

because she embeds symbols about her community's religious beliefs, practical concerns, social aspirations and other art forms, such as architecture.

Motifs, patterns, designs and weaving techniques point to specific regions, tribes and villages. Thus an ancient carpet can be dated. As traditional lifestyles are disrupted — either gradually by encroaching Western ways or brutally by war — the carpet remains a vibrant link to the past.

Born of the need to communicate, rather than merely decorate, the motif vocabulary is rich and complex. Motifs may refer to the social status of the weaver, her relationship with her husband, her feelings, or to basic needs such as running water. Fertility motifs abound (wheat, pomegranate, grapes) and so do those related to protection (eyes, scorpions, stylized triangular amulets worn to ward off the evil eye, trees of life). A tribal carpet is also likely to include family and clan signs.

As Piper points out, "From long ago until now people have been weaving their hopes and dreams into the rugs, and those haven't changed much because they're about basic human needs. They're about family, happiness, health, protection. That's what links it all."

Prayer rugs figure the arched *mihrab* design, or prayer niche, which is pointed toward Mecca while praying. The crescent, a Mohammedan symbol, signifies faith.

Carpets, Carpets on the Walls

Piper's goal in curating the exhibition was to "show a sampling of carpets with various motifs for people to look at and understand that there is a story." She chose some carpets for their artistry, others for their uniqueness. Most are old pieces made with hand-spun, naturally-dyed wool. All were once part of people's lives.

Kilims are flat-weave or pileless rugs. (*Kilim* also refers to the foundation of hand-knotted rugs, which consists of transverse threads — the weft — interwoven with longitudinal threads — the warp. In *kilims*, only the weft is visible.) Created for the needs of the weavers and their families, *kilims* have survived as a gen-

Bringing Vision

Holly Piper noticed that many people in Avci's native Adiyaman region (formerly known as "Blind Adiyaman") had sight problems but could not afford glasses. Even in Istanbul, a magnifying glass she'd brought was treated like a treasure. After she mentioned this to a friend at Rainbow Optics, that friend talked to the manager, Sheila Abbott. Rainbow Optics donated 50 pairs of reading glasses, which Piper brought to Adiyaman. After word got out, a crowd of people came to Avci every night to find a fitting pair among the glasses filling a basket. The few left over were given to the local hospital.

Among hand-knotted carpets are several beautiful and unusual 90- to 130-year-old *Shirvans* presenting a great variety of symbols, motifs and designs. *Shirvan* rugs are very finely woven, with particularly small knots. To create the pattern of a hand-knotted rug, weavers tie dyed pieces of yarn to the rug's foundation. There are two kinds of knots: the asymmetrical, single Persian knot and the symmetrical, double Turkish knot. Most Oriental rugs use the more durable Turkish knot.

Two charming, playful 80-year-old *Kirgiz Felts* display the "hands on hip" motif (a stylized female figure with her hands on her hips, inherited from ancient matriarchal beliefs in the mother goddess). The smaller piece was made with leftovers from the larger one. Felt is wool bound together by wetting it and forcing the fibers to shrink and adhere to one another as they dry. It preceded spinning and weaving and was an integral part of nomadic life. Warm and waterproof, it was used to cover people, animals, floors and yurts. It was also decorative.

The only recently created work in the show are three pieces from Afghanistan. One, a prayer rug, reproduces a traditional Balouch design with geometric symbols and symmetrical patterns. In sharp contrast, the other two express the contemporary

Western customers, which is becoming common throughout the carpet-making world.

The exhibition also includes various samples of Kirgiz and Uzbek nomadic textiles. These include several kinds of camel decorations created by young girls in preparation for their weddings; tent bands; a saddle blanket; a knife case; a *sufrah* (a rug placed on the floor and used as a table for serving food); a wonderful 100-year-old yurt door with a holy spider motif. Also, bags of all kinds that include saddle bags, spoon bags and felt arrow bags. Traditional garments include a Turkoman camel-hair coat, probably a wedding garment, with colorful triangular protective amulets sewn on.

Piper framed a variety of Uzbek *Textile Samplers*, all 60 to 100 years old. Spinning, weaving and natural dyeing supplies such as flowers, roots, bark and leaves are gathered in a glass case. Other samples include prayer beads and *nazerluk* beads for protection against the evil eye.

Also on show are pieces Piper said she created "in a spirit of meditation, as a way of processing what I was learning." Among them is a wall installation of *Prayer Flags* cut out from her grandmother's old flour sacks, dyed with Turkish tea, hand-printed with gold text Piper also painted magnified fragments of antique prayer rugs and included within the layers of paint written prayers and wishes for the world.

Magic Carpets: A Bridge Between East and West

The second half of the exhibition concerns the Magic Carpet Project, for which sharing experience and knowledge is also key. "I wanted to share some of what I'd learned with kids," Piper explained. She was working with Marcola children in a K-5 after-school program, and shortly after her second trip to Turkey decided to "do a little magic carpet thing" with them.

She filled a little trailer room with rugs — her shipment had just arrived — and the room glowed with colors. The children

Born of the need to communicate, rather than merely decorate, the motif vocabulary is rich and complex.

uine folk art and have become prized items in recent years. The show provides lovely examples from Anatolia, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, several of them prayer rugs, 50 to 120 years old.

Other examples of flat-weaves include an 80-year-old *Quashgai moj*, a vanishing type of rug that involves a twill weave technique, and a brightly-colored *Tulu* from the Konya region in Turkey, an early kind of weaving in which the goat-hair pile is left long, resembling the long hair of the region's goats.

life experience of the weavers and show how individual artistic expression renews itself in response to cultural upheavals.

After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, some weavers no longer used abstract geometric symbols but resorted to representational means to narrate their stories. These "war rugs" depict tanks, helicopters, guns and soldiers. Afghan weavers thus evolved for themselves a contemporary rug art form of their own, as opposed to weaving Western contemporary designs for

Did You Know?

- Rug weaving can be traced back to the Neolithic age (7000 B.C.). The first examples consisting of warp and weft were flat-weave rugs resembling *kilims*.

- The oldest surviving hand-knotted carpet is the Pazyryk carpet. Protected by permafrost and discovered by Soviet archaeologists in 1949 in a royal burial mound in the Altai Mountains of southern Siberia, it dates back to the fifth century B.C. Its Turkish knot is still in use today. It was intended as a horse-saddle cover. The borders feature rows of elk and horsemen. Its high density (more than 200 knots per square inch) and the complex, delicate design suggest it was already part of a long tradition.

- Turkish rugs probably became known in Western Europe after the sack of Constantinople in 1204 during the fourth crusade. They figure frequently in Western paintings between the 14th and 17th centuries. Geometrically patterned rugs became known as Holbein carpets, after the German painter.

- Skilled weavers (usually women) can tie 20 knots in a minute, but the density of knots is such that it may take several months of continuous work to complete a rug.

- Unlike most objects, rugs acquire value as they are used and acquire patina.

- Today, 95 percent of rugs are made with machine-spun wool and synthetic dyes. Unlike the early aniline synthetic dyes, contemporary chrome dyes are of excellent quality. Nonetheless, a carpet made of handspun wool and natural dyes is more valuable. The colors obtained with natural dyes are highly saturated yet soft. In the early 20th century, synthetic dyes became the norm, and the recipes for natural dyes were lost. Dr. Harald Böhmer, a chemist and father of the natural-dye revival in the 1980s, rediscovered them through chemical analysis of older carpets and taught Turkish weavers how to once again produce and use natural dyes.



Fourth-Graders holding their magic carpet designs at Forestville Elementary in Great Falls, Va.