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## Dragons, Blossoms, Sunbursts: Textile Arts of the Caucasus

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# DRAGONS, BLOSSOMS, SUNBURSTS TEXTILE ARTS OF THE CAUCASUS

OCTOBER 15, 1989–FEBRUARY 25, 1990

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THE TEXTILE MUSEUM

## PREFACE

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Ursula E. McCracken,  
Director



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

## BENEFACTORS

## CREDITS

Geography is one subject of which we are ever mindful at The Textile Museum. Museum founder George Hewitt Myers chose his nation's capital for his home in the early part of this century. Subsequently, in 1925, he opened the doors of the stately buildings, once his residence, to an international public which he hoped would share in his appreciation of the historic and handmade textiles and carpets of the world. Myers' fondness for the intricate design and draughtsmanship of the brilliantly-colored rugs and embroideries from the Caucasus was much in evidence at the Museum during those early days, and the quality and selectiveness of The Textile Museum collection has long been acclaimed by scholars.

In an age and in a city where the opening of diplomatic doors is greeted with enthusiasm, we take pride in opening an exhibition which celebrates at once the beauty and brilliance of the textile arts of the Caucasus, the mountainous region between the Black and Caspian Seas in the Soviet Union. *Dragons, Blossoms, Sunbursts: Textile Arts of the Caucasus* follows the ground-breaking Textile Museum exhibitions *From the Bosphorus to Samarkand* in 1969 and *Early Caucasian Rugs* in 1975. The current exhibition, curated by Carol Bier, continues that tradition of excellence. Presenting a rich array of rugs and embroideries, drawn from The Textile Museum's and other notable collections, the exhibition illustrates the close relationship between design and structure in these textile arts and reflects the diversity apparent in the region and its peoples.

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From The Textile Museum's holdings of nearly 250 Caucasian carpets and textiles, 25 have been selected for this exhibition. Included in this number are two which have recently come into the possession of the Museum through the bequest of Arthur D. Jenkins, former President of the Board of Trustees. These objects are complemented by loans from eight private and public collections. We are pleased to acknowledge the generosity of the following individuals and institutions in lending materials for this exhibition:

James D. Burns, Harold Mark Keshishian,  
Dr. and Mrs. William T. Price, Wendel R. Swan,  
the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,  
Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Wolf  
and two additional anonymous lenders

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Sotheby's, Inc. • Estate of Arthur D. Jenkins • HALI Publications, Ltd. • National Capital Arts and Cultural Affairs Program • National Endowment for the Arts • Oriental Rug Retailers of America, Inc. • Robert O. Scholz Foundation • Louise Woodhead Antique Textiles and Oriental Rugs • Christie's

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Produced by The Textile Museum, Public Relations Office, Rebecca Caldwell, Manager;  
Design by Chip MacCormack; Photography by Franko Khoury.

## DRAGONS, BLOSSOMS, SUNBURSTS:

Textile Arts of the  
Caucasus

Carol Bier, Curator,  
Eastern Hemisphere  
Collections, The Textile  
Museum



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## DRAGONS



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Rugs from the Caucasus have long been appreciated in Europe and America. Widely known for their bright colors and bold designs, Caucasian rugs have attracted collectors for nearly a century. These rugs, produced in towns and villages, reflect regional design traditions which were amalgamated from diverse sources.

Although embroideries and flatweaves (rugs without pile) from the Caucasus are less well known in the West, their designs are no less bold nor their colors less striking. Produced as a domestic art, they were destined for home use and local commerce. The richness of patterns in these textile arts is in part the result of the comings and goings through the Caucasus of peoples from east and west, north and south. Those who settled in the mountainous regions between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea migrated there from elsewhere, halted by the barrier of the great mountains. Others were drawn to the region on mercantile business, sometimes leaving in their wake an imprint of their own regional traditions in the arts.

For these reasons, Caucasian rugs, which were primarily woven for commercial purposes and for export, probably represent more distinct and disparate design traditions than rugs from any other rug-producing area of the world.

Three of the most popular designs in weavings of the Caucasus are stylized dragons, blossoms, and sunbursts. A fourth variation on a related theme, the medallion, has even wider popularity in Oriental carpets from Turkey and Persia. This exhibition, drawn primarily from The Textile Museum's holdings and complemented by loans from private collections and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, presents a rich array of dragons, blossoms, sunbursts, and medallions. Exquisite embroideries are displayed next to flatweaves and carpets, which reflect the same designs though executed in different techniques.

The close relationship between structure and design in these textile arts suggests that pile carpets from the Caucasus, woven in the commercial environment of the late 19th and early 20th century, are for the most part derivative, based upon indigenous design traditions that evolved for embroidery, soumak (weft-wrapping), and kilim (slit tapestry) techniques.

Historically, the oldest carpets in the exhibition, the "dragon" carpets, are the oldest known Caucasian carpets. They date from a time when the Safavid empire extended northwest into southern regions of the Caucasus. It is speculated that Shah Abbas, who actively supported economic development throughout his realm, may have been instrumental in establishing rug weaving in the Caucasus as a commercial activity. Certainly, the width of "dragon" carpets required broad beams for their production, suggesting the need for strong capitalization. Their stock designs, though complex, also hint at commercial production.

The main design motifs, after which this category of Caucasian carpets gets its name, are dragons. There are also phoenixes, lions, ducks, and other highly stylized animal forms, often with floriated elements in the composition. The extreme stylization of designs even makes it difficult at times to identify the visual image. Ultimately derivative of the arts of China, where the dragon is a beneficent symbol, these motifs probably appear in carpets of the Caucasus through the medium of Islamic art, possibly from direct Safavid influence.

## BLOSSOMS



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Flowers are the greatest single source of design inspiration in Oriental carpets. Rich varieties of naturally occurring forms are endlessly played with in the formulation of graphic designs which employ color, outline, and principles of symmetry. Floral forms are traditionally presented in full view, as seen from above, to form what is generically called a rosette, or in profile, to form what is called a palmette. Floral forms, too numerous to enumerate, proliferate in all textile arts of the Caucasus.

Within the layout of pairs of dragons and phoenixes in "dragon" carpets from the Caucasus, there are many stylized floral blossoms most often presented in profile. The distinct arrangement of individual blossoms, with an identifiable top and bottom, sometimes lends an axial orientation to the carpet. Petals and base are displayed symmetrically on either side of a vertical axis.

Similar blossoms occur as secondary motifs in carpets with sunburst designs, and serve as individual pattern units in the central field of carpets with infinite repeats, arbitrarily terminated by surrounding borders. Sometimes these are arranged in a staggered alignment of offset rows of blossoms.

## SUNBURSTS



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A favorite floral design in weavings of the Caucasus is referred to as a sunburst. Representing a blossom viewed from above, it shows biaxial symmetry in which composite petals radiate from a central point. The geometric stylization of a flower here is based on a primary orthogonal axis, with a secondary orthogonal axis rotated 45 degrees. The resulting floral rosette has a quadripartite division.

Carpets with the sunburst design are sometimes called "Eagle Kazaks," although their structural features relate them more closely to carpets produced in the Karabagh region to the south of Kazak. They are also sometimes called "Chelaberd" after the name of a district in Karabagh. Some carpets with sunburst designs show visual relationships with dragon carpets and blossom carpets, not only in the form of designs, but also in the use of bright vibrant colors, qualities of wool, and structural features.

## MEDALLIONS



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Squares, diamonds, hexagons, octagons, and star formations are basic to the design of Oriental carpets. Like blossoms in weavings of the Caucasus, there is a playfulness evident in how these elements are arranged and disposed. Very often what at first glance appear to be simple geometric forms, when viewed more carefully are seen to be effective geometric stylizations of buds and blossoms.

As in blossom and sunburst carpets, principles of symmetry are important in establishing the repertory of visual images. Arrows, chevrons, crosses, hooks, and double-curving S-shapes create a sense of intricate complexity to basic units of geometric forms.

## RECOMMENDED READINGS



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Bennett, Ian. *Oriental Rugs. Vol. 1, Caucasian*. London, 1981.

Burns, James D. *The Caucasus: Traditions in Weaving*. Seattle: Court Street Press, 1987.

Ellis, Charles Grant. *Early Caucasian Rugs*. Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1975.

Landreau, Anthony N. and Pickering, W.R. *From the Bosphorus to Samarkand: Flat-Woven Rugs*. Washington, D.C.: The Textile Museum, 1969.

Price, William T. *Divine Images and Magic Carpets*. Amarillo: Amarillo Art Center, 1987.

Schürmann, Ulrich. *Caucasian Rugs*. Braunschweig/London, 1967.

Tschebull, Raoul. *Kazak: Carpets of the Caucasus*. New York, 1971.

An annotated list of readings on Caucasian carpets, compiled by Curator Carol Bier, is available from the Arthur D. Jenkins Library at The Textile Museum. All materials are available for public reference during library hours, Wednesday through Friday, 10 am to 5 pm; Saturday, 10 am to 2 pm. Several of these references are also available for purchase through The Textile Museum Shop. Contact the Shop at (202) 667-0441 for a current catalog or for further information.

## CHECKLIST



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**1** Embroidery panel  
Central Caucasus  
18th or 19th century  
TM 2.18  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1952  
60.25 × 48.25 in

**2** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus (Kazak)  
19th century  
TM R36.5.10  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1920  
103 × 74 in

**3** Embroidery panel  
Central Caucasus  
18th or 19th century  
TM 2.11  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers before 1938  
41.50 × 27.75 in

**4** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
18th or 19th century  
TM R36.2.4  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1916  
192 × 82 in

**5** Pile carpet fragment  
Central Caucasus  
18th or early 19th century  
TM 1968.10.3/2  
Purchase by The Textile Museum  
52 × 30.5 in

**6** Embroidery panel  
Central Caucasus  
18th or 19th century  
TM 2.6  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1915  
46.25 × 27 in

**7** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
Early to mid-19th century  
L1989.8.2  
Collection of James D. Burns  
71.5 × 50 in

**8** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
Dated 1850  
L1989.11.1  
The Virginia Museum of  
Fine Arts  
Gift of Dr. Robert A. Fisher, 67.51.6  
75 × 47.25 in

**9** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
18th or early 19th century  
L1989.6.1  
Collection of Dr. and Mrs.  
William T. Price  
110 × 62 in

**10** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
19th century  
L1989.2.1  
Private collection  
53.5 × 70 in

**11** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
18th or early 19th century  
TM R36.2.12  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers  
216.25 × 95 in

**12** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
17th or 18th century  
TM R36.1.1  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1916  
195 × 93 in

**13** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
17th or 18th century  
TM R36.1.2  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1923  
142.5 × 71.5 in

**14** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
17th or 18th century  
L1989.9.1  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.  
Marshall Wolf  
202 × 95 in

**15** Flatweave (*soumak*)  
Caucasus  
19th century  
TM 1974.19.2  
Gift of the National Rug and  
Textile Foundation  
124.5 × 68.75 in



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- 16** Flatweave (*soumak*)  
Caucasus  
19th century  
TM 1971.7.1  
Gift of Charles Grant Ellis  
117 × 76 in
- 17** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
Late 17th or 18th century  
L1989.4.3  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1916  
Collection of Harold Mark  
Keshishian  
251 × 96 in
- 18** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
Late 17th or 18th century  
TM 1976.10.4  
Purchase of the Arthur D. Jenkins  
Gift Fund and Proceeds from the  
Sale of Art  
168.75 × 89 in
- 19** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
Late 19th or 20th century  
TM 1977.36.52  
Gift of Jerome A. and  
Mary Jane Straka  
88 × 57 in
- 20** Flatweave (*kilim*)  
Eastern Caucasus  
Late 19th or 20th century  
TM L1981.16.8  
Bequest of Arthur D. Jenkins  
129 × 64 in
- 21** Flatweave (*kilim*)  
Eastern Caucasus  
Late 19th or 20th century  
TM L1978.5.104  
Bequest of Arthur D. Jenkins  
133.5 × 69 in
- 22** Pile rug  
Eastern Caucasus  
Late 19th or 20th century  
L1989.6.6  
Collection of Dr. and Mrs.  
William T. Price  
approx. 84 × 60 in
- 23** Pile carpet  
Caucasus  
18th or 19th century  
TM R36.5.5  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1926  
157 × 87 in
- 24** Embroidery panel  
Caucasus  
18th or 19th century  
TM 2.1  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1915  
46.25 × 27.25 in
- 25** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
Late 18th or 19th century  
TM R36.2.2  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1926  
137 × 78.5 in
- 26** Embroidery panel  
Caucasus  
18th or 19th century  
TM 2.9  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1926  
62.25 × 47.5 in
- 27** Pile carpet  
Central Caucasus  
18th or 19th century  
TM R36.5.1  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1916  
122 × 68 in
- 28** Pile runner  
Southern Caucasus  
19th or 20th century  
L1989.6.2  
Collection of Dr. and Mrs.  
William T. Price  
151 × 45.5 in
- 29** Bagface (*soumak*)  
Southern Caucasus (Shahsavan)  
Late 19th or 20th century  
L1989.6.4  
Collection of Dr. and Mrs.  
William T. Price  
22 × 20.5 in
- 30** Bagface (*soumak*)  
Southern Caucasus (Shahsavan)  
19th century  
TM 1976.36.2  
Gift of Mrs. Joseph V. McMullan  
17.25 × 20.5 in
- 31** Pile runner  
Southern Caucasus  
19th or 20th century  
TM R36.3.3  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1915  
153 × 42 in
- 32** Pile runner  
Southern Caucasus  
Late 19th or 20th century  
L1989.5.1  
Private collection  
157 × 41 in
- 33** Bagface (*soumak*)  
Southern Caucasus (Shahsavan)  
Late 19th or 20th century  
L1989.8.3  
Collection of James D. Burns  
22.5 × 24 in
- 34** Bag (*soumak*)  
Southern Caucasus (Shahsavan)  
Late 19th or 20th century  
L1989.3.1  
Collection of Wendel R. Swan  
45.5 × 22 in
- 35** Bag (*soumak*)  
Southern Caucasus (Shahsavan)  
Late 19th or 20th century  
L1989.6.5  
Collection of Dr. and Mrs.  
William T. Price  
approx. 52 × 23 in
- 36** Flatweave (dove-tailed tapestry)  
Eastern Caucasus  
20th century  
L1989.8.1  
Collection of James D. Burns  
125 × 57.5 in
- 37** Pile rug  
Eastern Caucasus  
Late 19th or 20th century  
L1989.4.1  
Collection of Harold Mark  
Keshishian  
60 × 38 in
- 38** Pile rug  
Eastern Caucasus  
Late 19th or 20th century  
L1989.4.2  
Collection of Harold Mark  
Keshishian  
52.5 × 38.5 in
- 39** Pile rug  
Eastern Caucasus  
Late 19th or 20th century  
TM R36.4.2  
Acquired by George Hewitt  
Myers, 1914  
54 × 41 in

## THE TEXTILE MUSEUM

2320 'S' Street, NW Washington, DC 20008

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