugs from the 16th century onwards. This leaves the Caucasus isolated and makes the wider upper Mesopotamia region (Azerbaijan, East-Anatolia, NW-Iran and Northern Mesopotamia) a black box. This calls for amendment.

In the Mongol storm and with Timur's devastations, the wider upper Mesopotamia – as defined in the previous paragraph – had suffered blows between the 13th and early 16th centuries, from which it had not recovered demographically, culturally and economically when the next one came, which in the long run was probably the most decisive at least as far as rugs are concerned, the battle of Chaldiran and its aftermath that ended a unity that had existed for two thousand years (to be continued).

Regards,

Horst

Last edited by Horst Nitz; January 12th, 2014 at 12:26 AM.



January 22nd, 2014,  
11:32 PM

#2

[Horst Nitz](#)

Members

Join Date: Feb 2013  
Posts: 16

The quest for the elusive Caucasian rug - coming home ?

Hi

there had been tension between the Ottoman and the Safavid for decades. The latter intermingled in the succession process of the former, recruited among the Turkmen in parts of East Anatolia the Ottomans claimed their dominion – and from a Sunni Ottoman perspective, the Safavids were heretics. When the hour came on 23rd August 1514 it struck disaster to the Safavids. By the skin of a tooth Shah Ismail escaped alive but was wounded. This jeopardized his position lastingly, as he was not only secular leader but was also considered the invincible Mahdi, the returned 12th Imam by his followers. The Ottomans took Tabris, pillaged it and shuffled Ismail's Harem to Istanbul. It was later returned in a somewhat ruffled state, as the saying has it. About this it seems, Ismail fell depressed and took up drinking. Key artisans were shipped to Istanbul for good, so the famous Tabris metal workers (Newman 2006).

Iran's Anatolian and Mesopotamian provinces were lost to the Ottomans in the process. They had been an integral part of the empire since the days of Cyrus the Great (558-530 BC). Warfare between the stated continued for another almost 50 years until the settlement at Amasya in 1555.

But this did not mean peace, not to the population anyway. In Eastern Anatolia, overstressed structures after the collapse of the Ilkhanate gave in further, economical and cultural decline set in, religious persecution too resulting in large scale emigration and resettlement. The Jelali revolts were a symptom of it. Daily life had become severely disrupted. The bright lights of the capital and court at Tabris vanished behind the horizon, first to Quazvin, then to Isfahan. In the other direction too, resources were drawn to the west; a proverbial saying that goes like this was still heard in the east in the 1970s, not without bitterness: anything precious in the east finds its price in Istanbul. So did the rugs, and their workshops and the resettled weavers, they assimilated in the west and sooner or later new designs emerged. Far Eastern Anatolia (give and take a little all area east of Euphrates) was forsaken; as the creative cradle of rug designs that it once was, it had stopped rocketing long ago, when eventually the focus of foreign rug experts fell on a tradition, that was now primarily associated with Western Anatolia. However, the tradition was continued in far Eastern Anatolia, NW Iran and neighbouring areas as well, among the wandering tribes and in villages almost up to the present day. The produce was nice enough ('collectible') but it seemed to be a humble reflection of the great 'classical' rugs identified in the west and therefore was regarded as minor copies of them according to the well known formula of designs being 'handed down from court to village' – in my theory, it is the humbler floors within the ancient empires in tents and villages on which the designs flourished probably since times immemorial, for every know and then one being elevated to a degree of highest refinement.

In 2007 at the Volkmann-Treffen in Berlin, Michael Franses lectured on the 'Star-Variant' of West-Anatolian Ushak design carpets. He gave a complete and thorough overview, and in his conclusion had to concede: "As I have stated before, when studying carpets, certain assumptions have to be made that are not provable. We do not know the circumstances under which the rugs were woven, nor do we know how the patterns were conceived or how they evolved. We do not know how the patterns of one 'atelier' influenced another, nor whether the weavers wove for themselves or made their carpets for sale. We assume that a cottage industry expanded with the increase in demand from Western Europe and that small 'ateliers' were financed by merchants. No evidence has thus far been discovered to link specific weavers or workshops to surviving carpets, none (of) which are either signed or dated. Indeed the only indication of their age is that some Ushak carpets have been depicted in Western paintings. But the artist may have been copying a rug seen in an older painting, so the rug depicted might be older than the painting we are looking at. On the other hand, the actual rug that we may wish to compare with one illustrated in a painting may be a much more recent version."

I greatly admire Michael Franses for his knowledge and experience, his matter-of-fact style of presenting, the honesty and transparency with which he names gaps in the collective knowledge. It seems reasonable to put forward in steps a different view, which may lead to a theory with fewer assumptions. In the given case this means attributing the Pohlmann / Scheunemann rug to Azerbaijan instead of Western Anatolia and establishing its ancestry in relation to a well known later group of rugs, as part of the 'Quest for the elusive Caucasian Rug' started by Pierre, the Caucasian 'Eagle' or 'Sunburst' type:

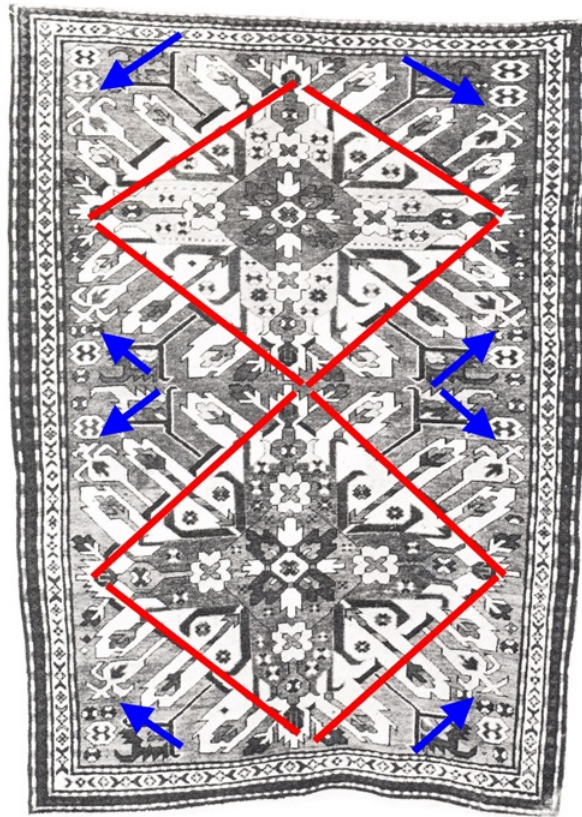


39 Westanatolien (Gebiet von Ushak), 17. Jahrhundert  
Western Anatolia (Ushak District), 17th Century




107 Kaukasus (Kasak), 19. Jahrhundert  
Caucasus (Kazak), 19th Century

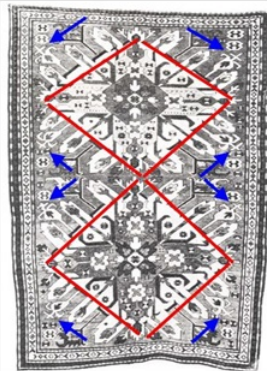




**The Quest for the elusive Caucasian rug – Coming home ?**  
 A comparison based on Erdmann(1975) - Early form and Caucasian transformation



Early form: plate 39 (15th c. ? ,Pohlmann' rug)  
supposedly Ushak / Bergama region



Transformation: plate 107 (Kasak 19th c.  
Munich Museum für Völkerkunde)

Regards,

Horst



January 31st, 2014, 08:50 PM

#8 □

[Horst Nitz](#)  
Members

Join Date: Feb 2013  
Posts: 16



Hi

I have to make an amendment. The Azerbaijan attribution is a likely one, but not certain. I was tired when I last posted and wanted to cut it short. No shortcut this time. I know it sounds awkward, but for correctness I

suggest 'Wider Upper Mesopotamia' instead, or abbreviated WUM, until I have thought out an easier term, or somebody else has come forward with a suggestion. WUM is meant to stand for the area east of Euphrates (Far Eastern Anatolia) stretching into Iran including present day Tabriz, and upwards through Mesopotamia from about the latitude of Seleucia Ctesiphon to the Aras (Araxes). This is, from a developmental perspective, the historically probably most important area, that has seen them all, the oldest rug we know of, the 'Pazyryk Rug', the biggest and presumably most valuable rug ever, the 'Spring of Khosrow' and others that were influential.

The most obvious attribute in the comparison of the two rugs above, is the shared double-diamond medallion. This is a very old form, going back to early Sassanid time, and by implication, its roots lay obviously in the east, in WUM. The ornamented halo with a garland of crosses - probably indicating ecclesia - as the most prominent single element in the chain like in the Pohlmann rug is repeated in a simplified but recognisable transformation in the Kazak rug; fewer crosses in this case, but the remaining ones in proper position. This can be regarded as a quotation of another early Sassanid era form. The same goes for the corner solution with its minute arrangement of dots (often small diamonds in other rugs of the region) that together make up a slightly bigger diamond in which they indicate the four corners. I hold it for quite possible, that the big double-diamond medallion is the much enlarged detail of the two minute diamonds on the vertical axis of the shape in the corners. Both rugs echo an era, when Nestorian Christianity was widespread in the region.

Regards,

Horst Nitz



February 7th, 2014, 07:27 PM

#9

[Horst Nitz](#)  
Members

**The elusive Nestorian rugs**

Sorry, posted in wrong thread.

Last edited by Horst Nitz; February 7th, 2014 at 07:32 PM. Reason: Sorry, posted in wrong thread.



February 12th, 2014, 01:15 AM

#10

[Horst Nitz](#)  
Members


Join Date: Feb 2013  
Posts: 16

As I see it, we have a Caucasian so-called Eagle or Sunburst Kazak from the Chelaberd, Gendje or East Karabagh area in or at the fringe of present day Azerbaidjan, which owes to an ancestry design shared with rugs of the Pohlmann type and the Scheunemann rug, introduced by Pierre Galafassi in the essay.

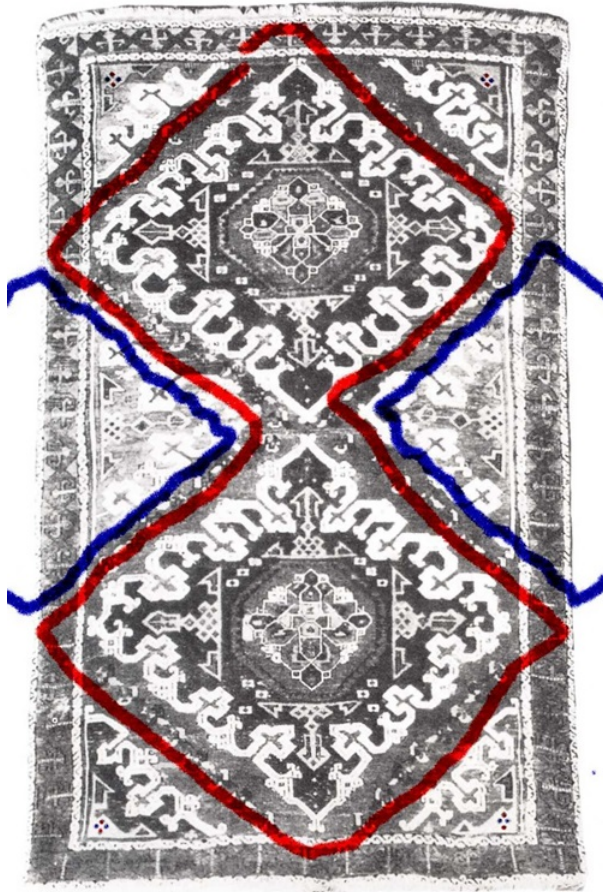
But why Sassanid and Nestorian; how do I know and, when did it happen?

Volkmar Ganzhorn in his book (Orientalische Teppiche) apparently feels ambivalent about a West Anatolian attribution of the rug in the literature, but consoles himself by stressing, that in the not far-off city of Bursa an Armenian bishop was seated until 1454, when he moved to Istanbul shortly after the conquest. However, with an Armenian filter applied to the rug, except for the obvious crosses in the garland, the specific symbolic content of the rug must have eluded him. In depth interpretation goes with an understanding of the Nestorian axioms of the time. The double diamonds on the vertical axis represent the hypostatic union, those on the horizontal axis God Father and Holy Spirit. Together the four diamonds form the Trinity in its peculiar (extended) Nestorian version.

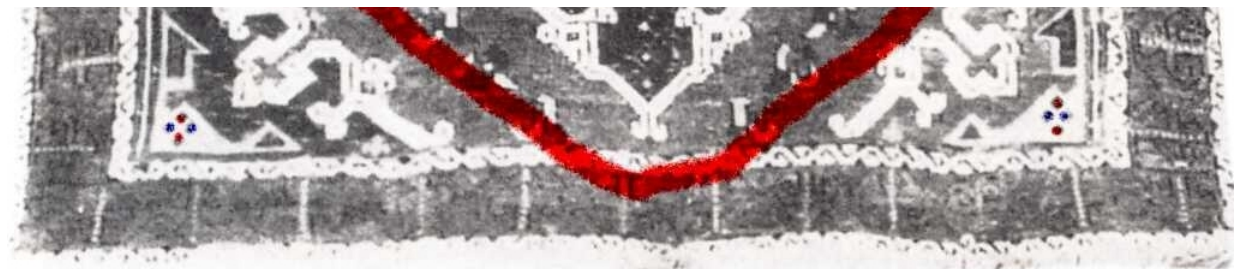
The Christian mission into the Caucasus progressed from the south (Parthia, Sassanid Iran) and from the west (Roman Empire). Eventually, Armenia was divided up between the two powers. With this, the whole area that I considered further up as likely but later origin of the Caucasian rug in the discussion, had become an Iranian dominion and open to intense missionary efforts on part of the Nestorians. This was when the time window for design influence was wide open. Later, the Armenian and Georgian churches increasingly established themselves as national churches and struggled for independence from Sassanid control. In the course of this development monophysitism gained the upper hand. With the fall of the Sassanid empire to the Arab conquest, and divided from the other churches by schism as a result of earlier councils, the Christological symbols of the Nestorian church became unacceptable in Armenia and faded into extinction. There are no records to prove this development, but it seems a fair assumption. At that time the window for design influence from the south was firmly closed already. But the design survived better in such areas that came under direct Muslim rule. This had happened to other designs as well, that had come from the south in earlier centuries. For a limited period after the collapse of the Byzantine Empire, the Church of the East (Nestorians) was able to expand its influence to the west, beyond Euphrates, perhaps to central Anatolia. But in principle, its influence ended at the river, the old border between the Roman and the eastern Empires.

The Nestorian Christology is dyophysical. The nature of Christ is understood as two hypostasis, Christ is God and human, the two natures are as distinct as they are inseparable and combine in the 'Hypostatic Union.' The two vertical 'diamonds' express this concept in image language. Its a little bit like this  (sorry for the badly drawn markings whilst on a train journey) :





The same arrangement in minute form is found in the four corners; red and blue markings are applied by me for better visibility:



Thank you Pierre, again, for your valuable essay and the opportunity it offered me to contribute my thoughts on the matter.

Regards,

Horst








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