

Karabokh
a hidden treasure



Carpets
of Karabakh



MOUNTAINOUS KARABAKH



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Carpet weaving is a traditional art form common to Armenians of all regions, but Karabakh's carpets are so distinctive and well known that they are placed in the category of their own.

Until the proliferation of synthetic aniline dyes in the 1870s, the rich colors of Karabakh carpets were produced using only natural substances, mostly plants and minerals native to the region. Indigo was imported from the east and cochineal from the Ararat Valley. Some villages and settlements never embraced synthetic dyes, adhering to their traditional natural methods.

According to Dr. Dickran Kouyumjian, the Director of Armenian Studies Program of California State University, Fresno, various ancient

SYMBOLS OF LEGENDS

historical sources testify the existence of fine rugs and other textiles woven in Armenia.

“Another important carpet woven in 1731 in Artsakh for Catholicos Nerses of Aghuank, is preserved in the monastery of St. James in Jerusalem,” states Dr. Dickran Kouyumjian in his article entitled *Armenian Textiles: An Overview*.

In Karabakh, as in other Armenian regions, carpets and rugs were not originally intended for the market. They were considered household items and heirlooms, not commodities. In fact, it was considered bad luck to take a carpet out of a home. Heirloom carpets had a protective significance and were often related to fertility.

Karabakh's carpets are rich with symbols that represent family crests and ancient legends, some dating back to pagan times. Also they have been adapted over the centuries, most ornaments have kept their original meanings. The most prevalent symbol is the dragon (vishap in Armenian). Though the dragon is now the common symbol found in carpets and rugs throughout the Caucasus, it is believed that this is largely the result of a large outflow of Armenians from Karabakh in the 18th century, who subsequently founded or revived many towns throughout the region and brought their carpet weaving traditions with them.

There are five main types of medallions, though several other variations can also be found. They are most likely derived from the crests of prominent clans and meliks (semi-independent feudal lords) who presided over the principalities of Karabakh from the Middle Ages to the 19th century. Some of the medallions have the suffix -berd (fortress) in their names, which implies that each fortress had its own crest. These include Jraber (water





RIGHT

A unique example among the earliest Armenian rugs Dr. Dickran Kouyumjian refers to as “the largest and most exquisite”, is “the famous Gohar carpet made in Karabakh with an inscription identifying the weaver, Gohar, and the date 1700.”



SYMBOLS

fortress), Arevaberd (sun fortress) and Okhtsaber (snake fortress), which is composed of swastikas (symbolizing power and eternity) and writhing dragons.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Caucasus became absorbed by the Russian Empire. Gradually, the prevalence of meliks ebbed along with their historical borders. But their traditional medallions prevailed in the art of carpet weaving long after the fall of these principedoms.

While crests and medallions are relics of the Karabakh historic royalty, many symbols used in ancestral carpets reflect day-to-day lives of the inhabitants of this ancient land. The centerpiece of such rugs is a crowned bull (ox, buffalo), the role of which in the lives of the people

BELOW

During the pagan era the eagle was the symbol of Aramazd, the supreme deity of the Armenian pantheon, later it appeared on the coat of arms of a number of Principal Houses, becoming the symbol of powerful dynasties.

of Karabakh was not limited to purely farming, economic functions. In ancient times, the bull was a revered animal. Even after its death, its skull was affixed in a prominent place in the home as a talisman. Many carpets include the representations of bull hide and ram fleece, sacrificial symbols with pagan roots. In ancestral carpets of Karabakh there are few designs with an overwhelming domination of the dragon symbol.

A great number of Karabakh carpets have various symbolic images of eagles, the image of which was perceived as a symbol of power, strength and striving towards heaven.





ABOVE

In the past, household items, such as saddle bags, luggage carriers, bedding storage cases, etc., were created out of carpet or woven wool.

ABOVE

Currently, Armenian carpet ornaments is also used in fashion and design elements.



By the early 20th century, the production of hand-loomed rugs and carpets had all but come to a halt in most Armenian cities as a result of massacres and continuous dislocation, where major heirloom Armenian rugs were also lost and destroyed. The art of weaving carpets was passed down from generation to generation, and the destruction and separation of families made it almost impossible for this tradition to continue.

In Karabakh, however, carpet weaving, as an art form and industry, was upheld well during the Soviet era. In the 19th – 20th cc, the carpets of Shoushi were considered the best in the region and were sold in all neighboring cities. In 1907 the rug factory in Shoushi employed 120 women who produced 600-700 rugs a year, most of which were exported to Europe. During the Soviet era the factory was transported to Stepanakert. Today, the handmade carpets and rugs are woven not only in Stepanakert and Shoushi, but also in surrounding villages, namely the Nikol Duman House Museum in the Ethnographic District of Tsaghkashat village. They are still popular and reputed for their high quality.

CONTINUING AN TRADITION ■





The basic colors that are used in Karabakh carpets manufacture are tight and dark tapes of red, blue and brown.





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