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Exhibition Traces the Evolution of Turkish Carpet Designs

September 13, 2002 – February 16, 2003

May 12, 2002, Washington, DC — *The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets*, an exhibition focusing on the rich and complex history of Turkish carpets, will be on view at The Textile Museum September 13, 2002 – February 16, 2003. The exhibition, which includes over 50 carpets dating from the 15th through the 19th centuries, draws heavily on the Museum's core collection of masterpieces of Anatolian carpet weaving amassed by the Museum's founder, George Hewitt Myers. The exhibition also includes loans from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Jewish Museum in New York, and loans from a number of leading private collectors.

The exhibition is curated by Walter B. Denny, Professor of Art History at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and Consulting Curator at Smith College Museum of Art. Coordinating curator is Sumru Belger Krody, Associate Curator, Eastern Hemisphere Collections, The Textile Museum. *The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets* is accompanied by a fully-illustrated color catalogue.

Exhibition Overview

For centuries Oriental carpets have represented an expression of refined taste and aesthetic sensitivity in many cultures. They have been an integral part of religious and secular life, reflecting social status, commercial connections, wealth, and power. Whether used in mosques, in nomadic tents or in urban homes for prayer or daily living, Oriental carpets have served as both essential home furnishings and items of luxury. The pile carpets of Anatolia (today the Asiatic portion of the Republic of Turkey) make up perhaps the oldest and richest carpet-weaving tradition that survives in a significant number of examples today. These examples form a highly diverse body of art, almost seven centuries old and immensely varied in technique, design, symbolism, and function.



Carpet
Western or Northwestern Anatolia
19th century, TM R34.2.8
Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1913

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The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets explores this enduring tradition, from the classical examples of the 15th and 16th centuries, produced at and around the Ottoman Court, through the village weaving traditions of later times. The overriding theme of the exhibition is the creative tension that exists between tradition and innovation. *The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets* looks at the ways in which artistic traditions in Anatolia develop from roots in a “classical” period of carpet design, whose masterpieces have exerted a compelling influence on many generations of Anatolian weavers. Organized in pairs, trios and quartets of carpets sharing the same designs, the exhibition emphasizes the twin themes of continuity and change.

Central Themes of the Exhibition

The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets poses questions and probes many aspects of the origins and evolution of Anatolian carpet designs. **What were the major design sources that inspired the Anatolian carpet weavers? How can we recognize these sources in later Anatolian carpet-weaving traditions? What was the impact of the techniques used in weaving on the designs produced?**

In examining the various design sources for Turkish carpets, the exhibition explores the influence of Anatolia’s neighbors (Syria and Egypt to the south, and Tabriz to the east), and looks at the artistic environments in which carpets were produced. In the late 16th century, the *nakkash-hane*, literally “place of design,” which was attached to and directly subsidized by the Ottoman royal court in Istanbul, had a professional staff of salaried artists to execute royal artistic commissions in a variety of media. This court style exerted a great deal of influence on the development of the classical style of Anatolian carpet weaving.

The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets also looks at the transfer and evolution of designs from one type of textile to another. Historically Anatolian weaving demonstrates an interplay and transfer of designs between two related but highly distinct art forms: patterned woven luxury textiles (often silk) and pile carpets (almost always woven of wool).

The exhibition also explores the origins of the coupled-column Anatolian prayer rugs. Woven in many different parts of Anatolia in a continuing tradition for many centuries, coupled-column prayer rugs are among the most distinctive and interesting of Anatolian carpet designs. Coupled-column prayer rugs illustrate the endurance of specific designs and their transcription from one type of textile to another, from one culture to another, and from one generation to another.

One of the fundamental questions posed by the history of Anatolian carpet weaving and examined in this exhibition is the effect that the technique of pile carpet weaving and the challenges of the physical limitations of the loom have had on carpet weaving over the centuries. For example, one of carpet-weaving’s most interesting challenges—the vertical-horizontal knot ratio—affects the weavers ability to create complex curvilinear designs and is the prime determinant influencing the artistic forms expressed in carpet motifs.

Anatolian Carpets in the West

Pile carpets are one of the luxurious objects used for everyday life in the cultures where they are woven, but they also transformed the lives of Europeans in many ways for centuries. For Europeans, Oriental carpets were products from the mysterious and “exotic” East that were affordable only to the very wealthy. In tracing the history of pile carpets as an integral part of Western material culture, the primary source of our knowledge on their arrival in Europe comes from paintings. Included in the exhibition are a number of these so-called “painter” carpets—known for the sake of convenience by the names of European painters who preserved images of their designs and colors.

The earliest recognizable group of carpets depicted in Italian paintings is the small-pattern Holbein carpets. The exhibition includes several of the finest examples of this style of carpet—named after the 16th century painter Hans Holbein the Younger. Lotto carpets are another group represented in the exhibition. While this type of carpet is named for the painter Lorenzo Lotto, the earliest representation of this carpet design is seen in a Sebastiano del Piombo painting from 1516, *Cardinal Bandinello Sauli, His Secretary, and Two Geographers*. It now hangs in the Italian galleries of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. In addition to Holbein and Lotto, Giovanni Bellini, Carolo Crivelli, Domenico Ghirlandaio, and Hans Memling are among the European painters who inadvertently lent their names to early Anatolian weavings.

Catalogue & Support

The Classical Tradition in Anatolian Carpets is accompanied by a full-color catalogue with an introduction by Sumru Belger Krody, Associate Curator, Eastern Hemisphere Collections, The Textile Museum, and an essay by exhibition curator Walter B. Denny. Generous support for the exhibition and catalogue was provided by Jeremy and Hannelore Grantham, and Sotheby's, New York.

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Founded in 1925 by George Hewitt Myers, The Textile Museum is an international center for the exhibition, study, collection and preservation of the textile arts.

The Museum explores the role that textiles play in the daily and ceremonial life of individuals the world over. Special attention is given to textiles of the traditional societies of the Near East, Asia, Africa and the indigenous cultures of the Americas. The Museum also presents exhibitions of historical and contemporary quilts, and fiber art.

With a collection of over 17,000 textiles and carpets and an unparalleled library, The Textile Museum is a unique and valuable resource for people locally, nationally and internationally. For further information, call 202-667-0441.

For more information or photographs, please contact Julia Neubauer, Public Information Assistant, The Textile Museum, 202-667-0441, ext. 17. The Textile Museum is a private, non-profit museum open Monday through Saturday 10:00 am to 5:00 pm and Sunday 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm. Admission is free; suggested donation \$5.00.
