



Discovering Azerbaijan

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CARPET MAGIC

"The work of every artist is directly related to feelings, emotions and sensations. When I looked at carpets as a child, the characters and heroes I read in fairy tales came to life before my eyes. Mugham performers describe those playing their instruments with genuine passion as if they are weaving patterns into a carpet. With their patterns and colours, carpets are the reflection of mugham." - Sahib Pashazade, tar player





On 26 August this year, Azerbaijan's National Carpet Museum celebrated 10 years in its new building. For readers unfamiliar with the eastern carpet, even from ancient tales of the flying kind, please understand that we write here not of a mere floor cover, but of a craft, an art that bears the soul of its maker.

And why the fuss over a building? Well, Baku has its share of stunning, modern interpretations of the architectural arts to accompany its medieval and Soviet monuments. Most famously these include the flowing curves of the Heydar Aliyev Centre and the warm, night-time glow of the Flame Towers. And architect Franz Janz's rolling carpet design for the Carpet Museum leaves you in no doubt as to its contents: the embodiments of a people's native culture.

I had first noted these carpets on wanders through the medieval walled Icherisheher (Inner City) and was surprised that such complex works could be hung so casually on walls behind street stalls. Even more so when one of the more serious sellers told me who made them. More on that when we return to the museum

The inspiration

That seller also introduced me to what has become one of my favourites - the Guba school 'Biliji' (sometimes known as Bidjov) carpet, and that, in turn, became a mini-obsession. What inspired the, to me, bat-like motifs and dark tones that put me in mind of a Gothic imagination? Enquiries revealed that there is a Biliji village (actually there are three) in the Guba region. A visit to the hills above Shabran revealed that Dag (*hilly*) Biliji was the first

village on a road that then passed through Pirebedil (remember that name, too) and Zeyve, also the names of



Biliji Carpet



Dag Biliji village, centre

two other renowned Guba carpets. That had to be the one.

And there, right in the centre of the village, was a sight that clicked instantly - a grassy mound with, at one end, the spiniest and spookiest of ancient trees. The spines overarched a haphazard collection of seven, equally ancient gravestones, each engraved with Arabic script. Surely there's no random connection here between the Biliji weavers' environment and their highly distinctive and creative designs. But who actually produced this weaving artistry?

Again we'll come back to that - it's an important point, as illustrated when once I was in a luxury department store in London that proudly displayed its 'Oriental Rugs' for sale. One of them was a Pirebedil carpet, labelled "Armenian carpet... produced in Iran." You'll see the problem here.

Gravestone, Dag Biliji village

Custodians of a culture

And so we turn to those who have studied and who work to encourage recognition of this Azerbaijani art and its creators.

The Carpet Museum's vibrant 10-year celebration in August was confirmation of the depth of feeling, attachment and connection with the country's carpet art and culture. And, as noted above by tar player Sahib Pashazade, music was a natural accompaniment; this time with pianist Emil Afrasiyab improvising mugham-style through a range of melodies.

Communicator

Connections through the culture are easily established in Azerbaijan and, as I sought a follow-up to learn more about those who create the art, I found myself in familiar company. Lala Mikailova is now head of the museum's International Relations and Innovations, but 20 years ago we were working together as English teachers, mainly to those building the country's wealth in the oil and gas industries.

Admitting that back then carpets were just part of the domestic landscape, Lala khanim was recently looking for a change in direction and she times her conversion to an interview for the post in the museum. The two-hour tour she was given instilled her with an emotional warmth and growing respect for the mak-



L to R: Amina Melikova, Lala Mikailova, Taryer Bashirov

Pirebedil Carpet



ers' handling of the traditional ornamentation into patterns that delivered messages for the ages. Invited to think overnight about the offer of work, she was already hooked. And she is already in touch with other international museums, and was preparing for the next day's arrival of Prof. Zhang He, Professor of Art History at William Paterson University in New Jersey. The plan is for the professor to conduct a term-long study of motifs woven into the museum's collection of 19th and 20th century carpets. She is to compare those motifs with other Turkic carpet-making traditions in Central Asia, west China and Siberia, as well as in Mesopotamia and Türkiye. This research appears to support the view that the historical Great Silk Road carried ideas and culture as often as the material goods transported by merchants along that East-West trade route.

As for Lala khanim's own preferences, she confessed to a particular liking for the regular and richly-coloured, flat weave Zili carpets, as well as Guba's Pirebedil.

Creator

I'd first encountered Taryer Bashirov when relaxing with a glass of tea in a restaurant in Icherisheher. He was in the process of advising the owners on a redesign in traditional style. I learned then that his first love was the carpet. A couple of years later I was meeting Tahir Salahov, probably Azerbaijan's greatest artist, for a magazine interview. By chance, Taryer bey was also there - to discuss a project to weave some of Salahov's paintings onto carpets.

Honoured Artist Taryer Bashirov is now the museum's Chief Artist and renowned creator of the art. He recalled memories of his 4/5-year-old self watching his mother at the loom in their home in Aghsu, weaving in the Shirvan school tradition. As she worked she sang,



Zili Carpet

Cheten Carpet



and her son was happy to confirm the similarities in the ways carpets and music were created and developed. With weaving in his genes, Taryer bey researched the meanings and interpretations of the motifs employed in the various traditions. In this he was helped greatly by Latif Karimov, the Shusha-born expert on all things Azerbaijani carpet, who produced a three-volume work on the history, development and structure of over 1,300 motifs featured on them. It was to Karimov that he

promised he would move from theory to practice and learn to produce the art.

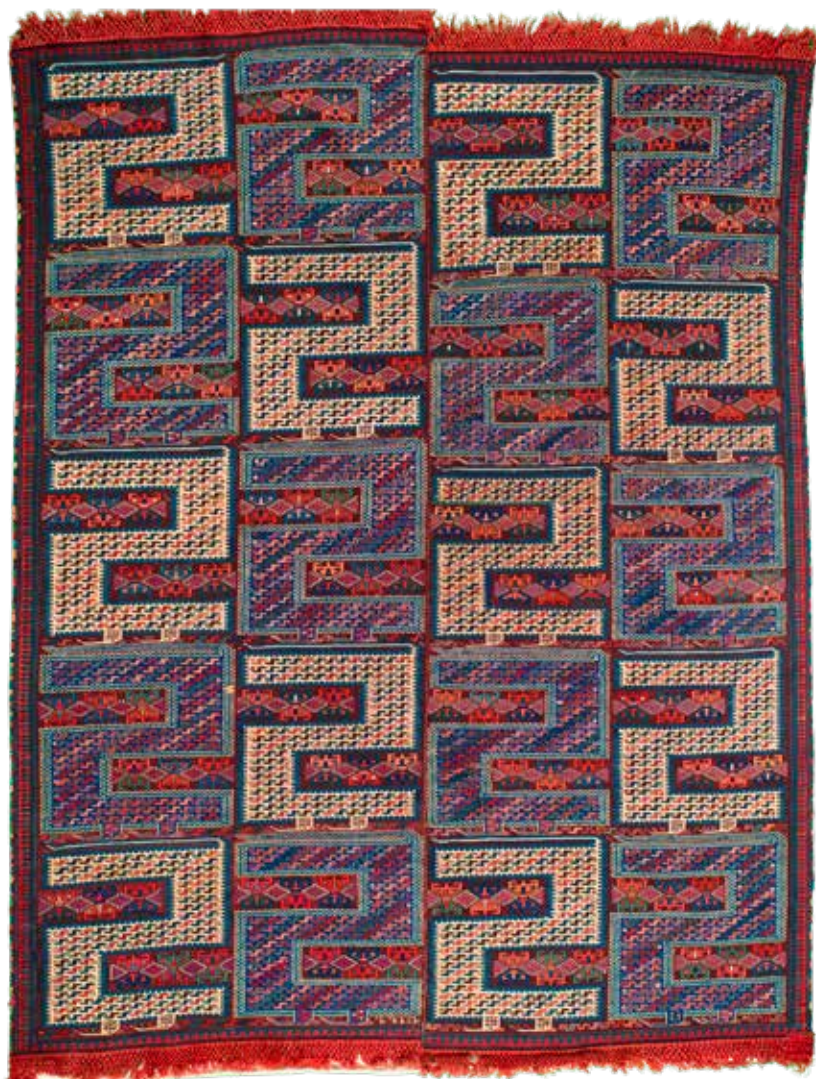
As he works to conserve and popularise traditional carpet-making methods, Taryer bey has a particular interest in the flat weave, Cheten carpet. New to me, the barred appearance had a surprisingly soft warmth to the touch, and may well have launched another enthusiasm.

Curator

Honoured Culture Worker Amina Melikova is Director of the National Carpet Museum of Azerbaijan. One of the country's most experienced contributors to the world of museums, she began her work in the Museum Centre - before independence the Lenin Museum. I had learned much about Azerbaijani culture from assisting on projects she initiated while heading the Icherisheher Museum Centre and the Exhibitions and Events Department at the Heydar Aliyev Centre. The vibrancy of the museum building's 10-year celebration had all the hallmarks: video, exhibition, speech, music and refreshment, of her embracing and enthusiastic approach to the promotion of culture.

As we spoke, Amina khanim was determined to give credit where it was due for the art we were discussing - to the girls and women who'd sat at the loom. And to the fact that the carpets they produced streamed indissolubly through the veins of 19th and 20th century social life. A girl properly trained and skilled could secure herself for life financially. And her skills and imagination could be vital contributors to her eventual settlement with her partner for life. In times and places when and where it was forbidden for prospective husband and wife to meet, the suitor might be shown a carpet that the girl had made. If he was suitably impressed by the skill and personality it embodied, then the proposal could move on. As Amina khanim told us this, it helped to explain the colour, drive and improvisation evident in so many of the carpets - they literally embody a life force. A force that emerged extensively from country village women - an unlikely source, perhaps, in the eyes of many modern sophisticates. Once a new family was established, then

Varni Carpet



there would be carpets for the children and other relatives. As life neared its conclusion, there would be one as a gift to the mosque.

As we all had in mind the upcoming COP 29 conference, Amina khanim pointed to the ecological sustainability of using wool as the base material. Also to the fact that Azerbaijan experiences nine of the world's eleven climatic zones, thus almost guaranteeing the colours available to achieve fullest expression. For choice, she declared the Varni flat weave to be a favourite.

A must see

A standout building on the Boulevard Park running alongside the Caspian Sea. Inside, a permanent exhibition of handcrafted art, pulsing with the heartbeat of a nation's social culture. And guides passionate to ensure that their guests enjoy the whole experience. Azerbaijan's National Carpet Museum; a must see. ✨