

A Steep Learning Curve

'Kurdish Weavings: Diversity on Display' is currently showing at Minasian's of Evanston, Illinois. This broadly based Kurdish carpet exhibition prompts **Joseph W. Fell** to reconsider the rationale of uniting such a diverse assortment of rugs and textiles under the umbrella of ethnicity.

An exhibition of Kurdish rugs, united only by their ethnic origin, appears to raise a number of problems. There are too many Kurds, in too many tribes, in too many countries for a clear and cohesive Kurdish weaving tradition to have developed. To make it worse, many Kurds are interspersed with numerous other ethnic groups, between whom designs have flowed.

However the good news is that we're on a steep learning curve where Kurdish weavings are concerned. In the past most Kurdish rugs, particularly tribal pieces, were sold as inexpensive floor coverings, unworthy of serious study or differentiation. Recently, however, interest has grown considerably, and it turns out that this exhibition serves to help us understand a little better the diverse world of Kurdish rugs.

To have been largely ignored for so long provided a protection of sorts against some of the more corrupting influences to which all rugs are susceptible. Thus, there are many Kurdish weavings with a kind of unsophisticated honesty, a primitive vigour that rewards the faithful collector. And even the more commercial urban weavings – notably those of Sehna



Above: Malatya mixed technique flatweave (detail), east Anatolia, 19th century. 1.63 x 3.48m (5'4" x 11'5")

Below: A selection of rural and urban Kurdish rugs, carpets, and bags in Minasian's Evanston gallery

and Bijar – are distinctive and highly regarded, although there is still some question how many of them were actually woven by Kurds.

Minasian's exhibition – the sixth in a series – is one of the largest displays of Kurdish weavings ever staged, with 88 rugs, flatweaves, animal trappings, bags and bag faces from northwest and northeast Persia, Anatolia and Varamin. Nearly all are from private collections, including many from outside the Chicago area. There is a particularly impressive group of so-called 'Yürük' weavings, perhaps due to the largely local dispersal of the Ralph S. Yohe Collection, which represented one of the largest assemblages of Yürüks in private hands.

The cumulative effect of so many Kurdish weavings in one place is a powerful one, impressing on the viewer the scope and appeal of the genre. Beyond this general impression, a smaller number of pieces remain as highlights in the memory. One obvious candidate for this distinction is a well-published northwest Persian sumakh horse cover owned by a local dealer-collector (Peter Stone et al., *Mideast Meets Midwest*, 1993, pl.19), one of three or so





once in the Yohe Collection, and a Reyhanlı kilim from a private collection. But perhaps the most unusual flatweave of all is a large kilim from the Varamin area with an all-over pattern of small-scale flowers so finely executed it has some of the character of an antique Sehna kilim. There are also two mixed-technique Khorasan ('Quchan') pieces, a category that has been largely and unfairly neglected by all but a handful of collectors.

Half a dozen early Sauj Bulagh rugs provide an interesting lesson in the variety of designs used in this part of Kurdistan. United by a common palette and secondary border treatments, the field patterns are all different. One of the more interesting pieces has a somewhat cryptic rendition of a vase pattern.

An early Yürük with Memling-güls is particularly intriguing, as this design is seen less often in east Anatolia than in the Caucasus and northern Persia. Another interesting early Yürük is a fragment of a long rug with Holbein variant medallions and an archaic border.

Some thirty bags and bag faces from all over the Kurdish world almost warrant a separate exhibition. Ten Jaf tribal pieces have been given a corner of their own, arguably an overly generous amount of space for so simple a design, but perhaps justified by their prolific survival rate and the diversity of weaving techniques used.

There's even a mystery rug: a main carpet with a field design adapted from a well-known type of Karaja runner, but with a typically Kurdish weave, including selvedge and end



treatments, and a palette that could easily belong to Khorasan. Whatever its origin, it's a fascinating piece. Perhaps someone will come along and solve the mystery for us. In the meanwhile, there's more than enough primitive vigour to satisfy and occupy the Kurdish rug enthusiast.

Kurdish Weavings: Diversity on Display
Minasian Rug Company, 1244 Chicago Avenue, Evanston, Illinois, USA
5 October 2001 – 28 February 2002

examples known, all so similar in design and weave to suggest a single weaver or family of weavers. Not so well known is a large, attractive tree carpet from northwest Persia, probably early 19th century, with a main border of rosettes identical to those found on Talish rugs (see gallery view opposite). A Yürük fragment (above) with a lovely palette of coral, salmon and purple illustrates perfectly the well-known fact that weavers sometimes copy a rug from an earlier example. This is an exact copy, down to changes in border treatment and colours, of a specimen half as long, so that every single knot of the design repeats precisely twice.

Three *dozar*-size Bijars represent different trends in Bijar production: a skilfully woven medallion rug that could only have been made by a professional weaver; a 'boondocks' Bijar with a small *harshang* field and a wide arabesque border, so out-of-scale that one wonders if it wasn't intended as a sampler (HALI 118, p.10); and a Garrus-area rug with an arabesque field (above right), drawn to the scale of a large carpet. Another sampler? Or merely a village version of a commercial carpet? Another half-dozen Bijars reinforce these categories, including two room-size carpets.

There are seven large flatweaves, four of them from eastern Anatolia. Of the latter, a Malatya-area mixed-technique piece (facing page, top) was bought in Turkey in the late 19th century by American Quaker missionaries. There are two other Malatya-area pieces, both

Above left: Kurdish (yürük) long rug fragment (detail), east Anatolia, 19th century. 1.40 x 4.11m (4'7" x 13'6")

Above right: Bijar arabesque rug, northwest Persia, 19th century. 1.57 x 2.21m (5'2" x 7'3")

Right: Kurdish tribal rug, northwest Persia, 19th century. 1.47 x 1.93m (4'10" x 6'4")

