

Magic Carpets

Turks weave the dreams of American children.

By Sylvie Pederson

The Language of Carpets and the Magic Carpet Project:
Springfield Museum (Nov. 5-Jan. 17)

Wishes, hopes and dreams are woven into some carpets, and this is the source of their magic. It's what makes people fall in love with them. Not all carpets are magic, of course. Yet not one, but two kinds of magic carpets are on display at the Springfield Museum. The first is steeped in cultural tradition, and the other is new and cross-cultural. But both, according to exhibition curator and contributing artist Holly Piper and carpet aficionado and Istanbul merchant Ali Avci, tell stories and express basic human needs, which is what makes them special.



Holly Piper
and Ali Avci

Encounter in Istanbul

The origins of the exhibition go back to a serendipitous encounter on an afternoon in July 2001 in Istanbul. Fulfilling a long-held dream, Piper had been visiting Turkey for a month. After visiting countless carpet shops, she had become obsessed with carpets, their colors, lines and motifs, which she drew for herself.

That afternoon was the last on her trip. She wanted to take one last look at carpets but, weary of the tea rituals in merchant shops that had filled her days, she took a long walk instead. After a couple of hours, hungry and afraid of getting lost, she decided to turn back when she caught sight of colorful piles of naturally dyed wool drying on the sidewalk across the street. She hesitated, but curiosity got the better of her, and she walked over to take a look.

Carpets hung over the sidewalk, between trees, against the wall. They seemed different from anything she had seen elsewhere. Particularly attractive was a small tapestry representing a person alone in a garden surrounded by birds and plants. It seemed to tell a personal tale

rather than come from a production line.

When Piper asked the attending vendor for its price, he

looked surprised and unsettled, and abruptly went back inside the shop. Out came another man who, when she repeated her question, became agitated. He, too, ran back inside. A third man came out. He questioned her about her interest in the rug. "Are you a collector?" he asked. "Are you buying for a museum?"

"No, no."

"This piece costs far more than that one," the merchant said, pointing to a much larger rug. "Come in and I will tell you about it."

So they went inside and had tea.

The merchant was Ali Avci, a man passionate about antique oriental rugs with a story. The piece Piper liked so much was tribal, and Avci told her stories about the people who had woven it — just what she had been thirsting to hear. They established an immediate connection. That very afternoon, he took her to rug shops where tourists didn't usually go, but where the rugs were ancient. He told her what to look at and what to look for. He also insisted on offering her as a gift the rug she had admired at his shop. "You have the soul for this piece," he said.

This was the beginning of both a friendship and a partnership. Piper went back to Istanbul for the month of November, during which Avci educated her about carpets. "It was grueling but exhilarating," Piper recalls. "Ali notices things about rugs and their stories that no one else sees, and people in the trade really value his opinion."

After 9/11, tourism was down, and some people in Turkey who depended on tourists went hungry. Avci arranged to ship about 90 "treasure rugs" for Piper to sell back home. He estimated that the sale of those rugs would feed about 300 families for a month. Piper wondered how she would ever manage to find homes for the rugs, but Ali had faith. "People will come," he assured her.

And they did: The word spread about the rugs at Piper's barn without her ever advertising, and the pieces quickly found

adoptive families. As soon as Piper received payment, taking no commission for herself, she sent the money to Turkey, where owners had trusted Avci's judgment enough to hand over their carpets without security.

Since then, Piper has gone back to Turkey a few more times and there have been two more shipments. "Every time I go," Piper said, "it's like being taken into the culture in a deeper and different way."

The Language of Carpets

As Piper sees it, the entire adventure from meeting Avci to the current exhibition is about sharing and transmitting knowledge. "Ali's intent from the start was to teach and educate me," Piper

explained. "There was an urgency on his part to give me that knowledge." Piper has found ways to further share what she has learned with people here, but it all starts with the carpets themselves, or rather with the individual who first conceives the design and embeds elements of her own life story — most weavers are women — in them.

Obviously the story element does not apply to carpets commercially designed with recycled motifs and patterns but only to traditional tribal carpets that women wove for themselves and their families to serve as rugs, prayer rugs, tables, covers, screens and wall hangings.

"Not one is the same," Avci said, "and the first copy is a treasure and collectible. The woman will draw her surroundings, something that she sees every day. She will add her wishes and hopes, not directly, but they will influence the drawing."

"If a woman is weaving a rug for herself, she'll add something of herself to it even, if she's copying the design from another carpet," Avci said. "In this sense, the carpet is only partially a copy and has value, though not as much as the original carpet." On the other hand, when it comes to commercial carpets, "The weaver repeats exactly what's in front of her," Avci said. "There is no soul in such carpets."

The quality Avci loves in some carpets is their power to convey meaning and carry messages about human life. Those messages are most often communicated through a vocabulary of symbols and abstract patterns. Depicted objects are highly stylized, and so are animals and people, which only appear where Islamic rule against representation of beings is less strictly followed.

Whatever is expressed — the grief of losing a child or the joy of birth — is no less vivid for the weaver for being couched in abstract symbols than for the letter-writer who uses the alphabet. For the weaver, working her emotions into the weave of the carpet can be as therapeutic as for a painter working on canvas or a poet weaving words together. It expresses her artistic skills — her sense of color, design and the weaving prowess.

The weaver's personal statement also speaks for her culture,

My Rug Represents Protection, magic carpet design by Stephen Board, age 10, Great Falls, Va. My Rug Represents Protection, woven in Turkey.

