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The Craft and Commerce of Oriental Carpets: Cultural Implications of Economic Success and Failure

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The Craft and Commerce of Oriental Carpets: Cultural Implications of Economic Success and Failure

Abstract
What we recognize now as oriental carpets, especially pile-carpets, are currently made in most of the countries of the Middle East, North Africa, and southwest and Central Asia, including of course Pakistan and India, as well as China. The technique originated before 500 B.C. somewhere in the area that later became the culturally Irano-Turkic part of Asia. Royal patronage under the Sasanians (if not earlier empires) raised carpet production to the status of high art. The most highly regarded carpets have continued to come from Irano-Turkic areas (including the Caucasus). Carpets made to the west and south of these areas have remained derivative in both technique and design, and less admired, though sometimes of objectively excellent craftsmanship. (The Chinese tradition is also derivative but developed independently.)

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Making Things in South Asia: The Role of Artist and Craftsman

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The Craft and Commerce of Oriental Carpets: 
Cultural Implications of Economic Success and Failure

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What we recognize now as oriental carpets, especially pile-carpets, are currently made in most of the countries of the Middle East, North Africa, and southwest and Central Asia, including of course Pakistan and India, as well as China. The technique originated before 500 B.C. somewhere in the area that later became the culturally Irano-Turkic part of Asia. Royal patronage under the Sasanians (if not earlier empires) raised carpet production to the status of high art. The most highly regarded carpets have continued to come from Irano-Turkic areas (including the Caucasus). Carpets made to the west and south of these areas have remained derivative in both technique and design, and less admired, though sometimes of objectively excellent craftsmanship. (The Chinese tradition is also derivative but developed independently.)

Like other textiles, a pile-carpet begins with weaving on a loom set up with warp threads, the ends of which usually provide the fringe at either end of the finished product. The webbing at the beginning and end of the weaving may be simple weft on warp, but may be elaborated by one or another of a number of flat-weave techniques. The body of the carpet is produced by tying rows of knots around overlapping pairs of warp threads. Each row of knots is held in place by the insertion of one or more weft threads before the next row is added. The ends of the knots are cut evenly to constitute the pile. In a fine carpet they are cut very close to the base. In order to achieve the desired degree of tightness and evenness of weave and density of knots, after every few rows — before the cutting — the weavers beat the weft threads and the pile back towards them with a comb-like implement, the teeth of which fit over the warp threads. This action also has the effect of making the pile of traditionally handwoven carpets incline permanently in one direction, towards the end the weaver started from. For this reason, throughout the life of the carpet, light strikes the ends of the knots at different angles according to the position of the viewer and, in the case of some qualities of wool (and especially of silk), makes the colors appear different from different angles, contributing to the overall appeal of the product.
We do not know the origin of the craft or at what time it became an integral part of the material culture of the rural sector of Irano-Turkic society, but from the time of the earliest evidence onwards, there appear to have been two separate but related traditions of carpet-weaving: tribal carpets, made with household materials for household purposes (whether or not they later found their way onto the market), and urban carpets, made for and financed by the market, with materials provided by it. It is useful to represent the history of the craft and the trade in terms of (1) tribal (female) weavers working in the home on horizontal looms with their own materials, among whom the relations of production emphasized the structure of the family and the symbolism of the carpet elaborated the meanings of the family and community life; and (2) urban weavers (mostly minors and males) working outside the home on vertical looms for wages under a master. Between these two traditions there evolved very early on a grey area of rural producers, living close in, who worked for gain and were financed to varying degrees by local or regional businessmen.

Oriental carpets (both tribal and urban, and their imitations) are, despite their variety, immediately recognisable by their design, which is composed by using different colored wools for the knots that constitute the pile. While their is a broad range of designs, they fall easily into two types: figurative and geometric. Urban carpets are mainly figurative, while many tribal carpets favor geometric motifs. The figurative designs of classic urban carpets can easily be traced back to such elitist inspirations as royal gardens. It is possible that the geometric designs of tribal carpets go back to similar origins. Other aspects of the relationship between village and city, or between desert and sown, in the history of the Middle East suggest that tribal carpets are likely to be in large measure derivative of urban forms. The historical success of the craft is due to the fact that it was developed under royal patronage while it continued to be practiced in rural and nomadic communities for household use. This social range and variation in the relations of production has been responsible for the great variety that we associate with oriental carpets.

Apart from wood for the simple horizontal loom, all other materials for the tribal weaver could be generated locally, for the most part within the household, and it was feasible for each family to provide all of its production needs. For example, the typical Turkmen carpet (a perennial favorite with collectors) was until recently made entirely of wool, except perhaps for a little cotton or silk to provide a color, especially white, that was rare or difficult to achieve with their own karakul breed of
sheep. The fact that the weaver, typically a daughter or wife, was closely associated in everyday life with the flock manager, typically the household head, was important. A good carpet required wool spun differently for three different purposes (warp, weft, and pile). A good warp is so fine and strong that the unaccustomed observer may fail to recognize it as wool. The secret lies in the choice of the longer fibers from the fleece, in the carding as well as the spinning. For each purpose, the weaver selects wool sheared at a particular season from a particular part of animals of a particular age. There is much in such a technology that is easier to organize in a household that manages all the operations, from animal husbandry to carpet production, than with the division of labor and relations of production typical of a more complex economy. Moreover, independent household production encourages a particular type of personal and communal association with the product and with its design, which is reflected in the artistic dynamism and integrity of the product. In the household mode of production, the carpet has intense symbolic value for the producers — which dissipates as the productive process is drawn into the larger economy. There are also practical considerations. A weaver who accepts wool from the market loses the ability to control quality and to differentiate types of wool for different purposes. But there are also benefits in centralisation. Dyeing, for example, can be done more efficiently on a large scale.

The urban (or factory) type of carpet has changed little as the result of modernisation. Some of the most exquisite carpets known to us were produced for the Safavid court in Iran in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. But they may have been no better than those at the Sasanian court in the third-seventh centuries. The only significant difference in today’s carpets of the same type may be some improvement in the lot of the weavers and a decline in quality, which has led to a situation where many of the better modern products (the famous Persian carpets, such as Nains and Kashans) have been priced out of the international market.

The tribal or household type of carpet, on the other hand, has been almost entirely drawn into the grey area of urban (or international) dependency. The process began gradually with the diffusion of artificial dyes in the second half of the nineteenth century, accelerated in the second half of this century with the increasing economic demand of the Western world, and was finally completed by the unstabilising effects of severe drought, especially in Afghanistan, in the early 1970s.

Although we know little about the early history of the production of oriental carpets, we have a reasonable amount of information about
the recent history of international consumption, about how oriental carpets came to be an integral part of the material environment of the Western world. Once they had become an object of royal patronage and manufacture, they became also an object of long-distance trade. As the trade moved westwards, the oriental carpet influenced the textile production of the West. Eventually, in the nineteenth century, imitation oriental carpets began to be mass-produced in Europe and America. Consumers sought them because of their interest in objets that were not only highly functional but exotic (in fact they were not commonly used for floor-covering in the West until the eighteenth century.) By including an oriental carpet in his home a man made a statement about himself to his community. He sought distinction (Bourdieu 1984). A well-chosen oriental carpet on the floor suggested that the personal significance of the owner transcended the affairs of the local community, both linking him to another category of people with whom he wished to be associated and giving him a distinctive image among them. I represent my criteria for choosing the carpet I display in terms of its authenticity. I distinguish myself by projecting my concern for distinction into my reconstruction of the social and cultural provenance of the carpet. As economies expand and demand increases, more and more people wish to make such statements about themselves — even people who are less experienced in the social game of distinction or who cannot afford authenticity. These people may be happy to buy Western imitations.

Although oriental carpets found their way into Europe very early, on the scale we are familiar with today the trade essentially began with the mechanisation of textile production in the West in the middle of the nineteenth century. A little later, in the second half of the nineteenth century, oriental carpet production was drawn irrevocably into the world economy, initially through the attraction of chemical dyes. By the turn of the century there had been a quantum increase in the numbers of oriental carpets reaching the West, and a qualitative change (caused by the influence of the West-dominated world economy) in the production process. Until this time, although it would probably not be true to say that production was untouched by any influence from the international market, such influence had been relatively slight. Since then, and even more since about 1975, the demand of the international market has increased to the point where it dominates all considerations of production even in the most isolated Asian rural communities.

The international carpet trade has been exceptional in economic history both for its stability (what other product has enjoyed consistent
and expanding demand for at least 2,500 years?) and for its reliance on the mutual interdependence of culturally different producers and consumers in different parts of the world who had no direct communication with each other. The merchandise worked its way through chains of dealers in Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe — especially Bukhara, Istanbul, Venice, and London. What the Iranian or Turkic weaver wanted to produce and what the Western consumer wanted to buy coincided only by chance — though the odds were increased by Western interest in exotic authenticity. Neither had any idea of the other, or of the social or cultural conditions that shaped their conception of the ideal carpet. During the second half of this century, however, the situation has changed, and continues to change at an increasing rate, as a result of global changes in technology and communications.

In the 1970s the supply of both old and new carpets increased significantly. In Afghanistan, in particular, the economic difficulties caused by the Sahelian drought had the effect of flushing out onto the market priceless heirlooms that would otherwise never have been sold. In the mid-70s even antique carpets could sometimes be found at bargain prices. At the same time, orphaned children were trained to weave carpets for the Western market in factory-type situations. Prison inmates were similarly employed. Most significantly, financiers and dealers from the eastern end of the trade network were able and encouraged to visit the West and see for themselves the consumption of their products and to communicate directly with the consumer, making their own deals instead of working through multiple intermediaries. For the first time, producers saw the opportunity to open up new markets by adapting production to satisfy demand.

This process was encouraged by the accelerating expansion of demand. Oriental carpets had become important accessories in fairly routine interior design. Every department store displayed them. This new type of demand has generated a need for a new type of production: an oriental carpet that would compete with the factory-produced imitation from Western as well as other Asian countries. It was no longer just the best oriental carpets that were in demand but the whole range of quality and value. Instead of one Western criterion of assessment, the connoisseurship of authentic craftsmanship, there were two: to the collector's criteria of connoisseurship were added those of modern interior design. The two did not always coincide. The result of this recent accelerated process (based mainly in England and Germany) has been some instability and change in the connoisseurship of older carpets (some types of carpet, such as Baluches, that were ignored by collectors
twenty years ago are now highly valued), and considerable modification of designs, mixing of motifs, and experimentation in colors in current production.

By filling this new market niche with products from the lower end of their quality range, many traders from the Middle East have made new fortunes, but there have also been significant commercial failures. Afghan producers in particular (especially Turkmen, the generic merchants of Central Asia) have for the first time tried to capitalise directly on their new opportunity to produce for the expanding Western market by assessing Western taste themselves, redesigning their product, and undercutting Western imitations. They seem unable, however, to understand the dynamics of Western taste, either the Western quest for authenticity or the criteria of modern interior design. The commercial problems they have run into are now exacerbated by the recent U.S. Congress' withdrawal of 'most favored nation' status from Afghanistan. The Indian and Pakistani dhurrie is presently more successful than Afghan products at the lower end of the market for exotic floor covering. Dhurries are simple loosely woven throws, often wool weft on cotton warp, with minimal decorative embroidery. They are simpler and easier to produce and to redesign, and require relatively little investment in training or materials, than pile carpets. It is worth noting that the dhurrie is produced by Pakistanis and Indians who have had 150 years of experience adapting to Western tastes. Afghans do not have such experience.

The trade in oriental carpets was successful on a relatively large scale in a particular period, roughly 1870 to 1970. The top of the market continues to be held by antique and old 'authentic' pieces. The craft (which for the time being will survive on the local and regional demand which has always been its main support) is losing the competition for the middle and lower sectors of the international market, which currently are held by imitations and derivative work from the periphery and by the dhurrie.

This present evolution of the relationship between producer and consumer in the international trade in oriental carpets carries with it some lessons for our study of inter-cultural communication generally. As long as there were chains of intermediaries between the two poles of a culturally distant economic relationship, the relationship worked, but it worked at a relatively low volume of trade. Only a small proportion of the total production of oriental carpets was consumed in the West and the consumers were 'up-market.' Now that producer has met consumer
and attempted to move down-market in order to increase sales, acquire more control of the market, and to deal directly across what may be an unprecedented cultural distance, the relationship is no longer working. We tend to put this type of failure down to straightforward economic factors, but these factors themselves are due to the cultural inability of producers to 'read' the consumers. Although producer and consumer interact and communicate about the tastes of the consumer and the abilities of the producer, somehow the producer does not satisfy the consumer. When the consumer could not interact with the producer, 'authenticity' itself supported the trade. Direct demand for specific, objective, products across the same cultural gap (and where authenticity no longer is a factor) does not work.

Anthropologists have long studied cultures in contact, but they have emphasized the processes by which people in neighboring cultures modify their values, interpretations, and their interaction in order to understand and live with each other. In the study of acculturation (which has been the study of the process of the breaking down of cultural barriers) we have taken it for granted that cultures in contact will adapt to each other, that mutual understanding (like ecological adaptation) is bound to come about, and that the cultural barriers to understanding will always break down. Even if this is inevitable in the long run, it may be more relevant that it does not occur in the short term. Based on the experience of the last decade or so, typified by the Afghan carpet producer in America but equally true for other visiting, immigrant, refugee groups, immediate social accommodation in some degree may be the norm, but cross-cultural understanding does not necessarily occur.

The success of the dhurrie typifies the public culture of a pluralist world. We live in the age of the dhurrie. The Western market is interested in products with exotic flair that are not too durable or too expensive. The success of the dhurrie in competition with even the less expensive varieties of handwoven oriental pile-carpets is a phenomenon instructive in demonstrating the problems and processes of cross-cultural communication in the modern world, which differ from the past because of the rate, quantity, and complexity of such communication today.
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