



Wayne Cable

## Gathering of the Tribes

In the seventh in its series of annual themed exhibitions, the Minasian Rug Co. in Evanston, Illinois offers visitors a mine of information on the weaving traditions of southern Persia. The rug world would benefit all round, says **Joseph W. Fell**, if there were more events of his kind.

The nomadic lifestyle of the tribes of southern Persia has been vanishing for generations, but the rugs and textiles these wandering nomads produced are fortunately still with us. Some of these are currently on display at the Minasian Rug Co. in Evanston, a large suburb north of Chicago. This exhibition, the seventh in a series, must be one of the largest ever assembled on this important weaving area. It features more than a hundred weavings of the Qashqa'i and Khamseh Confederations, the Lurs and Bakhtiari, as well as the Afshars from southwest of Kerman. There are even two old and well made Neriz rugs woven in the vicinity of the lake of the same name; somewhat obscure and seldom seen, these appear to be closely related to the weavings of the Khamseh Confederation.

Fortunately for this exhibition, Chicago and the Midwest are home to a number of collections containing south Persian weavings, and in particular the world-class collection of Tom Cook. A professor at Northwestern University who has specialised in collecting southwest Persian weavings for more than a quarter-century, Cook has loaned more than two dozen pieces, among them trappings, kilims, bags and bag faces as well as rugs.

Something rather interesting happens when you have an opportunity to view this many pieces from a single region in one place. The viewer is able to grasp the range and depth



Diane Alexander White

of a weaving tradition, a process normally achieved only by the slow and difficult process of accumulating information – which is then inevitably distorted by memory and the passage of time. So while such a show may not exactly offer instant knowledge, at least it establishes a framework for further encounters.

For example, the exhibition includes five rugs with the well-known 'Shekarlu' border, usually associated with the Qashqa'i but here shared with two Luri examples. When viewed together, their diversity is very apparent. They have different palettes, field ornamentation and interpretations of similar designs. Similarly, there are four outstanding examples of *murgh* (chicken) rugs of the Khamseh Confederation, usually attributed to the Arab tribe, but one of which has a decidedly different structure. As always, understanding is in the details.

Perhaps the biggest single surprise is the Luri rugs, which are often viewed as cruder versions of Qashqa'i weavings. A number of the most colourful and imaginative pieces in the show come from this tribe, including an especially attractive garden rug with lions in

Above: Southwest Persian tribal rugs and bags at Minasian's Evanston gallery

Left: Qashqa'i rug, southwest Persia, circa 1890. 1.60 x 3.18m (5'3" x 10'5")



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the corner patterns (above), and an almost indescribable long rug, one of the earliest pieces in the show, with horizontal panels containing a bewildering variety of symbols, among which are a number of bees. There are also several attractive Luri gabbehs, including the obligatory lion rug. A gold-field long rug with a vase pattern seems almost too sophisticated for the company it is keeping.

The weavings of the Khamseh are also a revelation of sorts, although less so than those of the Luri. The five tribes of the confederation turn out an astonishing variety of work. A number of Khamseh rugs from the Cook Collection belong in this category, including several previously published by David Black and James Opie, both pioneers in bestowing recognition on the weavings of this region. One of these, a medallion rug inspired by Persian city pieces, is assigned to the 18th century. A Khamseh saddle cover on a plain-woven red ground with sumakh brocading is an attractive example of tribal showmanship, as is a large 'mother-and-daughter' boteh rug with unusually light colours.

Not unexpectedly, the Qashqa'i are well represented, and particularly their colourful and bold kilims. One of these, a rare piece with wide diagonal stripes, could serve as an example of what makes Qashqa'i kilims so collectable. A large, citified main carpet with an ornate medallion clearly belongs to a small group of rugs inspired by commercially woven carpets, and usually thought to have been made for tribal leaders. Some small fine rugs show the classical garden theme of diamond medallions surrounded by a profusion of floral forms.

At least forty or fifty bags, trappings and bag faces of all the southern Persian tribes are spread through the three large rooms housing

the exhibition. While the majority are Qashqa'i, Khamseh and Luri, there is also an attractive group of Afshar and Bakhtiari bags and bag faces. Where possible, the bags with attractive kilim backings have been opened up, a good idea since in some instances the backs are more interesting than the fronts. This appears to be especially true of the Qashqa'i pieces.

While Bakhtiari rugs of real tribal character are in short supply (both here and on the market), there is a semi-antique gabbeh-type rug which the collector believes is Bakhtiari. Nothing about it clearly confirms or disproves this attribution, but it is unlike the better-known Luri gabbehs. The Bakhtiari bags and bag faces shown more than make up for the lack of rugs.

As a group, the Afshar weavings could have made a separate exhibition. Indeed, they seem to have a distinctive character that sets them apart from the southwest Persian pieces. This may be explained in part by the proximity of

Kerman to the Afshar domains, although it is also likely that the Afshars brought their own weaving tradition to southern Persia, elements of which have survived in a modified form.

Minasian's have devoted a great deal of time and expense to this show, and its predecessors. It's worth noting that these exhibitions are not sales events. All but a handful of the weavings are from private collections and with few exceptions are not for sale. The idea that rug exhibitions are worth organising because they create a better-informed public, and ultimately a more knowledgeable customer, is one that deserves to be more widely recognised and emulated. In the long run we'd all be better off.

#### Tribal Weavings of Southern Persia: Artifacts of a Vanishing Lifestyle

Minasian Rug Co., 1244 Chicago Avenue,  
Evanston, Illinois, USA

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Above: Luri garden design rug, southwest Persia, 19th century. 1.65 x 2.36m (5'5" x 7'9")

Right: Luri rug, southwest Persia, late 19th century. 1.63 x 2.39 (5'4" x 7'10")