

The Art of the Opportune

The recent exhibition at Minasian's in Evanston was the first devoted solely to Turkmen rugs and weavings ever presented in the Chicago area. **Joseph W. Fell**, who collected many of the pieces in the first place, offers an interested overview.

Tribal Identities

Turkoman Rugs from Central Asia

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

10 December 1999 – 27 February 2000

Writing about an exhibition which included some forty of my own rugs and trappings is a bit like being given the opportunity to write your own obituary. In short, it's too good to pass up. In defence of this act of hubris I would just say that that a lifetime of reading and writing reviews has reinforced my suspicion that most reviewers are no more objective than I am likely to be on this occasion.

In the early days, when most of my Turkmen pieces were acquired, I was an opportunistic collector; I bought whatever presented itself if I thought it was good, and if it was attainable in light of my finances. To a great extent, fate was in the driver's seat. Though Turkmen were my collectable of choice, there was no overriding purpose to the acquisition process, so I am unable to claim full credit for the final result. Rugs, at the time and place I did most of my collecting, were relatively plentiful and inexpensive – another reminder that being

older than the general population of rug collectors has its compensations.

The Minasian exhibit included some sixty pieces, all but a handful from private collections, and a majority from my own holdings, which I had the pleasure of seeing together for the first time. The scope was sufficient to enlighten the amateur as to the variety of items contained in the Turkmen universe, while there were enough interesting pieces for the connoisseur to make a visit worthwhile.

The principal tribes were reasonably well represented, but Yomut and Ersari works were especially prominent, in part due to the tastes of the collectors, but also to the local lack of early Salor and Saryk pieces. I did once own a fine Salor torba, but in a moment of financial need I sold it to a well-known collector who I knew would give it a good home.

From the extensive Yomut repertoire, in addition to four respectably old *asmalyks* and half a dozen *chuvals*, at least two of which arguably date to the early 19th century, there was an unusually attractive mid-19th century main carpet with *kepse* güls on a chestnut ground, and an appealing *ensi* with a rare green border. Neither of the latter, I'm sorry

to note, are from my collection. Two which are, however, are worth mentioning: an early main carpet with *tauk nuska* güls, and a well known 18th century mixed-gül carpet, last shown in the 1980 TM exhibition. It is rather primitive in its handling of design, indicative I believe of a relatively early date, since it must have taken time for Yomut weavers to transform a classical leaf and palmette motif into a conventional tribal gül. I am reluctant to consider the alternative explanation – that the weaver was either inexperienced or incompetent. Besides, who am I to argue with Jon Thompson and Louise Mackie, who assigned it to the 18th century long before I did.

Other Yomut pieces included an attractive flatwoven tent band, a money-bag face (?) in a tree design with nice colour, two additional main carpets (*dyrnak* and *kepse*), two flatweaves (one in a pile design), an *okbash* of intermediate date, and two early torbas, one of which, from a Milwaukee collection, deserved more than a casual glance. Apparently the work of

Minasian's Chicago Avenue gallery with an array of mainly Yomut tribal weavings, but including a rare Tekke bird *asmalyk* high on the right-hand wall and a grand Beshir 'palace' carpet on the floor.





one of those hard-to-pinpoint Yomut tribal offshoots, it has large-scale archetypal güls on a warm brown ground and a border of small squares containing single flowers: rather like an Arabachi, except for the symmetric knot and several other structural characteristics.

Ersari pieces included a long, narrow 'head and shoulders' prayer rug of the first half of the 19th century, with ascending columns of flowers, an excellent example of the type; an appealing small rug with a pattern of squares enclosing tulips; two large ensis, the more attractive of which has a rosy ground and a border which makes extensive use of a light green, a colour for which I have weakness, and which in my collecting days often compelled me to make an involuntary move for my chequebook; a *mina khani* design chuval of respectable age with magenta silk details; an unusual asmalyk with a small apex on a rectangular base, a veteran of several previous exhibits; a large chuval with horizontal stripes and long silky pile in unusually good condition, the result of some fifty years spent in a storage warehouse; and a rather thin but striking chuval with a modified ikat motif, a refined sense of space and a palette that includes, surprise, a wonderful dark green, the latter belonging to one of Chicago's longtime Turkmen collectors.

As is usual for this tribe, the Tekke pieces were fairly conventional. The earliest example on view was a bird asmalyk, the serendipitous antique store discovery of a local collector. Unfortunately rather worn and tattered, its fineness of weave, age and character impress nonetheless. It's one of those pieces you're lucky to have regardless of condition.

Above left: Ersari Turkmen prayer rug, first half 19th century. 0.99 x 1.93m (3'3" x 6'0"). Published: Renaissance Society, *Islamic Prayer Rugs*, Chicago 1973; Jones & Boucher, *The Ersari and their Weavings*, Washington 1975.

Above: Selected Tekke, Ersari and Chodor weavings.

Below: Yomut Turkmen multi-gül main carpet, 18th century. 1.57 x 2.54m (5'2" x 8'4"). Published: Mackie & Thompson, *Turkmen*, Washington 1980; Sienknecht, 'A Turkic Heritage', HALI 47, 1989.



Other notable early Tekke pieces included a main carpet on a warm madder-red ground; a torba with straight-sided güls; an unusual small rug with so called chuval güls, end panels with spindly flowers and a plum-coloured field; two chivals with horizontal stripes, one all pile and the other pile stripes on a kilim ground. And from the latter part of the 19th century, a main carpet with very well-drawn turreted Salor güls and archetypal minor güls. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this piece was its handle, which is as soft and flexible as a pashmina shawl. Less desirable is the presence of what are undoubtedly synthetic dyes.

The Saryk were represented by an early chuval with glossy wool and cotton details; a small rug with archetypal güls from around 1900; and a main carpet of approximately the same date with rather subdued colours but in excellent condition.

The floor of the exhibition gallery displayed two room-size carpets, an exceptional large Beshir (Bukhara?), with attractive colour and a wide main border, and an *ertmen gül* Chodor which was never meant for a nomad's tent.

This show was the fourth in a series presented over the past two years by the Evanston rug gallery, and more are planned as and when worthy themes are developed. While the main purpose is to cultivate a broader public for antique rugs, considerable attention has been given to the interests of serious collectors.

This is especially true of the Turkmen show, which by its very subject matter was collector-oriented. If it also broadened the horizons of a few individuals who were under the impression that the Turkmen rug was invented by royal weavers in Bukhara, so much the better.