

Weavers and dealers: the authenticity of an oriental carpet

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The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilisation and culture. Edward Said, *Orientalism*

Carpets, oriental

Oriental carpets have been recognized as prestigious furnishing in the West since the Middle Ages.¹ In many ways, they represent the epitome of Western concern with alien things – especially utilitarian alien things. Carpets entered the Western cultural arena as a rare alien item of interest and eventually became a commodity. But commoditization does not adequately explain their continuing success in the market or the special attention they receive from collectors.

Why should this Western concern with the Other be epitomized in the Oriental Carpet? More significantly why should oriental carpets still generate increasing demand, become ever more rather than less available, be stocked in a wider range of shops, and deployed in a steadily wider range of homes? The expansion apparently continues despite the changes in product and supply that result from accelerating social change and political disruption in the countries where they are produced. Oriental carpets are now bought and sold at a number of different levels of the market, from discount department stores to exclusive dealers available by appointment only. Objectively, they may be new or old (not “second-hand”), large or small. There is a wide range of price, durability, materials, designs, colors; the dyes may be natural or chemical. They may be purchased as floor covering, for decor, or as a collector’s item. People who knew them only from books and museums now buy their own, join rug societies, become collectors. Like other objects of conspicuous consumption, carpets first became luxury furnishing for the elite, and have now gone the way of so many luxuries in recent times and become available throughout the middle class. But they have not lost their elitist appeal in the process.

Is the oriental carpet we buy today in fact, as we like to think, the

same commodity that began to be traded in bulk in the last century – let alone the same as rarer examples that are displayed in museums, such as the Boston Hunting Carpet (*Boston Museum Bulletin* 1971) or documented in medieval paintings such as the fifteenth-century Memlings (see, for example, the “Madonna and Child Enthroned” in the Louvre)? The criterion of age tends (implicitly, at least) to be foremost in any evaluation. Even if it were possible to produce identical artifacts today, they would not compete on the market with antiques because of the value we attribute to relative age. But even though antique rugs still no doubt provide much of the basic inspiration and rationale for the market and for collecting, they supply only a very small and still declining proportion of it. Moreover, if we compare what was written about carpets around the turn of the century with what is being written now, it is clear that despite the quasi-genetic relationship – the continuity of the craft – there is a difference between what the average buyer thought he was buying then, what it meant to him, and the equivalent today. The change can be seen in the value and the supply of antiques, in the logistics of production and the social context of consumption. In the straightforward material sense (which seems always to be uppermost in our consciousness), it is still possible to come by an antique – technically, that is to say, in the definition of U.S. Customs, assumed to have been produced before about 1880. But most of the examples we see at auctions, in dealers’ showrooms, and in stores and homes, even in museums, however good, are not antiques in this sense. Why do we assess them differently?

Assessment in this context is related to demand. But the factors that come immediately to mind to explain assessment and demand – superlative craftsmanship, exotic design, snobbism, for example – are inadequate, if only because they apply also to other types of furnishing and utensil that have not generated demand so continuously and successfully. Why do people want carpets rather than other materials on their floors? Why do so many want oriental rather than other carpets? No sooner do tentative answers to these questions appear within reach than others, more difficult, arise. For instance, why and how do we distinguish, as we do, between different types of oriental carpet? The conventional answers to these questions – answers that focus on material factors in the carpet and on the carpet’s place in the history of the craft – are unlikely to satisfy our curiosity.

For aspiring buyers there is much to know. Besides being able to recognize a carpet as oriental, they must be at least vaguely aware of a hierarchical taxonomy of types of oriental carpet, rationalized in terms of criteria such as age, provenience, materials, color, design,

“handle” (that is, feel or pliability), condition, fineness, and evenness of weave. The existence (though not necessarily the details) of this taxonomic scheme is recognized in different degrees by a wide variety of consumers, from those just trading up from wall-to-wall at one end of the social scale to the most discerning collectors at the other end. Becoming an aficionado means entering the debate about the recognition and application of the criteria – criteria of authenticity.

The fact that these criteria of classification and appreciation are only imperfectly translatable into market prices alerts us immediately to a discontinuity between the criteria of commerce and those of connoisseurship. The dealer has his sources of supply and his costs. The average consumer has his budget and his social needs. The connoisseur and the collector have their exhibitions, public and private, and their literature. Each stands in a different position in relation to both the prices and the values and has a different understanding of them. Different carpets mean different things to different people.

Where there is so much to know, we expect the information to be accessible. Why should it not be as available as the carpets themselves? Superficially, it is. Carpet primers abound. Exhibitors vie with one another in the sumptuousness of their catalogues. Dealers have ready answers to questions. For those who wish to delve further, there is a literature of history, ethnography, travel, technology, and connoisseurship. But somehow, despite vast improvement over the last ten years, the now voluminous literature on oriental carpets is unsatisfying. Most of the perhaps fifty works devoted to the subject before 1900, and probably over a thousand that have appeared since, though they are addressed to various levels of the market, are concerned primarily with illustrating, classifying, and identifying the inventory of carpets in the West (cf. Enay and Azadi 1977). They are one-sided. However academic or scientific some of them may appear, they are with few exceptions consciously or unconsciously informed primarily by the lore of the dealer. This lore is generated by the history of the trade and of Western interest, rather than by the conditions of production. For example, a Bukhara was a carpet that entered the trade through Bukhara. The meaning naturally came to be extended to carpets of similar designs, wherever they came from. Most “Bukharas” now come from Pakistan. The term does not – whatever one may be led to expect – represent a homogeneous craft tradition from Bukhara. The dealer deals, naturally, not with the weaver, but (often through a chain of other dealers) with the producer or local merchant. The weaver is barely represented in this operation. The dealer’s information is trade lore, generated in the process of negotiation en-

tailed in commercial transaction. Works on carpets by collectors and art historians are also based largely on this lore. Very little other information has been available to them. They rarely have access to independent ethnographic data. Early travelers, however fascinating their descriptions in general, barely noticed the rugs they occasionally admitted sitting on. The weavers themselves were not literate, and the literary-minded of their culture and time, even up to the present, have shown little interest in work produced by the skills of the poor, even where it was financed by a royal court. It is not surprising, then, that the literature is often confusing, difficult to understand, even contradictory. For an amateur who is not easily satisfied, it can be exasperating. For the determined scholar it leads sooner or later to the realization that so long as the problem is defined as one of material culture, or even of the history of design in the narrow sense, there are limits to what can be known and the limits often seem not to be recognized by the experts.

The carpet business involves not just the supply of carpets, as in the case of other commodities, but also the supply of information about them. In fact, most of the available information about carpets has, at least until recently, come with them. But the journey from one cultural area to another affects the information differently from the carpets. The carpets arrive in Europe and America in basically the same condition as when they left their point of origin (though special techniques are sometimes used to age them or to change the colors according to particular conceptions of Western taste). The information, as any schoolboy learns to expect, suffers reinterpretation with each transaction. The dealer's interest is primarily economic. The lore he acquires with his wares is often purveyed incidentally. On the other hand, the connoisseur who is the public arbiter of authenticity scarcely controls the sources of the information on which he bases his judgment.

So there are questions both of economics and of values, and they are linked. The question of values is complicated by the fact that oriental carpets compete in the open market as floor covering, but with an unfair advantage: they are recognized most immediately by their designs, which over the centuries have become an integral part of our own cultural repertoire, but without losing their exotic appeal. We copy and imitate them so commonly, both in carpets and in other media, that we are scarcely aware of our cultural debt. The initial borrowing and imitation is buried in our history and almost completely assimilated in our cultural heritage. Our appreciation of the superficial factors that tend to dominate discussions of the technological, economic, and cultural history of the genre and the social history of

the producers, the middlemen, and the consumers is conditioned by the fact that oriental carpets became culturally familiar to us by their basic designs long before the present generation. They surround us in Western products that imitate oriental originals. Now, every year more and more people become familiar with – and want – the real thing.

The real thing is not simply an artifact; it is made by particular individuals, from special handcrafted materials, in particular social, cultural, and environmental conditions, with motifs and designs learned from earlier generations. The original meanings of the decorative elements have been largely forgotten by the people who weave them (who probably anyway think about their work in terms that would not provide answers to Western queries about meaning) and must be reconstructed by Western specialists in order to rationalize their need for authenticity. The social conditions in which the carpets began their journey from weavers through the hands of dealers to consumers (including collectors) are known only imperfectly. We receive them divorced from their social context. Our desire for authenticity prompts us to reconstruct that context. We do it mainly by seizing on the information that comes incidentally with them, which it must be said does serve our immediate purpose. But at the same time such information enables us to deceive ourselves about what we are doing: because of the inherent distortion and paucity of the information, we are easily able to make it fit our needs, instead of being constrained to fit our ideas to the information.

Nevertheless, our interpretations are sophisticated. We discriminate among a seemingly infinite variety of traditions and subtraditions. We deal with questions of both authenticity and quality. Good is distinguished from bad, old from new, genuine from imitation. But the criteria of overall quality are vague, and tend to be complicated by questions of authenticity. Even in the case of the most lowly specimen, the determination of value invariably involves at least an implicit assessment of authenticity.

Analytically, however, authenticity must be distinguished at the outset not only from the question of quality, but also from the idea of a classic carpet. A classic carpet would be an example of the highest quality in its class, such as the famous sixteenth-century Persian Royal Hunting carpet that hangs splendidly 6.8 by 3.2 meters, in the Oesterreichische Museum für angewandte Kunst in Vienna. In most cases a classic carpet would also be authentic. But a carpet of very high quality could be a later imitation of a classic, in which case it would not be authentic. Authenticity cannot be determined simply by re-

tailing the objective material attributes of the artifact. It has to do not only with genuineness and the reliability of face value, but with the interpretation of genuineness and our desire for it. The material attributes, however, are generally treated as though they were clues to the arch-criterion, the supposed origin of the piece and its place in the history of the craft. But since the history of the craft is poorly documented, it is open to continual revision (even more so than history generally). We must not be misled by the values ascribed to craftsmanship, for these values have also changed significantly over the past hundred years. They are based explicitly on the search for historical truth, but we are of course steadily moving further and further away in time from the sources on which the reconstruction of that historical truth depends.

Our interpretation and reinterpretation of the sources available to us may become ever more sophisticated and ingenious, but only in the service of our own needs. We are confronted, therefore, with (1) the material facts before us in existing carpets, (2) the history of the craft that produced them, reconstructed by us from poor and inadequate data, and (3) our concern for authenticity. We talk commonly as though our idea of authenticity depended on our reconstruction of the history of the craft, which in turn depended on a combination of the material facts before us in the carpets and in scanty textual and archeological sources. In this chapter this commonsense understanding is turned heuristically on its head: underlying the discussion is an interest in the possibility that the evolving constellation of social relations in our complex society generates a need for authenticity, which leads people to cast around for cultural material on which to work out the obsession for distinction. In some sectors of social life, oriental carpets serve this need. The service of this need conditions our reconstruction of the history of carpet weaving, and our reconstruction gives meaning to the material evidence before us.

Although carpets generally are commodities, oriental carpets are only imperfectly commoditized. They are part commodity, part symbol. It is in the nature of a symbol to bear more than one meaning, even in a particular social context. Carpets bear many different meanings for different types of people in different cultural contexts. They began as domestic products that acquired a symbolic dimension for the people who produced and lived with them, because of the cultural significance of what they did with them. The producers projected the meaning of what they did onto what they did it with. In anthropological terms, carpets became an object of cultural elaboration among the people who produced them. Over the history of

the craft, over the past two and a half millenia at least, these symbolized artifacts have become first partly commoditized in the Orient and then wholly commoditized in international trade. In the history of the greatly increased interest in them in the West over the past one hundred years or so, they have become partly decommoditized, or (in the terms of Kopytoff's discussion in Chapter 2) resingularized. Certain attributes have reacquired special meaning through the reconstruction of the social and cultural provenience of the artifact. As a result, whichever way we turn in an attempt to explain our interest in oriental carpets, we run sooner or later into mystification. Since this is so obviously a problem that poses questions of both oriental and Western experience, careful investigation of it promises to be especially rewarding in our continuing struggle to understand better our relationship both with our own material world and with other cultures.

These questions require and would I think repay the attention of writers trained in any one of a number of academic disciplines, each of which would approach them from a particular point of view that might illuminate a new aspect of how the appreciation of oriental carpets among us today has developed. They concern the technology of weaving and how and why it has changed at different rates in different parts of the oriental-rug-producing region of the world; the social history of these areas; the international political economy as it affects the terms of trade, especially in certain raw materials such as wool and dyestuffs; and the history and evolution of design, style, and fashion, in both the Orient and the West. The field is difficult to define in intellectual terms. Although the oriental carpet may legitimately be a single topic in the history of technology, the technology is obviously diverse since it has been practiced over a vast area since before the Islamic era. It is not legitimate, for example, to address it as many have done as a genre of Islamic art. I discuss it here from the vantage point of a type of social anthropology that, because of the way it has developed over the past two decades, suggests a promising approach. If in the process I trespass on the preserves of other disciplines in which I claim no competence, I apologize; my defense lies in my claim to be pursuing a significant point in the dialectical process of modern life – between the social and the cultural, and between us and them.

Given the complexity of the subject, I have chosen to narrow the focus of discussion to the Turkmen pile carpet. Since all Turkmen pile carpets are woven by Turkmen in a particular part of southwestern central Asia, they constitute a category that is recognized both in the trade and in the craft, and they have a unitary geographical

and cultural provenience. This focus also has the advantage of illustrating a number of misconceptions that pervade the literature. Turkmen carpets derive from an interesting cross-section of socially diverse but culturally similar communities in the areas now incorporated in Afghanistan, Iran, and Soviet Turkmenistan over a historical period that has included severe political and economic dislocation. Finally, Turkmen carpets are tribal (and so are woven largely by women who learn domestically from one another in small, cohesive communities, rather than by men or children working for wages under a foreman), without being rustic or unsophisticated. This last point may explain the place of Turkmen rugs as favorites among collectors – a place that has twice in the last five years been confirmed by the results of polls conducted by the “ruggist” magazine *Hali*² – suggesting that a tribal origin helps to satisfy the quest for authenticity.

This introduction must not be closed without notice of the fact that there are oriental carpets for which the question of authenticity, though not irrelevant, is less significant. The Persian carpets of the great urban traditions, such as Isfahan, Tabriz, and Nain, were always woven on vertical looms, mainly by children at the direction of a male *ustad* (master craftsman), and in largely figurative designs rather than mysterious symbols. In these conditions quality is the dominant criterion.

Finally, from the point of view developed in this chapter, the crux of the problem entailed in the growing popularity of this changing commodity among consumers, and in the related concern with authenticity, lies in the history of the relationship between the weaver and the dealer, as it relates both to the supply of carpets and to the flow of information about them. This relationship must be investigated with due regard to the changing status of each in his own society and the continuous negotiation of commercial terms between them, which has allowed the growth of a flourishing lore on both sides that can be understood only in its own social context. The weaver is embedded in a complex system of social relations. The dealer must cultivate the market. It is in the nature of the business of the Western dealer that he has built up a corpus of practical knowledge of the Other that goes back to the Middle Ages and possibly beyond. The weaver’s knowledge of the market, on the other hand, is probably for the most part of relatively recent growth. Until the later nineteenth century, the proportion of total production that went for export (despite a thirteenth-century reference given below) beyond the boundary of the Islamic world was presumably small and involved a relatively small part of the productive community. Since then, the dialogue between

weaver and dealer has become increasingly direct, especially in the last ten years or so, to the extent that direct negotiation can be recognized. The negotiation of authenticity of the rug derives at least to some extent from the indirect negotiation between weaver and dealer and the evolving bargaining power and social status of each. But the process of negotiation is complex.

In what follows I address three types of questions: (1) Of cultural values and practices – what is a carpet, and how did oriental carpets come to transcend for us in the West the purely utilitarian function they share historically with other textiles? (2) Of material and social facts – how has the technology (in the broadest sense) of carpet production changed over time, especially with regard to the changing availability of raw materials, labor and the organization of society in the East and in the West? And (3) of the intersection of facts and values – how and why do we negotiate standards of authenticity as distinct from quality, and what does the history of this particular intercultural problem reveal about the dynamics of modern society and social change? In the course of this argument I review a particular type of oriental carpet as material textile, as cultural furnishing, as social product, as commodity, as object of demand and of specialized knowledge, and finally as partially naturalized alien landmark in our shifting constellation of Western values. I have defined my topic and restricted my field in a way that obviates the need to review everything that has ever been written about oriental carpets, though I cannot of course avoid some discussion of the literature.

The remainder of the chapter falls into three sections. The first of these is a reconstruction of the traditional technologies and social contexts of carpet production and a critique of modern hypotheses concerning their symbolism; the second deals with the economic and cultural changes attendant upon the transformation of the carpet into an object of Western commercial interest. Finally, in the third section, the test of authenticity is reviewed in terms of the resingularization of commodities in Western society.

The manufacture and the symbolization of floor covering

The technology of weaving has a history of its own (see, for example, Ackerman 1938a, 1938b, Farnie 1958, Forbes 1964, Wulff 1966). A carpet is a particular type of woven fabric, which though now diffused over much of the world probably evolved from a particular tradition

of weaving that began somewhere between southwest and central Asia. It is arguably the most sophisticated fabric ever invented.

Besides weaving skill, carpet production has a number of requirements: specifically, the ability to provide certain basic materials, such as wood and metal for the loom and weaving tools, different types of wool, and dyestuffs; the knowledge of certain skills and motifs; certain forms of cooperation; and certain amounts and types of financing. Each of these requirements allows room for innovation, as the last hundred years of Turkmen history shows – but not a great deal, unless the nature of the end product is to be changed. At the same time, these requirements condition the activities, the organization, and the expressive culture of everyone involved in carpet production. The dynamic of the technology is interdependent with the dynamic of social interaction, of ways of thinking, and of the natural processes that provide the raw materials. These technological, social, cultural, and natural constraints constitute a fourfold framework of production, in which the individual weavers express themselves by innovating within the limits imposed by their need to maintain their place in the society on which they depend for their material and emotional security. Any discussion of the significance of carpets in the society where they are produced must give weight to each of these factors.

The origin of carpet weaving lies beyond the middle of the first millennium B.C. The earliest extant fragment was found in a frozen barrow at Bash-Adar in the Altai area northeast of Turkestan and is dated to the sixth century B.C. An almost complete carpet was recovered from a similar site at Pazyryk in the same area, dated to the fourth century B.C. (see Rudenko 1968). These finds provide evidence of an already fully evolved tradition. The details of invention are of course unknown and unimportant – except to the extent that they may perhaps illuminate the evolution of the motifs and designs, and the history of the relationship between settled and nomadic populations. With some justification the carpet has been compared to a fleece. This comparison may be more than a felicitous insight, since it suggests a connection with pastoralism. It may, however, be misleading, because it does not necessarily argue for an origin among nomadic rather than settled populations. In fact, the sophistication of the technology – the combination of conceptualization and workmanship in color and design, and in fineness and evenness – warns us not to accept unquestioningly the common thesis that carpet weaving originated among nomadic populations. The early evidence is in fact ambiguous.

Like other fabrics, a carpet is woven on a loom of 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 other of a number of flat-weave techniques. The body of the carpet is produced by tying rows of knots (two basic types are used in the area; only one of them is a true knot), one- or two-ply, around pairs (or pairs of pairs) of warp threads. A good-quality carpet may have as many as 400 or even more of these knots per square inch, though an excellent carpet need not have more than 100. The ends of the knots are cut evenly to constitute the pile of the carpet. In a fine carpet they are usually cut very close to the base. The design of the pile is composed by the use of different-colored wools for the knots. Each row of knots is held in place by the insertion of one or more weft threads, before the next row is added. In order to achieve the desired degree of tightness and evenness of weave and density of knots, after every few rows of knots the weavers beat the weft threads, and the pile, back toward them with a comblike implement, the teeth of which fit over the warp threads. This action also has the effect of making the pile incline permanently in one direction, toward the end the weaver started from. For this reason throughout the life of the carpet, light strikes the ends of the knots at a different angle 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.

For the tribal weaver, apart from the wood for the loom, which was a simple horizontal affair, all the materials could be generated locally, for the most part within the household. It was feasible for each family to provide all of its production needs. The typical Turkmen carpet until recently was made entirely of wool, except perhaps for a little cotton or silk to provide a color, often 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 sometimes fails 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 the technology of carpet weaving that is easier to organize on the level of the household than on higher, more complex

levels, and independent household production encourages a particular type of identification with the product and symbolization of it. For example, weaving on a wool warp is tricky. The wool snaps easily under the tension that is necessary to allow efficient and even weaving and knotting. If the household must buy wool on the market, the weaver loses control of both the quality and the differentiation of fibers. In these conditions cotton, which is significantly easier to work with but must always be obtained from the market, eventually replaces home-grown wool in the warp. Again, working in her own environment, for herself and her family, the weaver reproduces the technology and design of her senior female relatives, and with occasional personal innovative touches produces a special rug – special because of the meaning imbued by the labor and the domestic context and relations of production. But can the Western consumer, far removed both socially and culturally, recognize and appreciate those differences? Should we recognize them? How do they affect *our* appreciation of the rug?

Not all stages of the technology were necessarily conditioned in this intimate social context. The dyeing was probably in most cases done on a larger scale, since even though many of the dyestuffs were gathered locally, outside the settlements and around the camps, the techniques were complex, and in dyeing at least there must always have been some economic benefit in working on a larger scale (see Holmyard 1958, Schneider 1978, 419).

Reds generally predominated, and may have been easier to produce, but since they were all from mordant dyes there was a wide range of shades.³ Madder (*Rubia tinctorum*), which was the most common and must have been the cheapest, seems to have provided the widest range of color, from rusty brown to red, though not so brilliant a red as some insect products. Of these, the local kermes (from the female *Kermes ilicis*), although it had provided the Persian language with a word for red (*qermez*), seems not to have been used in any extant carpets. We know that cochineal (from the female *Dactylopius coccus*) was introduced early in the sixteenth century and was important in the nineteenth century. The Indian lac (*Coccus lacca*) is also found, but seems to have been displaced by cochineal. They are both sometimes found mixed with madder. Scarcely any details of the traditional dye process are on record. (See Wulff 1966, 189–94 for more detail and the best discussion of dyeing and of the technology of weaving in Iranian civilization generally; see also Farnie 1958, Forbes 1964.)

The dyeing process was the first part of the technology to undergo change as a result of factors of the world economy. The first synthetic

dyes reached Persia early in the second half of the nineteenth century, but seem not to have entered western Turkestan or to have been used in Turkmen carpets. They were generally inferior to the natural dyes they replaced. A second generation, known as azodyes, which arrived after 1880, gave better results (Whiting 1978a, 1978b, 1980, 1981; see also *Oriental Rug Review*, vol. 3, nos. 7–8, 1983). It was inevitable that the chemical dyes would take over because they were easier to use and less time-consuming. But their success must have been clinched by the fact that dyeing was already out of the control of the domestic unit. It took time for them to filter down to the household end of the production spectrum. When they did, at the end of the century, they were often combined with vegetable dyes. Unlike vegetable dyes, they did of course cost money, and were better suited to commercial production or to household production that was financed from a market center. Presumably their assimilation must have been associated with some increase in the commoditization of the product.

The logistics of dyeing suggest that it was the thin end of the wedge in the final commercialization of carpet weaving. On a regional level, within different parts of western Asia and the Middle East, it is likely that this commercialization began slowly quite early in the history of the craft, and proceeded in fits and starts up to the modern period, when it provided a point of entry into the commercial backwater of central Asia for some of the more drastic influences of the modern world economy, driven in this case by the consumer interest that began in the West on a commercial scale in the last century. If this view is correct – and it has the attraction of helping to explain some other problems we must attend to, such as the history of carpet design – traditional carpet production must always have been spread out over a social continuum (with repercussions for the cultural tradition) from the isolated, self-sufficient nomadic or village group through the urban hinterland to the city-controlled production. In this century the hither end of this continuum has been spliced to the world economy, and the influences of that splicing are still spreading through the continuum.

It would be helpful to know more about the way carpet production fitted into the lives of weavers and producers on the one hand and into the commercial system on the other, before any significant change took place in the relations of production. What did it take to weave a carpet in terms of labor and time? Which parties took which decisions? In one of the few informative accounts by nineteenth-century travelers, O'Donovan (1882, 2, 352) describes a situation that is probably closer to the more market-oriented end of the time:

The female members of the family are mainly occupied in household duties. They do all the cooking and fetching of water, and the daughters for whom there is no other occupation occupy themselves in the manufacture of embroidered skull-caps, carpets, shirts, saddle-bags, and socks of variegated tints for the better classes. The silk and cotton robes worn by the men and women are made by special persons. The women manufacture their own garments, the cloth being purchased from the merchants at the bazaar. When a Turcoman is blessed with a large number of daughters, he contrives to realize a considerable sum per annum by the felt and other carpets which they make. In this case, an *ev* is set apart as a workshop, and three or four girls are usually occupied upon each carpet, sometimes for a couple of months.

Each girl generally manufactures two extra fine carpets, to form part of her dowry when she marries. When this has been done, she devotes herself to producing goods for the markets at Meshed and Bokhara, where the Turcoman carpets fetch a much higher price than those manufactured in Khorassan or beyond the Oxus. Sometimes these carpets are made partly of silk, brought from Bokhara. They are generally twice the size of the ordinary ones, which are made from sheep's wool and camel hair mingled with a little cotton, and are almost entirely of silk. They fetch enormous prices. I have known as much as fifty pounds given for one measuring eight feet square.

In the modern period, Irons (1980, 36) who worked among Yomut Turkmen in northeast Iran between the late 1960's and the mid-1970's, calculated that "one woman could weave roughly one square foot in a day of heavy weaving, about twelve hours at the loom." We know almost nothing about the other end of the continuum.

It is worth noting first that the passage from O'Donovan places carpet production plainly in the context of textile production generally. For the producers, carpets are a special form of textile, special locally because of the way they combine labor value and symbolic value, and (as the trade developed) because of their exchange value. This reminds us that the differentiation between floor and other furnishing is a relatively recent Western development, though it has now spread to most of the world. It seems to be only since the eighteenth century that our words "carpet" and "rug" have become specialized in the meaning of floor covering. It is likely that all our carpeting is derivative of oriental carpets (even though neither word is of oriental origin), and that before oriental carpets were available for the rich in the Middle Ages, and began to be simulated (first in 1755 at Axminster, which became in England a branch name standing, like Hoover, for the product) for the not quite so rich in the eighteenth century (see Fowler and Cornforth 1978, 213), Western floors were not covered. Axminster was followed by Wilton and Kidderminster in England, by Brussels, and later by other names in the United States. (The American products were less successful because of higher labor costs

– a fact that reminds us how much the success of oriental carpets owes to the availability of cheap labor. Urban carpet weaving in Iran's oil economy priced itself out of the international market in the 1970's.) Mechanization did not begin until the middle of the nineteenth century. Oriental carpets, when they first began to take on, appear (from paintings) to have been used to cover and decorate any flat surface, especially tables. In the past, Turkmen rugs were made for a wide range of local uses. There is a long catalog of local names for different types and sizes of carpet, as well as traditions of weaving. Functional types, for example, include door hangings, bags, and cushions, besides those that are for sitting on or for floor covering, though it is not always easy to distinguish function from other criteria.

As long as carpet production was a household activity, it enhanced the standing of the craftsmen who were the producers. There was a link between the social value of the carpet (as a valued item of furnishing) and the social status of the weaver. The status of women generally was relatively high in Turkmen society. Irons (1980, 35) relates how one Turkmen woman in northeastern Iran told his wife that the "ability to weave a carpet was like literacy. It is a skill acquired over many years, one that beginners cannot hope to master in a short time. Our ability to scan a page covered with small letters and produce words and sentences seemed as amazing to a Turkmen woman as her ability to weave an intricate pattern from memory seemed to us." Apart from increasing the income of the household, the women produced artifacts that were both functionally and symbolically important. It is understandable, therefore, that the designs may have acquired the type of restricted social reference that we would interpret as heraldic (see Moshkova and Morozova 1970). Closely related weavers worked with closely related designs. The designs became associated with the identity of the producers, and that identity was conceived in tribal or genealogical terms. In fact, it is not clear how explicit this quasi-heraldic meaning was, and it appears to have been exaggerated by Moshkova and other Western commentators (see David 1980). However, although there was plenty of variation, a general association between form and identity seems to have been recognized, at least until tribal identities were disrupted in the wake of Russian encroachment toward the end of the last century.

Whatever the extent of commercialization, carpets continued to be produced for domestic and personal purposes, especially for dowries. They were eminently storable and were stored for long periods. In some cases they were brought out only in order to be converted into cash in time of crisis, such as the drought of the early 1970's, by which

time they had changed hands by inheritance and marriage and come to embody the biographies of their succession of owners as well as that of their producer. They provided the personal intimate furnishing of the producers' and owners' family life. In the nomads' camp they domesticated the ground they were spread on, provided a surface for the family meal, which symbolized the unity and integrity of the family, and a surface to pray on. Turkmen carpets probably even more than other tribal carpets and unlike the more famous and spectacular carpets produced under the Safavids in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were therefore fraught with implicit meanings for the people who produced and lived with them.

In our appreciation of these carpets, we have been quick to see symbolic values, but we have seen them in the motifs and designs rather than in the production and functions. It is difficult enough to find or gather information about the symbolic dimension of their use, since there are barely any historical records and the social context has changed. It is almost impossible to study the symbolism of their design either historically or ethnographically, because the tradition was fully formed when it came into historical view. Not surprisingly, however, there is a considerable literature on it. Insofar as it is systematic, this literature is based on the comparison of forms and motifs from different cultural traditions, with little or no reference to their social context. Although this method has been all-important in our understanding of the great artistic traditions of the world, it is sometimes difficult to follow the logic of those who would apply it to folk traditions. In the case of carpets the evidence suggests that we are dealing with a poorly differentiated variety of urban, village, and nomadic products. The greatest source of confusion in the interpretation of the symbolism of oriental carpets may derive from this peculiarity – that the craft extended socially from isolated nomadic camps to royal palaces, and the motifs moved back and forth along that continuum, meaning different things in different social situations.

Most commentators focus on the recurrent similarities in the design of all oriental carpets – repeating designs cut off by border frames, stylized flowers and animals. Much is made of the evidence of the design and craftsmanship of the Pazyryk carpet, of the well-known animal style of the prehistoric steppe, and of the appearance of certain elements reminiscent of Chinese imagery. The repeating geometric and other patterns are interpreted as giving the appearance of a section of a larger whole framed by the borders, symbolizing the limitlessness of paradise. The animal motifs are simply referred to as “the animal style of the steppe” (Rostovtsev 1929), which is read as

representing nomadic vitality, though the conjunction of the two styles in one craft tradition is left unexplained. Finally, a common origin of all carpet design is suggested in central Asia, whence the style would have diffused westward with the movement of the Turkmen in the train of the Seljuqs in the eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D. (see, for example, Denny, 1978, 1982, Mackie and Thompson 1980, Schurmann, 1969, Thacher, 1940, and Wagner 1976).⁴

I have consciously oversimplified this type of interpretation, perhaps to the point of caricature, in order to show on the one hand that it makes excellent sense of the evidence, while adding a mystical touch by the introduction of a link to the limitlessness of paradise; and on the other that it gives no consideration to the problem of how symbolic forms are generated or how they change (except perhaps to imply that we are dealing with *Homo orientalis*, who is by nature mystical and concerned with great religious ideas), or generally to the social context of the craft. I shall suggest later that this type of interpretation owes its success to the fact that it overtly earns our praise by being scholastic in an exemplary way while covertly serving an important need in our society: it makes us feel we are making headway in our quest for authenticity. I do not argue that it is wrong – necessarily; only that it is inadequate.

Since there are so few data for either social or cultural reconstruction, we are debating a question of approach rather than documentation. It is worth seeing to what extent a change in approach can help to incorporate more of the available data and demystify the interpretation. It has been suggested that the carpets preserved from the middle of the first millennium B.C. in the Altai had been brought from Persia. A large alabaster slab from the entrance of the Ashurbanipal Palace at Nineveh (on display in the British Museum) is carved in patterns closely comparable to those of the Pazyryk carpet. Khlopin (1982) has suggested evidence for carpet weaving in settled communities from a thousand years earlier in the same general area. From what we know of the cultures of nomadic populations we should not expect them to develop more complex technologies than nearby settled populations, but we should expect them to be closely related economically and demographically to those populations and to copy and adapt the technologies of settled communities to their own purposes. There is ample evidence to suggest that nomadic pastoralism throughout the Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, and central Asia is culturally derivative of settled life, both in origins and in continued interaction. Since there is no essential difference in design between the carpet production of settled and nomadic Turkmen communities,

we can say that they both worked the same symbols, possibly with minor variations in form and probably with larger variations in meaning, in the same economic and cultural system, but in different social conditions. Although the cultural differences between nomadic and settled populations have probably been exaggerated, there is no doubt that they do differ markedly in one respect, their perception of nature. There is ample evidence that although nomads share symbols with nearby settled populations, they differ in their understanding and use of them (Spooner 1973, 35–40).

In the Iranian tradition “paradise” and “garden” are not clearly differentiated. A “*pardis*” (from which “paradise” comes to us through Greek) was not originally a religious concept, but a type of royal park, a walled enclosure within which nature was to a certain extent brought under human control. The king, like royalty elsewhere and especially in Asia, wished to hunt. But he wanted the experience without too much trouble or discomfort. In the Iranian tradition generally there is a desire for intimacy with nature, fresh air, light, open spaces, but a distaste and apprehension for nature in the raw, without protection from the threat of the elements. In the wilderness, devoid of the comforts of settled life, where nature was uncontrolled, only nomads lived, and nomads symbolized insecurity, social disorder, and lack of political control – the absence of civilization (cf. Hanaway 1971, 1976).

Symbolic traditions are easy to recognize but notoriously difficult to interpret. The Sufi tradition (the mystical tradition in Islam) provides an excellent comparative example of the problem of interpreting imagery, because of the sexual and emotional ambiguity in its use of imagery for love and loving. Similar ambiguity has misled Western interpreters of carpet and design who are hungry for “pure” symbols and reluctant to see ordinary gardens reduced by the constraints of the medium to a rigorous overstylized simplicity. But there is a relationship in the symbolic dimension between different types of gardens and the idea of paradise. We know that at the Sassanian court (third to seventh centuries A.D.) there were large, spectacular carpets that represented gardens. We have noted that the word *paradise* derives from the pre-Islamic Persian for a special type of royal garden. Most of the individual motifs that appear in the carpets have a place in a Persian garden, because in Iranian civilization (which provided the great tradition for central Asia as well as the Iranian plateau and farther west) a garden (of which the ideal was a royal garden) was a place to live. A house should ideally be in a garden, and the ideal design for the furnishing of a house would be a garden design. The court carpets have magnificent figurative gardens.

Of course, not all carpet motifs even among the Turkmen are derived from concepts of gardens. Gardens appear to have been a particularly important source of design. But it is easy to see the influence of a number of other crafts and ornamentation from other media. The most noteworthy other crafts are jewelry and lanterns, and there are abundant examples of influence from the design traditions of tilework, pottery, and metalwork, and the decoration and form of the *mihrab* (prayer niche) of the mosque. The Turkmen had silversmiths, and the city of Bukhara, an important market center for them, had a major tile industry (Eiland 1980, Mackie and Thompson 1980, 21). Apart from the garden, which could have been a local folk interpretation of a royal tradition of design, women's jewelry seems understandably to have been the most fertile source of motifs in Turkmen tribal weaving. But in every case the motifs take on a life of their own. They generate their own dynamic and live independently of whatever originally inspired them. If the meaning of these symbols to the weavers who weave them in carpets today is inauthentic in any meaningful sense, the same was most likely true for all the best carpet weaving.

Central Asia was part of Iranian civilization throughout the medieval period. The cities of central Asia were basically Iranian cities. Turkmen society comprised nomadic pastoralists and settled cultivators as well as urban traders and merchants. It is not clear at any stage of the historical process what proportion of carpets were woven by nomads or what proportion were financed by merchants or political centers. Even the nomadic Turkmen were heavily Persianized. It is not surprising, therefore, that Turkmen carpets have simple stylized gardens with geometric motifs, which they call (generically) by the Persian word for flower. The only essential design difference between carpets of different functions is that, for example, prayer rugs and door hangings are unidirectional rather than symmetrical, but the underlying design still derives from the garden concept. In the great tradition of urban life the concept of paradise was always present. But the unlettered did not necessarily have such elaborate conceptions of paradise. They understood the stylization and simplification of nature in a Persian garden, and represented flowers more than anything else in their designs. Different tribal groups represented them differently, as they spoke with different dialects.

In Turkmen rug weaving, therefore, there seems to have been a social-technological continuum from the market center, through the village, to the nomad camp; and a cultural-symbolic continuum from the Iranian royal courts, through the agricultural to the nomadic world view. Wherever patronage was exerted, as it was in the major

centers of central Asia, especially Bukhara, the designs became more elaborate, modified and rationalized by the lettered elite.⁵ The almost figurative “flowers” of a type of Turkmen carpet known as Beshir (which, significantly, is a local rather than a tribal term) may be the result of greater patronage in more permanent communities (cf. König 1980, 201, Pinner 1981, Vasil’eva 1979, 560). But in the central Asian interior, the tribal ideology was always independent of the city, and even the most expansive urban patronage could not develop there the magnificence of the famous Persian royal carpets or expropriate the symbolism of the craft. When the tribal organization was disrupted by Russian encroachment and domination toward the end of the nineteenth century, the relationship between the carpets and their social context also broke down. The eclecticism of the forms that have developed since that time have obliged the critics, according to their own Western terms of reference, to withhold from them the insignia of authenticity.

The commoditization of carpets

Although oriental carpets became known in parts of Europe at least seven centuries ago, little was known about their production or the economics of their supply until much later. At this early stage of the trade they were seen as a special type of textile rather than a separate product. However, carpets were from the beginning something of an anomaly in the textile trade. For example, in the later medieval period a relatively close economic relationship grew up between Anatolia and Italy, which makes it often difficult to tell on which side of the politico-religious divide a particular textile was produced, but this problem never arose in the case of pile carpets. The carpet trade is in this sense reminiscent of the silk trade in the ancient world: probably no other exotic craft has been so successful for so long. The carpet trade has an added peculiarity: no other trade has been so marked by lack of communication between producer in one area and consumer elsewhere.

The modern trade took shape toward the end of the eighteenth century.⁶ Carpets began to move in bulk along a chain of economic connections in which major focal points were Bukhara, Istanbul, and (later) London. Wholesalers began to classify the merchandise for their own purposes – which combined criteria of commercial provenience (where they entered the market, rather than where they were woven) and saleability. The development and application of these criteria generated a lore, which despite later accretions from art history (mainly Islamic, but also Chinese), the notes of travelers, and a

very little professional ethnography, still informs the literature on carpets.

As the Western experience of carpets has evolved, the nature of the carpet itself, as well as of the trade, has steadily changed, and lately at an increasing rate. The relationship between weavers and dealers, and between producers and consumers, is now much closer, largely as a result of changes in the political economy at both ends. But this closeness has brought in train its own particular problems of understanding and communication. There is now a conscious effort on the part of the producer to cater to the Western market. This effort is only partly successful economically, and it might be argued that success is only complicating the communication problem. The reasons for this complication are, once again, social. They have to do both with social needs within each society and with perceived inferiority and superiority between societies, as these perceptions affect cultural borrowing and the communication and diffusion of ideas and symbols. They need to be addressed, therefore, against the background of our experience of chinoiserie, japonisme, and orientalism generally.

Our interest in oriental carpets and our imitation and assimilation of their designs is analogous to the process that produced chinoiserie, the imitation of Chinese designs in the eighteenth century (Jourdain and Jenyns 1950). As an economic process it is more specialized, because of the focus on one specific commodity, the carpet, which continued to be produced exclusively by Turkmen. But culturally it has supplied an infectious series of motifs that now pervades our lives. The analogy with chinoiserie, however, may help to explain the increasing Turkmen interest in adapting their product for the Western market, and the effect of their efforts on our attempts to satisfy our desire for authenticity.

Most of what we know about the Turkmen and their carpets dates from the point when Russian expansion began to interfere with their political independence, disrupting their tribal life.⁷ Of the eight major tribes into which they were divided at the time, the Salor (who were generally recognized to be descended from the senior line and were major carpet producers) suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Qajar dynasty of Iran in 1831 at Sarakhs, which now lies at the north-east corner of Iran's border with Soviet Turkmenistan. The Yomut lost Khiva to the Russians in 1871. The Tekke lost their best territory (Akhal, well-known as the name of a type of Yomut carpet; see Koenig 1962) to the Russians in a series of battles culminating at Geok Tepe in 1881. Marw (now transliterated into English from the Russian as

“Mary”), their capital, from which the present Mauri designation of carpets derives, was lost in the same way in 1884. Since about 1870 the Turkmen have been negotiating, with only occasional respite, with the Russians on one side and the Afghans and Iranians on the other, while the Afghans and the Iranians responded in turn to pressures from both the Russians and British.

Unfortunately, so far as I can ascertain, neither the social history nor the carpet history of this period has been studied in any detail (even locally in Soviet Turkmenistan).⁸ But certain important points seem clear. As a result of the upheaval and social disruption following on the Russian encroachment, large numbers of carpets found their way north into Russia. The Turkmen themselves became gradually more commercially oriented, but directed their attention southward. Most of the nomads gradually settled (which was not difficult because most of them had probably been nomadic mainly in order to avoid political domination, rather than in order to ensure access to the best grazing) (see Irons 1975). Settlement brought with it an increasing tendency to identify with a spatial community rather than the tribe, and tribal identities began to lose some of their significance. Later, in the 1920s, during the Sovietization of Soviet Turkmenistan, many Turkmen moved south across the border into northern Afghanistan, into country that had been depopulated by earlier hostilities (N. Tapper 1983, 233–4).

The impact of this century of political and social upheaval on the everyday life of the Turkmen, which involved for many people a long series of household and family dislocations, endangered the continuity of Turkmen carpet weaving. In most communities it appears to have ceased altogether by the end of the 1930's. It was only with the improvement of political and economic trends after the Second World War that the tradition was gradually rescued and revived, especially in the 1960's – in government factories on the Soviet side, and in a few small villages on the Afghan side. The organization of production of Soviet factories emphasizes quantity rather than quality and compares only with the relatively cheap end of the scale of production across the border. A few Turkmen communities in northwestern Afghanistan have rebuilt their family traditions and developed a fine-quality cottage industry (which may, however, not survive the current renewed upheavals). Some of these have settled in the city of Herat and benefited from the existence of the established carpet industry, which belongs to the Persian urban tradition. Finally, possibly taking a cue from the Soviet factories, some wealthy Turkmen merchants began in the 1960s to establish small factories in northern Afghanistan

that employed men and children to weave cheap carpets specifically for the Western market, seeking where possible direct contracts with Western dealers. The movement soon spread to the capital, Kabul. After what we know as the Sahelian drought, which although it did not make the news was equally devastating in west-central Afghanistan, enterprising Turkmen began to hire orphans and refugees and train them to weave. Whatever the political future of Afghanistan, it is likely that these factories will expand, because it is unlikely that present social trends toward modernization will be reversed. It is interesting that the drought had the effect not only of flushing out long-stored heirlooms, sold to help people through the crisis, but of increasing the production of poor-quality carpets.

This final establishment of an almost direct link between producer and consumer, though it is still insecure and at the lower end of the market, was the logical outcome of a process that had started centuries before. Traders had obviously penetrated Turkmen society early on. As early as the thirteenth century an Arab geographer, Ibn Sa'id, was able to write that Turkmen carpets were being exported to all countries (see Barthold 1962 [1929], 130, who considers that although the reference is to Turkmen in Asia Minor, they must have brought the craft with them from central Asia). This information suggests strongly that, although nothing can be dated earlier than the eighteenth century at the earliest with any certainty (Thompson 1980), Turkmen carpets derive from a tradition that goes back at least as far as the eleventh century, when they, along with the Turkmen, made their entry into Middle Eastern and Islamic history. We have already argued that the tradition is neither socially nor economically homogeneous, for it represents the products of nomadic camps, isolated settlements, villages closer to the market centers, and probably also of production units inside the cities. Each of these social types of production unit, although culturally closely related and accustomed to using the same motifs, was presumably infiltrated to a different extent by traders and merchants who would therefore be able to exert different degrees of influence on the nature and quality of the final product.

Exactly the same situation obtains today. But modern carpets, however fine the weaving, are immediately distinguishable from the antiques from, say, before the battle of Geok Tepe, because the designs and certain other features, though still recognizably Turkmen, have changed. Whatever the relationship between design and tribal identity then, today's weaver or designer is presumably no longer reworking the old motifs according to ideas of what they should look like based on an appreciation of old carpets produced in the same social group.

Rather, they are modifying the motifs they happen to know in ways they calculate will please people who are buying for foreign markets (cf. Silver 1981). This change of orientation has led to very obvious changes in modal size of rug, in size and combination of motifs, and in choice of colors. Today's total production may well include basically the same range of quality as always. The changes are in the distribution within that range and in the relationship between weaver and dealer. Many more medium- and low-quality carpets are being produced directly for the market, because not only has Turkmen society been entirely reorganized, but more significant, the pattern of patronage and financing of carpet production, which must always have affected the majority of the carpets that were exported, has been transformed as a function of the transformation of the world economic order from the rise of colonialism to the onset of modernization. The most obvious differences between old and new rugs lie in the loss of constraints from old tribal or local associations on innovation in design. It is this evolution that underlies the major question of authenticity, to which we shall return in the final sections of this chapter. For these and other reasons there have been complex changes in the terms of trade. These changes now involve competition between new carpets (which must be priced to pay for labor and materials) and old, and in the West between both and machine-made floor covering. This pricing problem has been complicated by the return to the use of silk (a more expensive material than wool but easier to use for the warp) and to factory production, which increases quantity over quality. However, these technical changes are not necessarily innovations, since some type of factory production of hand-woven carpets and greater use of silk appear to have been known in earlier periods.

These obviously social and economic changes can be reconstructed with relative certainty despite the lack of historical detail. But what about the changes in design? What was the relationship between the weaver and the motifs she (mainly at home) wove and he (in the factory) weaves? Has it changed? If so, is the change a function of the changes in social context? Did motifs generally have the same meaning for the weaver, the designer (who presumably could have been the weaver or somebody socially close or distant who financed the materials and perhaps also the labor), the consumer, and later critic? If the design was originally worked out on the philosophical level of, say, a conception of paradise in tune with symbols from either the Chinese or the Islamic tradition, or both, would the unlettered weaver have understood it as such? Assuming that different weavers wove at different removes (cultural as well as social) from any ration-

alized theology, what held the tradition together, facilitated its continued coherence and identity over so many centuries?

To recapitulate what we have argued so far in answer to these questions, Turkmen society has for the last thousand years included a socially diverse population from urban market to nomad camp: it was at once commercial, agricultural, and pastoral; tribal and peasant; nomadic and settled. Some parts of Turkmen society were even ethnically diverse (Irons 1975). In a single society, however ethnically diverse, all think in basically the same concepts, the same vocabulary of words and visual symbols. But social diversity meant that people interpreted these symbols differently, according to social and personal differences, *especially* – to give an extreme example – insofar as the nomads' distinctive conception of nature and space would lead them to put their thoughts together differently, and manipulate symbols differently from villagers or city-dwellers. These conditions produce a range of different uses of recognizably related symbols, which must have varied throughout the history of Turkmen weaving. But the evolving market integrated these symbols by collecting them together into a single market genre.

In the Western world ruggism seems to have been born in the same generation that produced the machine-made carpet. This development may not surprise us, but it suggests that until that time Western interest in the oriental carpet was primarily in the design, rather than the handicraft, and that this emphasis changed when native handicraft gave way to the industrial revolution. Once started it expanded fast, leading to the rise of the issue of authenticity. Mumford (1900) writes of thousands of rugs with Bukhara patterns being shipped to the United States each year. Although the handmade Axminsters and others had opened a market in the middle of the eighteenth century, presumably providing for the first time in the West a fabric especially designed for covering floors, it was only a century later (with the invention of the mechanical Jacquard loom) that carpets became a commodity on a scale available to all who could pay. The new market was soon stratified. The collectors stood at the top and, in complex combination with the dealers on whom they depended for their acquisitions, set the values that led the market. Illustration of their values may be seen in Bogolubow 1908-9, Martin 1908, Pope 1926, Sarre and Trenkwald 1926-9, and Society for Textile Art Research 1983. Those values have not been constant. The market is still hierarchical, led by antiques, among which antique Turkmens hold a high place. But the room at the top has continuously expanded, especially since the 1950's. The most recent additions to the respectable collector's

repertoire are various types of tribal rug from Iran and Afghanistan, which received no attention twenty years ago. The Baluchis and the south Persian tribal rugs are two examples. The justification for including for the first time these exclusively rustic productions has to be quite different from that which applies to the classic Turkmens. Is it simply that since there is more room at the top of modern society, the hierarchy of goods had to be reorganized, in order to provide enough top *objets* for the top people?

The authentication of commodities

Having reviewed the evidence on the significance of carpets in Turkmen life generally and in selected sectors of Western society, we can return to the question of how we determine their authenticity. The discussion so far suggests that we are faced with not one but two related questions: (1) What in fact is authenticity? and (2) Why is it so important to some of us?

On the elusiveness of authenticity

Have our standards of authenticity changed? Why are we interested in a wider range of carpets now than before? Could it be simply that our knowledge has increased? Or do we perhaps not really know objectively what we are looking for?

Although it would seem that certain objective material attributes are involved in the definition of authenticity, authenticity cannot be explained by reference to them alone. It also involves subjective interpretations. But there are still more questions. How do we explain the choice of objective attributes (since they cannot be explained as criteria of quality)? And given that each person in search of authenticity does not make his or her determination in isolation from everyone else, what is the social mechanism by which the value of different interpretations of authenticity is negotiated and renegotiated over time? We now have four basic questions, which concern (1) the objective attributes of authenticity in oriental carpets; (2) our subjective assessment of those attributes; (3) the shared cultural choice of what to look for authenticity in (why, that is, do we care about carpets at all?); and (4) the social mechanism of the negotiation of authenticity, in which we all to some extent participate. The interrelation of the answers to these questions presents us with a Kantian dilemma: If the criteria, the choice, and the negotiation are genuinely independent, how do they coincide? This type of dilemma underlies all anthro-

pology. As a step toward resolving it in this case, I shall try to illuminate each question in turn, taking what guidance I can from Kant and his commentators.

We can pick up here the argument that was introduced at the beginning of the second section of this chapter. The same fourfold framework of experience – natural, social, cultural, and technological – that conditions the production of the individual weavers also conditions the reception of their products. To begin with, the physical and material world provides the basis, the context, and the means of human experience, and we look for authenticity in material objects according to objective attributes. However, the material world does not have clearcut distinctions and definitions – these come from our conceptualization and ratiocination. Our application of the criteria of authenticity is therefore complex and depends on negotiation among ourselves. Since social situations are always to some extent in flux, this negotiation is unending. Furthermore, beyond their immediate physical needs, people generally decide what they want according to cultural (that is, shared) values, which are historically given but socially renegotiable. Where several values are relevant to a particular situation, it may be necessary to choose among them or to give precedence to one over others. Such choice or ordering is also subject to social negotiation. Both values and choices are affected by natural and economic factors of supply, and by the historical continuity of experience. But natural, economic, cultural, and social processes all unfold historically according to their own dynamic. The technology of weaving, as a tradition of praxis, also has its own dynamic. A satisfactory treatment of the question of authenticity must interrelate these various dynamics, in order to arrive at a definition that is not simply either a social or a cultural fiction, relative and unreal, but part of our continual process of compromise between the various dimensions – psychological, cultural, social, technological, and natural – of our experience.

The objective attributes: Let us begin with a review of the objective attributes. The idea that an authentic carpet is essentially one in which the weaver was living her symbols in her weaving will not stand the test of either historical or cultural analysis. We have no good reason to believe that there ever was a Golden Age when Turkmen culture was an integrated systemic whole, within which noble tribeswomen conscientiously worked out their religious problems in their daily craft. In the products available to us it is easy to show, for example, that neither age nor the number of knots per square inch is necessarily

consonant with quality or a reliable guide to authenticity; that vegetable dyes are often not distinguishable visually from chemical dyes, and until recently were not even reliably distinguishable by chemical analysis (Whiting 1978), nor are they faster; that the values we attribute to provenience have changed and are likely to change again. Our interest in handicraft probably began at a certain stage of our industrial revolution. Until the mechanization of carpet weaving in the West in the mid-nineteenth century, oriental carpets seem to have been important more as an exotic textile for which (until Axminster) there was no Western equivalent, and (once they were culturally assimilated and recognized as exotic) valued for their design, rather than for their utility. From that time on, however, the fact of their being hand-made became a significant characteristic, and as the craft was gradually drawn into the world economy the survival of traditional relations of production became an additional factor – the rug was an exotic product made in its own exotic production process for its own exotic purpose. These two factors made the oriental carpet irreducibly different from any Western product, and both began to be associated, if not identified, with age as a tangible measure of authenticity. The minimal criteria of authenticity are objective and reasonably explicit, but we easily fall into a habit of reducing them glibly to something less tangible, and relative. For example, we slip from age to relative age. At the same time, we elaborate some criteria over others. For example, age becomes antiquity and bestows an aura on the chosen object (cf. Benjamin 1969, 221; Shils 1981, 75).

The subjective criteria: All these attributes have to do with distance, especially the interpretation of cultural distance over space and time from one social situation to another (see Benjamin 1969, 222). Any reduction in that distance threatens authenticity. As early as 1908, in a classic work on “Oriental Carpets before 1800,” the Swedish scholar F. R. Martin provides an interesting example. He wrote that Kirman carpets

often accommodated to European taste. Anyone who has devoted some attention to carpets knows that the Kirman carpets are the most firmly knotted, and in technique the very best now made in Persia. It is very unlikely that the European demand has created this superior technique; in fact it has existed from days of yore, and become so firmly grafted that not even the Europeans have succeeded in destroying it, since its basis is the excellent wool and the custom of the inhabitants, inherited from their ancestors, of producing good and lasting work. In these mountain regions they have not yet learnt that ‘Time is money!’ (1908, 76.)

In fact, of course, if oriental carpets were out of tune with European taste, Europeans would not be so interested in them. What does it then mean that influential writers considered that by the beginning of this century (and even earlier) some producers were “accommodating to European taste?” Obviously, the writer is making a distinction between his own taste and the taste of others who are unfamiliar with traditional designs. As long as his claim to be a master of taste is accepted, he can use it to reinforce his social position (see Canclini 1979). But apart from its elitism, the statement implies that authenticity is considered (1) to be a measure of quality; (2) to require special knowledge to recognize; (3) to reside not in the carpet itself but in the relationship between carpet and weaver; and (4) likely to become rarer as time goes by. However, if authenticity lies in cultural distance, how is that distance determined, and why should the distance be as important as the objective attributes?

The cultural choice: Although there are objective criteria for authenticity, and a major mark of those criteria is cultural distance, nevertheless we look for authenticity according to *our* cultural concepts, not *theirs*. Authenticity is our cultural choice.

Western societies have a longstanding cultural interest in the Other. Something comparable may be common to all societies. Even in the West this interest takes many forms, our interest in carpets being one. The search for difference is a familiar feature of our intellectual and artistic traditions, dating from long before authenticity became the type of issue it is now. Both classicism and romanticism are characterized by rejection of the commonplace. Orientalizing, in one form or another, began in Greek pottery, continued in the Roman taste for textiles, and was renewed with the experience of the Crusades. Orientalist scholarship, the beginning of *academic* interest in the Other (of which the Orient was still almost our only example), was institutionalized in universities in the seventeenth century. However, something new happened when this same interest, through the stimulation afforded by economic expansion, gave rise to the chinoiserie of the eighteenth century, and later (helped by the opening of Japan in 1860) to japonisme. Even before the effects of the industrial revolution began to be felt, the quantities of exotic decorative commodities had increased unprecedentedly (Honour 1961, Impey 1977, Wichman 1981).

Another change came with Western commercial expansion beyond Asia into Africa and the Pacific. New non-literate Others swarmed into our consciousness in the second half of the last century. Our

responses included anthropology in academia and primitivism in art. Primitivism (Goldwater 1938) was yet another incarnation of romanticism, responding to a different Other because our relationship with the rest of the world had changed. Similarly, the differences between primitivism and romanticism in art are illuminated by consideration of the fact that in the meantime our society had changed.

Given the fact that the nature of our society, and of our ideas generally, changed radically over this period, it is noteworthy that our interest in difference was strangely consistent. Only the nature of this interest changed. A significant feature in that social change was the rise of the issue of authenticity. In the sixteenth century the word meant sincerity. By the end of the nineteenth century it had taken on its modern meaning, but had still not become the issue it is today (Trilling 1971). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the academic discipline of anthropology became established in our universities, and along with psychoanalysis led the scientific search for authenticity, beyond our social boundaries and within ourselves (Foucault 1973, 373–85).

Along with these changes came the rise of commodities, and gradually the production of meaning in Western society became thoroughly bound up with commodity consumption (Brenkman 1979, 103). But because of their interest in cultural distance, anthropologists were slow to take an interest in the meaning of commodities. As a product of our own society, commodities were left to economists, who naturally took them simply at their exchangeable (supposedly) face value. It was of course not long before their social values were illuminated, beginning most significantly with the work of Marx. But it was left to the semioticians to reintroduce us to the grossly neglected symbolic values of commoditized products, and to show us how essential these values are. The position is particularly well stated by Rossi-Landi (1973, 626), who starting from Marx, shows how essentially resingularizable the average commodity is:

A commodity does not go to the market by itself; it needs somebody to sell it; and it is not sold until somebody buys it, that is, accepts it in exchange for money (or for other commodities in the case of barter). A product does not transform itself into a commodity like a caterpillar into a butterfly; it undergoes such a transformation because there are men who put it into significant relations. And when a commodity is used to satisfy a need, this means that its character as a commodity is, so to say, dropped, forgotten.

Carpets provide an excellent example of an alien utilitarian commodity that is simultaneously a complex message in the Western world. The authentic carpet combines within itself the properties of utility,

commodity, and exotic meaning. How do we differentiate among such commodities? Obviously age, or at least continuity of the tradition of production, is an important factor. We differentiate according to values that we realize in the past, in this case the commodity's past, because we have a social need for order and we see more order in the past than in the present. It is easier for us to impose order on the past, though in fact that order has to be continually renegotiated among all who have an interest in it (Appadurai 1981).

The social mechanism: The process of differentiation, which is similarly never once-and-for-all, makes sense if we see it as a continuous process of negotiation in a social arena that is poorly defined, and for social objectives about which we are very vague. We use our own concepts to identify points of cultural interest in the Other society and then negotiate the extent of that interest according to our own social positions. In working out ways of distinguishing between different carpets and choosing some over others, we make social statements about how we see ourselves, and by implication how we see others who choose differently.

However, both our values and our choices are affected by the supply of carpets. Over the last hundred years the supply of rugs, the range of rugs traded, and the number of collectors has increased at an accelerating rate. As the material and social context of our interest changes we have to make choices continually in such a way that we maintain continuity of identity, or as Peckham calls it, "persona stability" (1979, 253–4).

Authenticity is a conceptualization of elusive, inadequately defined, other cultural, socially ordered genuineness. Because of our social expansion recently we have been needing more and more of it, and it has been necessary to alter our criteria in order to be able to continue to satisfy our needs. How does this come about? The problem is similar to that faced by those who would understand the processing of fads and fashions in what have come to be called the culture industries (for example, the book, record, and film industries). These studies use the concept of gatekeepers to describe the social concentration of decision making in relation to significant changes (see, for example, Hirsch 1972). Although much of this chapter has been devoted to showing how different the relationship between carpet producer and consumer is from the situation in such industries, nevertheless there is a comparable social concentration of dealers and collectors whose relatively heavy investment gives them the power and the will to lead opinion and manage the shifting secrets of authenticity for others.

The need for authenticity

If it is true that no combination of objective criteria can explain our concern with authenticity, we must look at ourselves and inquire why we need it anyway. It appears that the concept of authenticity belongs to industrial (even more to “postindustrial”) society – not because of the direct social implications of industrial technology, but because of the concomitant social scale and the plethora of objects and categories of objects that it generates for our consumption, and, more significant, the cultural processes that those objects engender. If this interpretation is valid, then authenticity (as we understand it now) became an issue at a particular stage in our social evolution – when with the appearance of mechanically produced clone-commodities we began to distinguish between the social meaning of handicraft and that of mechanical production, as well as between uniqueness and easy replaceability. This process had been discussed from different points of view by Benjamin (1969), Berman (1970), MacCannell (1976), and, Trilling (1971), among others. As one aspect of this process authenticity became the watchword of Existentialism (Barrett 1958). Authenticity is a form of cultural discrimination projected onto objects. But it does not in fact inhere in the object but derives from our concern with it. In seeking authenticity people are able to use commodities to express themselves and fix points of security and order in an amorphous modern society. But the evolving relationship between the search for personal authenticity inside and the search for authenticity in carefully selected things outside has received relatively little attention. Perhaps, although we know all about fetishism, we are still inadequately aware of the range and variety and mechanics of many fetishistic processes in modern society (Douglas and Isherwood 1978).

Authenticity operates in an arena constituted by (1) supply, and (2) Western concepts concerning the Other – an arena constituted by the intersection of the social and cultural dimensions of our lives. It has become an issue more and more in modern life because of our social experience of ever-increasing complexity. Complexity lies in the numbers and types of interaction we have to enter into in a society that not only steadily grows in size but adds new media of interaction – face-to-face, bureaucratic, electronic. As complexity increases, the social order becomes less constraining. There is more need for choice, and the individual’s need for self-expression is given full rein. But individuality is expressed through choice in the material world, but the use of objects to make personal statements, to say something about who one is in relation to others. Authenticity, though stated in terms

of objects, bears implications about the person. Turkmen (and other oriental) carpets (among other things) are used to negotiate not just relative social status, but quality of personality, or how one should be understood and appreciated as an individual by others, and on a scale that has significance only for the individual's sense of social identity, not for the structure of the society as a whole.

Western society is the extreme example of a complex society, unique of its type. It is leading the information race and setting its cultural stamp on it, so that as more and more parts of the world are caught up in the information network of modern Western society, they become cultural appendages to it. Authenticity would be determined differently in a different culture, but we should expect it to become an issue of this type (as distinct from the type of issue it may be in a socially less complex society, such as the Turkmen) in any human situation that reached this stage of social complexity. We tend to forget that cultural evolution is an entirely different process from social evolution and is not directly linked to social complexity (Wallace 1961). Culture develops in traditions that can theoretically be unlimited in number, whereas forms of social life are directly related if not to numbers of people then to quantities of interactions and are based on a limited number of basic patterns of relations. In our attempts to understand human experience, therefore, we are confronted by a seemingly infinite cultural diversity and relatively much less, and limited, social diversity.

Our concept of authenticity facilitates our working out and working up our individualism in our everyday lives. It is integral to the cultural dimension of our multidimensional experience, of which natural resources, economic supply, numbers of people, and structures of social interaction are the most immediate other dimensions. But as Kant (once again) argued, our lives unfold as a continuous dialectic between our sociability and our selfishness, or the conflict between our need to belong and feel secure and our need to express our individuality. Society, operating within a particular cultural framework, provides the necessary order, but at the cost of inhibiting the self-expression. There is always some room for maneuver. The maneuvers generate a dialectical process between each individual's conflicting needs to belong to something securely ordered on the one hand and to be free to self-express on the other. Both these drives are evident in our concern for authenticity, though because of the complex and shifting forms of modern society, the latter drive is generally the more evident. The answer to the question of why we need authenticity, therefore, lies in our social evolution.

Compare us with the Turkmen, in relation to their carpets. An oriental carpet is something we not only use, but enjoy and take pride in. The same is true, of course, for the Turkmen. But the Turkmen are not concerned with authenticity in their carpets – primarily, because, I suggest, they are socially different from us. Although Turkmen society has diversified in the recent past, it is still nowhere near so diverse as Western society. What is true about carpets for Turkmen is true for all Turkmen. But what is true about carpets for us is true for only some of us, those of us who have chosen to take an interest in them. The reasons why some of us have taken this interest and not others are social rather than cultural. When Turkmen do things for social reasons they are concerned with playing out their identity within a particular subgrouping of Turkmen society. Because of the complexity of Western society our reasons have to do more with personal rather than group identity – more so now than a hundred or even fifty years ago. These reasons may still have to do to some extent with what group or (more likely) category of people we wish to be identified with in our society, but, more than that, they derive from our desire to express our individual selves distinctively in relation to the others among that group or category.

There is another side to this story. Authenticity is also needed by the Turkmen, but in different ways because of their different social condition (cf. Douglas 1978). At the same time they are affected by our search for authenticity in their production. It is noteworthy that we tend to search for authenticity in economically dependent societies. Is there a relationship between the processes of (a) cultural use of alien forms and (b) social dominance? Perhaps the greater the dependence of the other society, the more desperate our quest in it for authenticity. Authenticity is elusive because it is projected not only outside ourselves, but outside our social selves, outside our society, in the same way that the totemic tribal fixes his identity in the tribe by symbolic reference to something outside in nature. The concept is a product of interaction between us (dominant) and them (dependent) and becomes more important as the gap grows, partly because as the gap grows we appropriate more and more of the symbolic dimension of life in the other society, and inhibit the indigenous symbolization that would generate the authenticity we seek. It is in the nature of things, therefore, that our search for authenticity is continually frustrated by the people among whom we seek it. The more we reveal our need for authenticity to the Turkmen, the more they frustrate our search by adapting their wares in ways they imagine should please us.⁹

How did the changes in the importing society – the accelerating increase in social complexity in the West and the emergence of the concept of authenticity – affect the Turkmen? We have no means of knowing how early some Turkmen (financiers/producers at this stage, rather than household weavers) became conscious that more than a negligible amount of Turkmen carpet production was being syphoned off by the external economy, and consequently began to be interested in producing carpets for export. On a small scale it must have been much earlier than the last century. Since that time they must have begun to formulate ideas about the tastes of their potential customers and to modify their production accordingly.

How did the Turkmen weaver and carpet producer begin to conceive of those Others who were interested in their production? Unfortunately, we can only guess. But it is helpful to remember that there is a tendency for all people to conceive of Others – if only as part of a cognitive process of sharpening their conception of themselves – and to conceive of them as essentially and distinctively different from themselves, rather than trying to work out what they really are like as an internally coherent other way of life. We should expect that the Turkmen would grossly oversimplify in their efforts to conceive of us and our needs, as we do in relation to them (Ben-Amos 1976, Southall 1961, 29). We naturally form stereotypes of each other, and the Turkmen application of these stereotypes leads to discordances in carpet design that both frustrate and fuel our search for authenticity.

The Turkmen have quite naturally developed first an interest in our tastes, leading to an oversimplified conception of them: each element of their conception is constructed in distinction from elements in their own taste, rather than as a coherent whole. This type of process in the art of the Fourth World generally has been addressed by Graburn (1969, 1976, 1982) under the heading of tourist arts, and by Kubler (1961) for the fate of the native art forms of Mesoamerica. Most modern Turkmen carpets, certainly the best ones, do not in fact suffer from quite the same problems (in our Western view) of juxtaposition of inconsonant elements that are familiar to us under the heading of tourist art – perhaps because Turkmen society in Afghanistan (the basic source of Turkmen carpets since the 1950s) has not yet disintegrated socially to quite the extent of the people who produce “airport arts.” But the same sort of thing is evident in Turkmen carpets, more than enough to justify our search for the real thing. Meanwhile, the Afghan teenager in the new urban middle class seeks authentic American jeans and alligator (Izod) polo shirts (New-

comer 1974). While we seek authenticity in their past (as well as in our own), they seek it in our present.

The Western interest in Turkmen carpets has had the effect of alienating the Turkmen from their own forms of artistic expression. Before, they worked with designs embodying symbols that were for them extensions of their own social identity. They did not understand these symbols or need to know their origins. Now, these symbols have become the property of others. To repossess them they must now find out from others what they mean. They are concerned only with how they will look to others. In the words of another branch of the literature, on nationalism, the Turkmen have chosen epochalism ("The Spirit of the Age") and lost essentialism ("The Indigenous Way of Life"; Geertz 1973, 240-52), or they have taken universalism and abandoned nationalism (Bahnassi 1979).

The process is the cultural dimension of the condition of dependency formulated by neo-Marxists to explain the economic state of the Fourth World. It demonstrates that we are not alone in our experience of the problem of authenticity. But whereas for us authenticity is something we search for as individuals, for the Turkmen it is a larger cultural process, in which the stakes are not personal identity but the identity and therefore the survival of Turkmen society. In the words of Uberoi (1978, 2) the Turkmen "have lost themselves." What they have left over, they market: they market their ethnicity, their culture, as a commodity. Our search for authenticity in their carpets will not help them find themselves again. It is part of the cause of their problem.

This consideration of the difference in the meaning of authenticity in Turkmen and Western society may help us to understand better the social dimension of the issue in Western society and to avoid a simplistic relativist solution. Many of the differences that anthropologists seek to explain between the various societies into which humankind is divided – which are commonly conceived to be cultural – are probably, although superficially cultural, basically social, especially in the case of the differences between societies at different stages of social (in the sense of demographic, economic, and technological) development.

Turkmen society differs from Western society both socially and culturally. The relationship between the social and cultural dimensions of modern change is too often overlooked. Dependency is an example of a type of unequal social relationship between societies that might repay comparison with various examples of unequal cultural relationships, such as primitivism and orientalism. Authenticity has

become an issue for us only since the condition of dependency has developed in the Other.

The history of oriental carpets right up to the present can be understood in relation to the history of the particular societies that produced them. Our interest in them, and the history of it, must be understood in relation to our own history. In this sense, as Geertz (1976) has taught us, carpets are a text. Rather than being simply a reflection of something in society, they represent a tradition with its own independent dynamic. In their production over time we can read about the history of a relationship between East and West. Whether they are produced in our society or in another,¹⁰ whether or not, as a consequence of processes of cultural underdevelopment or dependency, they have become "our art not theirs" (Graburn 1976), carpets are a primary document. They are like literature. They have their own dynamic and historical continuity, and their relationship with any other cultural or social form is likely to be dialectical rather than unidirectional (Cohen 1974, 58).

The definition of authenticity of a Turkmen rug is a product of choice and negotiation within our society, based on supply from theirs. But it is inspired by an interest in the Other and its products, and can only choose from what the Other provides. The Other must therefore be preserved in its pristine form. Meanwhile, our choice has become crucial to the economy of the Turkmen.

Notes

I acknowledge with gratitude the encouragement and assistance in work related to this essay that I received in the past from Mohammad-Ewaz and Bairam Badghisi (Kabul), Froelich Rainey and David Crownover (University Museum, University of Pennsylvania), Anthony N. Landreau (Textile Museum), and Mary Martin (University of Pennsylvania). In the writing I have benefited considerably from the critical comments of my colleagues, especially Arjun Appadurai, Leah Glickman, and Renata Holod, for which I thank them, though I have not known how to use all their suggestions.

1. "Carpet" and "rug," which are respectively of Romance and Germanic origin, have not been sufficiently distinguished in either meaning or usage to be worth discriminating here. I use them interchangeably for all forms of woolen knotted (pile) floor covering.
2. The appellation "ruggist," has recently appeared in magazines directed at aficionados.
3. A mordant, essential with most plant dyes, is a substance that fixes that dye, by combining with it chemically. Its choice and manner of application determine the shade of the final color. Alum was the most commonly used mordant.

4. The question of where the craft fits historically between Chinese east Asia and Iranian west Asia is not important for the present argument. It is worth noting, however, that the evidence as presented in Lauffer (1919: 492–98) points in the Iranian direction for the origin of the craft. With regard to design, the history of reciprocity in symbols between the Chinese and Iranian worlds is obviously intricate and complex. Given the prevalence of geometrical motifs, some of which are reminiscent of split representation, it is impossible to ignore the possible significance of the *t'ao t'ieh* tradition of decoration on Shang and early Chou bronzes in mid-second to early first millennium B.C. China (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1963). Our understanding of this connection suffers from the dearth of scholars who might be able, Janus-like, to look without logistical bias in both directions. The writings of Cammann (1958, 1978) are especially interesting in this regard; see also Mackie in Mackie and Thompson 1980, 20.
5. Thompson (1980, 181) makes a similar argument.
6. For a review of the early history of the trade, see Impey 1977, 68–9.
7. For a summary of the history of this period see Mackie in Mackie and Thompson 1980, who also review the relevant scanty information up to that time. For more detail see Agadzhanov (1969) and Barthold (1962).
8. This statement stands despite considerable publication on the Turkmen in Moscow and Ashkhabad (see Agadzhanov 1969 and Vasil'eva 1979.)
9. As an example, the University Museum (University of Pennsylvania) has been presented with a genuine Turkmen carpet woven in the design of the American flag!
10. For example, carpets are manufactured in New Jersey under the apparently meaningless but obviously orientaling name “Couristan.”

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