



# View from the Fringe

Newsletter of the New England Rug Society



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[www.ne-rugsociety.org](http://www.ne-rugsociety.org)

## April 17 Meeting: Beau Ryan on Collecting Rug Fragments



**Beau Ryan with some of his rug and textile fragments**

On April 17, at Lincoln First Parish, NERS member Beau Ryan will present “Bits and Pieces: Collecting Rug Fragments.” Using his own examples, he will show that well-chosen fragments can rival intact rugs in visual power and aesthetic reward. Fragments, furthermore, offer the novice (or veteran) collector an affordable form of high-quality textile art.

Originally from New York, Beau is the owner of Rare Elements, a Concord shop that specializes in fine and decorative arts, textiles, and rugs. When he first became

### April 17 Meeting Details

**Time:** 7:00 p.m.

**Place:** First Parish, Bedford Road, Lincoln

**Directions:** From Rt. 95 (128), take exit 28B, Trapelo Road West. Proceed west about 2.5 miles to a stop sign at the five-way intersection in Lincoln (there’s a white planter in the middle of the intersection). Go right on Bedford Road for 0.1 mile to Bemis Hall, a large brick building on the right. First Parish is on your left.

**From Rt. 2,** take Bedford Road, Lincoln Center exit (eastbound, turn right at the light; westbound, go through light, turn right, and circle 270° to cross Rt. 2 at the light). Proceed 0.9 mile to Bemis Hall, a large brick building on your left. First Parish is on your right.

**Parking:** Park in the lot behind the parish house, along the street, or in front of Bemis Hall if that building is dark and not in use.

**Food:** Provided by **members whose names begin with A through G.** Please arrive before 6:45 to set up, and plan to stay afterwards to clean up.

interested in carpets, some twenty-five years ago, his future in-laws introduced him to NERS members Rosalie and Mitch Rudnick, whose collection and friendship have provided ongoing inspiration. He also credits member Lawrence Kearney with fostering his discernment and introducing him to members of the carpet trade.

For a post-presentation show and tell, Beau invites attendees to bring one or two of their own favorite pieces—smallish fragments, that is, *not* intact or nearly intact rugs.

## May 24: NERS Picnic, with Moth Mart, Silent Auction, and Show and Tell



**Browsing the moth mart at the 2014 picnic**

### Picnic Details

**Date:** Sunday, May 24

**Time:** Noon to 4 p.m.

**Place:** Gore Place, 52 Gore Street, Waltham

**From the Mass Pike:** Take exit 17 and follow signs to Rt. 20 westbound (Main St. in Watertown). After 1.5 miles, turn left onto Gore St. at the second of two adjoining traffic lights (Shell station on right). Proceed 0.2 miles on Gore St. Turn left (through center island) to Gore Place entrance.

**From Rte. 128:** Take exit 26 onto Rt. 20 eastbound (it starts out as Weston Road and becomes Main St.). After 3.3 miles turn right on Gore St. at the first of two adjoining traffic lights (Shell station on left). Proceed on Gore St. as above.

**From Newton:** Go north on Crafts St. Turn right (at traffic light) on North St. Cross the Charles River and go straight. The street eventually becomes Gore St. Entrance to Gore Place will be on right.

The annual NERS picnic, the final meeting of the 2014–15 season, will be held on Sunday, May 24, at Gore Place, the lovely grounds of the former governor's mansion in Waltham. We'll again have a huge, enclosed tent with water and electricity, bathroom facilities in the adjacent barn, tables and chairs for all, and plenty of lawn space for mingling and spreading out rugs (see the 2014 moth mart photo above). Supply your own picnic lunch, and NERS will provide soft drinks, coffee, and tea.

Lunch will be preceded by the ever-popular moth mart; we invite all members (dealers or not) to bring things to sell, swap, or give away. Past offerings have included rugs, bags and trappings, kilims, and other textiles; books and periodicals; and even tribal jewelry and clothing. At this year's picnic, in addition, a silent auction will feature pile rugs, textiles from many parts of the globe, and yet more rug and textile books (see representative examples on the next page) belonging to life member Gillian Richardson, who has generously offered to split with NERS all proceeds from the sale.

Finally, following lunch, there's the last show and tell of the season. Bring one or two of your treasured items to share with fellow members—mystery textiles or rugs, exotic specimens you think we should know more about, or wonderful new acquisitions you want to show off.



Members await the 2014 picnic show and tell



A sampling of Gillian Richardson's rugs, textiles, and books to be sold at the 2015 NERS picnic

## February Meeting Review: Ali Riza Tuna on Reconstructing Extinct Rugs from Paintings



### 1. Ali Riza Tuna

On February 21, Geneva-based carpet collector, researcher, and patron Ali Riza Tuna **(1)** addressed NERS members in Newton—one of many stops on his ACOR-sponsored speaking tour—with a talk entitled “Back to the Future: Reconstructing Extinct Anatolian Carpets from Renaissance Paintings.” The hardiness and fervor of both speaker and audience kept enthusiasm high despite the start during the presentation of yet another area snowstorm.

Although long interested in early Anatolian carpets, Ali began his reconstruction project only in 2009. It led him to commission the weaving of several carpets—a non-commercial enterprise that sprang from passion and gave him an opportunity for both study and collecting.

He began his talk by discussing trade routes, highlighting the strong ties to Anatolia of Venice, Florence, Pisa, and Genoa. He noted that carpets were brought to Europe at the end of the Crusades and began to appear in European paintings by the late thirteenth century. Some paintings show carpet types that continued to be woven for long periods, while others depict carpets of which there are no known surviving specimens. As examples of the former, Ali showed a Giotto painting, ca. 1295–1300, that includes a carpet with animals in octagons, and a mid-fifteenth-century Mantegna altarpiece **(2)** that depicts a so-called



### 2. Andrea Mantegna, *San Zeno Altarpiece* (center panel), Verona, 1457–60

small-pattern Holbein carpet, fifty years before Holbein himself painted such a rug. Ali stressed via these and other examples that painters clearly had access to the actual carpets and generally represented them accurately.

Recognition and study of carpets through paintings is not new. Ali cited the late nineteenth-century work of German art historians Julius Lessing and Wilhelm von Bode, who pioneered carpet classification, largely through paintings. In the mid-twentieth century, Kurt Erdmann used similar methodology, and in the following decades John Mills, Onno Ydema, and Luca Emilio Brancati published important studies of rugs depicted in paintings.

Ali noted that, for Renaissance painters, carpets were not just furnishing or decoration; rather, they had their own symbolic and spiritual meanings. He summarized, “When we look at a carpet in a painting, we share its appreciation with the painter who has placed it there.”



**3. Detail and whole view of Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels, Archangels, and Saints*, ca. 1484, Uffizi**

He then described his reconstruction project: to recreate in their entirety some of the now-vanished rugs depicted by Renaissance painters (who without exception showed them only in part). Proceeding from a digitally completed design, he has the carpets woven in the structure and size of the originals. His effort combines design research and theorizing with the challenges of commissioning weaving in present-day Anatolia.



**4. Ali's woven reconstruction of Ghirlandaio's carpet**

So far, he has recreated rugs that appear in three well-known paintings: Domenico Ghirlandaio's ca. 1484 *Madonna and Child Enthroned with Angels, Archangels, and Saints* (3); Piero della Francesca's 1472–74 *Brera Madonna* (also known as the *Montefeltro Alterpiece*); and Lorenzo Lotto's ca. 1524 *Portrait of a Married Couple*.

Ghirlandaio's painting has resulted in the artist's name being applied to a group of surviving rugs related to the one he depicted. The carpet in the painting, in Ali's words, "defines a holy space leading to the Virgin." The painter has painstakingly reproduced not only its design, but also perspectival effects and the play of light and shadow as it descends the stairs in front of the Madonna.

Studying border and field details of this painted carpet and of the most closely related extant rugs allowed Ali to determine the actual knot count for certain design elements. Although the center of Ghirlandaio's carpet is partially obscured by a vase, he managed to work out the remainder of the medallion by reference to three existing carpets, in Sion (Switzerland), Istanbul, and Berlin. From his reconstruction, he had the rug woven (4), replicating the design, proportions, and knot count of the lost carpet that had served as Ghirlandaio's model, and utilizing natural dyes as close as he could get to the likely originals.



5. Piero della Francesca, *Brera Madonna (Montefeltro Altarpiece)*, 1472–74, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan



6. *Brera Madonna*, detail



7. Detail of carpet depicted in *Brera Madonna*, showing central medallion size and proximity to border



8. Perspective detail of Ali's reconstructed Montefeltro Carpet, showing smaller central medallion

Ali's second reconstruction effort was of the rug shown under the Madonna's feet in Piero della Francesca's *Montefeltro Altarpiece* (5). Given that Federico di Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, was the patron of the painting (and is portrayed kneeling in the foreground), and given the prominence of the carpet, Ali surmised that it was the duke's own rug, and referred to it as the Montefeltro Carpet. Once again, the carpet delimits a holy space for the Virgin. Its plain red field contains a single, eight-pointed central medallion formed of two interlaced squares; this is surrounded by an interlaced star-and-cross border (6).

After determining the number of border devices and calculating the carpet's square proportions and size, Ali turned to the design of the medallion, using the famous "domes and squinches" carpet in the Vakıflar as a guide. But having plotted out the dimensions of the medallion, he concluded that in actuality it would have been much smaller than it appears in the painting (7, 8). In explanation, he hypothesized that the duke, wanting the splendor of his carpet emphasized, had Piero expand the medallion so that it would extend well beyond the hem of the Madonna's robe.



**9. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Married Couple*, ca. 1524, Hermitage Museum**

The unconventional symbolism of Lorenzo Lotto's *Portrait of a Married Couple* (9) has been much debated: The husband, for instance, is shown pointing to a sleeping squirrel and holding a piece of paper inscribed in Latin, "The man, never." The wife, cradling her faithful dog, is elevated and appears pale and unworldly. A current theory, Ali explained, maintains that when Lotto painted the double portrait, the woman had died, and the man was indicating that he, unlike the squirrel, would never sleep during stormy times—that is, would never forget his departed wife.

In the painting, Lotto has faithfully reproduced part of a carpet known alternatively as "Bellini," after Giovanni or Gentile Bellini (who both painted rugs of the type), or as "reentrant," after its keyhole-like design feature.

Since Lotto's portrait shows only 25 to 30 percent of the carpet, determining the rest required considerable research on Ali's part. A preparatory sketch in the Rijksmuseum told him that the size was consistent with existing reentrant rugs. Those surviving rugs also provided guidance in reconstructing the central medallion and other design elements. But an unresolved question remained: did the carpet have a keyhole at the bottom and an arch at the top, or a keyhole at each end? (Both versions existed at the time Lotto was painting.) Ali covered the bases by creating two patterns (10, 11). One of them (the symmetrical, "double-reentrant" type) has now been woven, and the other is still on the loom.

**10, 11 (right, top and bottom). Ali's alternative versions of Lotto's reentrant carpet**





Ali's recreated carpets were woven in central Anatolia, near Karaman. Mehmet Girgiç, a master feltmaker from Konya, was Ali's man on the ground in supervising the weaving. Responding to a question, Ali indicated the need to refine weavers' usual practices and emphasize quality and fidelity, even if it meant greater expense. It was crucial, he said, to get the fundamentals right; in his words, "The rug starts with the wool and the color. . . if you miss that, you miss everything."

In conclusion, Ali reiterated that Renaissance painters used carpets to define specific spaces, and that, recognizing carpets' artistic value, they depicted them as faithfully as possible, unless some special purpose of the painting made them do otherwise. He stressed that the reconstruction of rugs depicted in paintings helps us to understand the paintings as well as the rugs.

Following the talk, there was a brief show and tell. Since members' collections aren't exactly overflowing with fifteenth-century Anatolian carpets, the examples brought in—such as a fragmentary, Ushak-derived Manastir carpet (12)—displayed designs descended from earlier Anatolian weavings. From his own collection, Ali showed three fragments of a gorgeously colored Anatolian rug uniting motifs derived from Ghirlandaio, Holbein, and reentrant carpets (13).

Ali's painstaking research and his commitment to weaving accuracy and quality are impressive. Our many thanks to him for carrying out this project, and for braving the elements to share it with us.

*Jim Adelson*

**12. NERS member's fragmentary Manastir carpet**



**13. One of Ali's Anatolian fragments, with medallion indebted to large-pattern Holbein and some reentrant carpets**



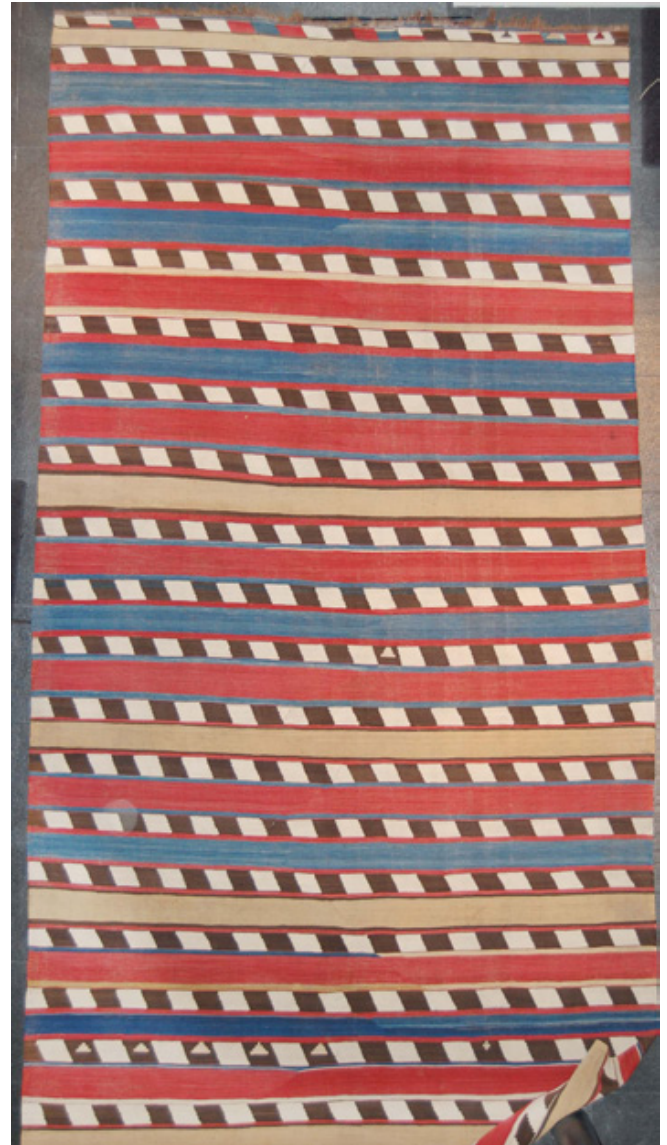
## March Meeting Review: A Night at the MFA, with Mike Tschebull

On March 5, NERS members gathered at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for a doubleheader courtesy of Raoul (“Mike”) Tschebull—a gallery walk-through of a half-dozen kilims from his collection, followed by a slide talk on the origin of certain Caucasian pile-rug designs. Unfortunately, this may be our last such meeting at the MFA, as the Upper Colonnade exhibition space will henceforth be used for paintings.

Mike opened his gallery talk by commenting on a large kilim with stepped medallions arrayed diagonally, which he assigned to Shirvan **(1)**. He pointed out that the kilim was unusual for its many colors—three reds, three blues, two greens, and more. Another unusual feature was its borders, absent on many Shirvan kilims. He remarked that most such kilims are woven in a size similar to this one, and yet very few pile carpets have these dimensions, so the kilims and carpets likely served different functions. He noted the exceptional condition of the example on display—even the end finishes remain in good shape—indicating that



**1. Multicolored and bordered Shirvan kilim**



**2. Kilim with horizontal stripes, eastern Caucasus**

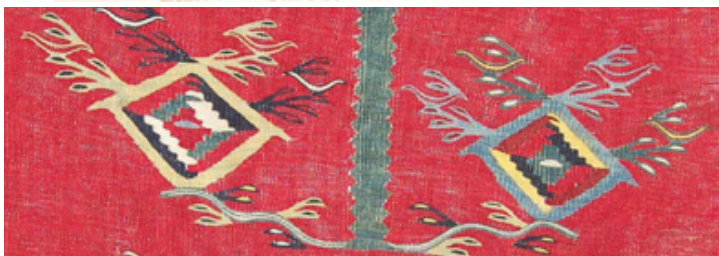
it probably didn't get much floor use, either in its original home or in the West. He also commented on the use of difficult-to-dye dark wool for the warps rather than the colored wefts.

The design of Mike's second kilim, from the eastern Caucasus, featured colored horizontal stripes interspersed with brown and white angling diagonals **(2)**. He commented that larger kilims such as this one were probably used on floors, atop felts, and could also cover bedding during the day. He noted that “good is not always old,” and that assessing age is in any case problematic, since these weavings never have dates or signatures. Nevertheless, he maintained that this example was old. He surmised that it had been made on a vertical loom, and by more than one weaver, given its color breaks and “lazy lines.”

Next was a kilim of uncertain origin: such pieces are usually labeled “Thracian,” but according to Mike no one really knows whether they were woven in Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia, or Romania. There were significant Turkish populations in these regions during the second half of the nineteenth century (when Mike judged his example to have been made), though many were expelled in the first half of the twentieth century. The substantial use of cochineal in this piece helped date it, according to Mike. Eccentric wefting, a technique seldom used in other kilims, made possible its smoothly curved designs (3).

In contrast to the “Thracian” kilim, an Anatolian prayer kilim from Mike’s collection had madder-based red. It was in very good condition, with surviving end finishes. Mike noted that he thought Kazak prayer rugs were based on Anatolian kilim predecessors, though he did not elaborate on this.

He then proceeded to a kilim from eastern Azerbaijan, which he had acquired from Iran (during a pause in the embargo) based on digital photos (4). He pointed out that its colors were similar to those in pile weavings from Heriz, and explained that its wool foundation suggested a nomadic origin (since village weavers had by then adopted cotton foundation materials); he concluded that the Heriz area might have been where the nomadic weavers wintered. This kilim had functioned, he thought, as a *sofreh*, or cloth upon which meals were eaten.



3. So-called Thracian kilim (whole view and detail showing curvilinear motifs created by eccentric wefting)



4. Kilim made as a *sofreh*, eastern Azerbaijan

Mike attributed his sixth kilim to Qarabagh, on the border between Iran and the Caucasus. He commented that its design may have originated in *sofrehs*, but that this piece was too large and probably too fragile to have served that purpose. It was likely village made, woven in a single section wider than a typical nomad loom could accommodate. A few of these rare kilims seem to have been stored away, hidden from the Russians and emerging only after the fall of the Soviet Union. Their dyed warps, grouped in wide stripes, increase the color intensity of the loosely packed wefts (5).



5. Delicately woven Qarabagh kilim, whole view and detail, with grouped colored warps visible

Following the gallery tour, members proceeded to the Riley Seminar Room for refreshments, followed by Mike's slide talk. As to why so few field studies had been done in the Caucasus, he gave two answers: first, that czarist Russia was generally very secretive, and therefore not open for such research, and second, that the area had been acquired through bloody conquest, and its conquerors were uninterested in understanding or publicizing the local populations.

He then presented possible sources for several Caucasian village-rug designs. He started with two examples from northeastern Azerbaijan that exhibited similar star-and-lozenge motifs—one an embroidery and the other a pile weaving (6). Although designs are often thought to have passed from embroidery to pile, he said that it wasn't clear in this case which came first. Next he showed an eighteenth-century carpet design reflected in a nineteenth-century village rug. But he went on to contrast this instance of carpet-to-carpet design influence with rug designs inspired by other media, such as pottery or wood.

Mike noted that ground looms, which didn't require the amount of wood—a scarce commodity—needed for vertical looms, were used for weaving *jajims* and bands. Undecorated *jajims* with vertical stripes have been made for a very long time, and Mike conjectured that these led to certain Caucasian pile carpets with embellished vertical stripes. He then compared a warp-substitution *jajim* and a vertically striped prayer rug woven in the same area (7).

Felts, which allowed the easy creation of curves, may have been a design source for carpets. (In addition, reed screens may have adopted felt designs.) The reciprocal-trefoil border of a Bordjalou Kazak prayer rug, for example, was directly comparable to that of a felt horse cover probably made in the same vicinity (8).

Mike then turned to Caucasian prayer rugs, highlighting several aspects that he linked to Indian and Kashmiri textiles (9). One was the prevalence of ivory fields (10). Another was the use of *botehs*, sometimes in rows, as in Marasali prayer rugs. A third was plant motifs within lattices (11).

Caucasian villages producing rugs with these features were located fairly near the urban centers of the region—Baku, Shemakha, and Kuba—where the weavers might have had a better chance to see imported Indian and Kashmiri textiles with these design schemes.

Mike concluded by wondering aloud what Caucasian village weavers were producing prior to the nineteenth century.

He speculated that there wasn't much output, because the populations were relatively small and the people often brutally suppressed, making weaving difficult. In addition, Western demand was at the time much lower. But there were substantial population movements between Turkey and the Caucasus in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and perhaps people in motion took weaving designs with them.

Many thanks to Mike for yet again sharing his rugs and thoughts with NERS. Thanks as well to curator Lauren Whitley for her years of hosting our group. We can only hope there will be future rug-appreciation events at the MFA.

Jim Adelson



6. Caucasian embroidery and pile-rug motifs



7. Caucasian *jajim* and pile rug



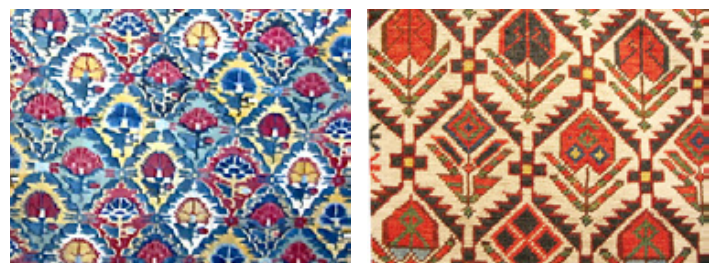
8. Bordjalou Kazak pile rug and felt horse cover



9. Indian printed, dyed, and painted cotton *qalamkari*



10. White-ground Caucasian pile rugs



11. Floral lattices on Kashmir twill-tapestry shawl fabric (*jamawar*) and Caucasian pile rug

# The Textile Museum Reopens, Part One: Splendid Setting, Welcome Company

“You are cordially invited to a special reception celebrating the grand opening of the George Washington University Museum and the Textile Museum [on] Thursday, March 19, 2015. Black tie or festive dress,” read the invitation. And so, with four hundred other “Very Important People”—including NERS members Julia Bailey, Jeremy and Hanne Grantham, Barbara Kaslow, Peter Pap, Jeff Spurr, Mike Tschbull, and Nick and Joan Wright—I joined the festivities. We were treated to cocktails, dinner, and a preopening opportunity to wander the three floors of the new museum.

The stunning new building **(1)** is a collaboration between a university and a museum each committed to

fostering the study and appreciation of the art, history, and culture of societies and peoples across the globe and across time periods.

The inaugural exhibition is a blockbuster display of the Textile Museum’s most prized treasures. It includes, to name just a few, an eighteenth-century Caucasian embroidery **(see p. 20)**; a sixteenth-century silk and metal-thread velvet depicting a hunting scene; heavily decorated robes from Uzbekistan **(2)**, China, Burma, Cameroon, and elsewhere; a Cairene Torah-curtain rug **(3)**; and other world-class carpets, of which four of the biggest are splendidly viewable from an upstairs balcony **(4)**.



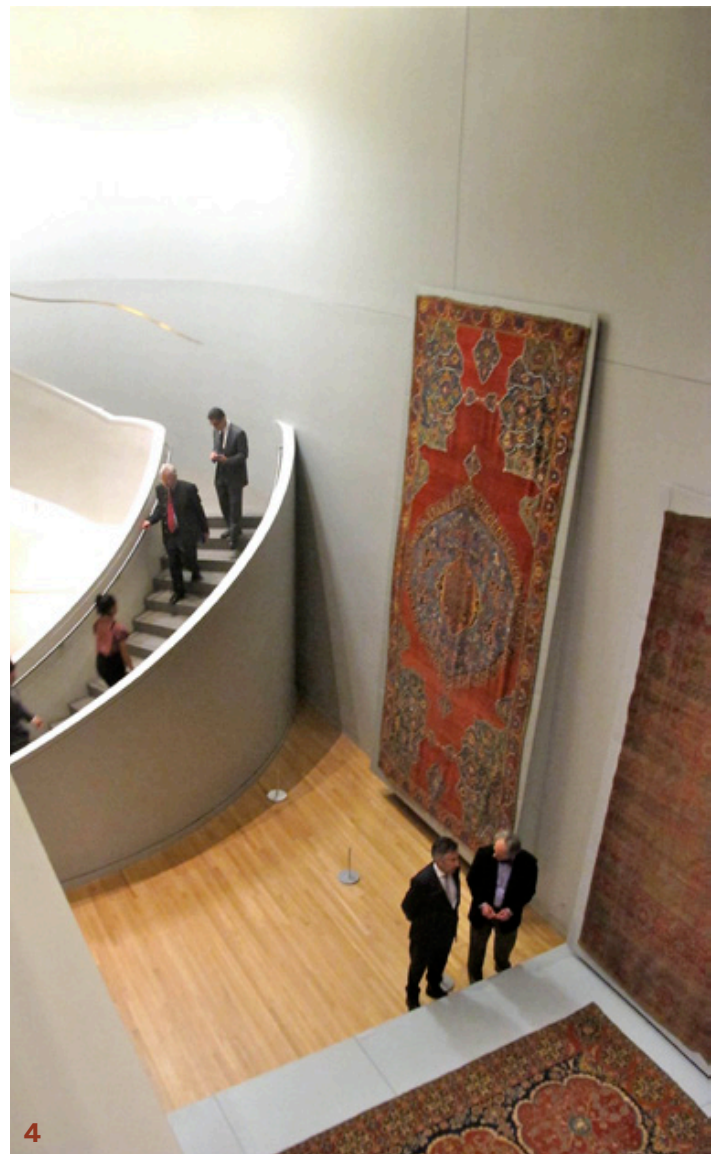
**1. Exterior of the new Textile Museum**



**2. Kazakh man’s embroidered deerskin kaftan, 19th c.**



**3**



**4**

**3. Devotional textiles, including a knotted-pile Ottoman Torah curtain (on sloped platform)**

**4. View from above of spiral staircase and large carpets**



**5. Michael Franes and Jeff Spurr conversing in a serving area, overseen by a portrait of George Hewitt Myers**

But for me the highlight was the people celebrating the event—a community of textile and rug enthusiasts from around the world. There was a perpetual buzz of animated conversations as finely dressed guests renewed contact. Many were wearing kaftans, velvet coats, silk wraps, shawls, and various ceremonial costumes that encouraged lots of touching.

I was particularly happy to reencounter Dietlinde and Christian Erber, Munich collectors of suzanis and Turkish textiles. We've shared time together at conferences and over dinners for the better part of twenty-five years. Michael Franes, high-priest guru of great rugs and advisor to the Qatar Museums Authority, was there (5). Detlef Maltzahn (6), owner of Rippon-Boswell, the Wiesbaden auction house specializing in rugs and textiles, was sought after for conversation about his upcoming auction, on April 11—the first of three sales dispersing the Uzbek, Anatolian, Persian, and Caucasian textiles collected by Ignazio Vok. (I counted at least seven Americans who, given additional hope by the strong dollar, are planning a trip to Germany for the auction.)



**6. Judy Smith with Detlef Maltzahn, likely discussing the upcoming Vok Collection sale at Rippon Boswell**

Danny Shaffer, executive editor of HALI, was wandering around, as were Alan Marcuson and Diane Hall, dealers living in Belgium. Judy Freedman, a New York collector of horse blankets from many different cultures, was impressed with an exquisite example on display.

The following night, some eight hundred of the Textile Museum's "wider circle of family, friends, and members" attended a second, even larger reception in the new building. On Saturday there was a special lecture session and a show and tell (at which Jeff Spurr was the principal discussant of textiles). One of the two speakers, Tom Farhnam, talked about Textile Museum founder George Hewitt Myers (5), who was an entrepreneur, an environmentalist, a passionate collector, and (who knew?) an owner of Bristol-Myers. London scholar Jon Thompson gave the second talk, on motifs in early Persian painting and their use in textiles and carpets.

Like the "VIP" opening, these events offered the welcome chance to meet new people and prolonged the thrill of sharing time with old friends.

*Judy Smith*

## The Textile Museum, Part Two: Reflections on the Lectures and Inaugural Exhibition



**7. “Unraveling Identity” curators: Sumru Krody, Mattiebelle Gittinger, Lee Talbot, Anne Rowe, and Rebecca Stevens**

The new Textile Museum, at the equally new George Washington University Museum, debuted March 19–21 with two receptions, inaugural lectures, and—sustaining an old tradition—a show and tell. Through this alliance, the TM not only finds itself with modern premises and a state-of-the-art storage, conservation, and study facility, but an opportunity to remake itself in other ways.

For the near term, the expansion of the galleries increases pressure on the current curatorial staff (7); adding a full-time Western Hemisphere curator, and one for fashion and fiber arts, will be necessary to secure new audiences (already in evidence at the openings) and to properly honor, let alone augment, the museum’s outstanding collections.

The inaugural lectures were Thomas J. Farnham’s “George Hewitt Myers: Changing the Way We See” and Jon Thompson’s “Motifs and Mysteries in the World of Oriental Rugs: Crumbs from the Idea Table.” Both were excellent. Farnham introduced us to the fascinating biography of the TM’s founder, educating us in his multidimensional character, qualities, and private and professional activities.



**8. Jon Thompson, one of the two speakers at the Textile Museum opening**

Myers was among the elite of his day, a Harvard alumnus who once possessed a 50-percent ownership of Bristol-Myers and engaged in other entrepreneurial activities. More striking to me, however, was the fact that he became an early conservationist—one of the first students at the Yale School of Forestry—who bought up forest land in New England and engaged in its enlightened, sustainable use (via methods he encouraged in others). In addition, he espoused advanced conservation practices for rugs and textiles in his own collection and, once he had founded it, in the TM.

Thompson’s rather droll but insightful presentation took as its point of departure a small bit of Timurid illumination so packed with visual ideas that he could relate them to numerous aspects of rug design in the Persianate realm in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He employed Timurid and early Safavid miniatures and extant rugs to sustain his arguments (8).

Both talks were stimulating and of genuine substance, worthy of the event, looking backward to the founder and his progressive ideas, and forward to future research.

The new museum features a utilitarian ground floor (5), leading to a back court that had been equipped with a large tent reminiscent of TM events past. Thought should be paid to embellishing that plain and rather unimpressive space in the future. Platoons of what I took to be GW undergraduates were present as greeters. The gallery spaces on basement, second, and third levels are large and open, with high ceilings—particularly in certain areas—permitting large carpets to be displayed vertically (4). The absence of permanent articulation of these spaces affords maximum flexibility to the curators.

The title of the inaugural exhibition, “Unraveling Identity: *Our Textiles, Our Stories*” [italics mine], emphasizes inclusiveness—not a bad thing in a museum eager to appeal to a broader audience. The theme is a central one: informing us about the whys and wherefores of dress worn by each individual in each particular culture and each social situation should be a principal goal of the museum’s enterprise. The same applies to the vast array of textiles that are not worn but have other practical and symbolic social purposes; these include rugs and carpets, many of which have functioned to embellish, define, or even create social and cultural space. Textiles serve human identity like nothing else.

If costume paraphernalia, including jewelry, are added, the reach of the TM’s collecting becomes even broader. There are hints in the exhibition of a move in that direction, as well as toward modern and contemporary “fiber art.” Areas that remain outside the TM’s purview include traditional European and European-American textile arts, excepting Hispano-Moresque carpets and textiles. Non-Indonesian Oceanic textiles also appear to be completely missing.

So what does “Unraveling Identity” demonstrate?

It reminds us that the ambition, taste, and collecting acumen of George Hewitt Myers were not only realized in his time, but have continued and expanded in new directions since.

Anyone visiting the galleries of the new museum will be reminded of what the collections comprise:

—The exquisite, such as an immaculate length of Ottoman silk *kemha* fabric of the greatest sophistication, a unique pair of Safavid silk panels woven in the 1600s for Thai royalty, two examples of Nasrid silk lampas, an impossibly fine Mughal pashmina pile rug as dense as velvet, and small, circular rank badges for a Chinese prince.

—The spectacular, including very large and dramatic pre-Columbian camelid-fiber panels in discontinuous warp and weft weave, a supreme example of Caucasian embroidery (see p. 20), and the shattered remains of a once-magnificent late Roman tapestry-woven hanging.

—The important, for instance, the most interesting Cairene carpet around, woven in the Mamluk palette but in Ottoman style, and including a unique display of blossoming plants in the “spring flowers” style that emerged in the mid-sixteenth century under Süleyman the Magnificent (9); a Cairene-woven *parokhet*, or Torah curtain (3), created for an Italian synagogue; an immaculate seventeenth-century Safavid silk kilim with the royal Polish coat of arms, acquired by Myers in 1906 and chosen by him to adorn his book plate; and an unusually fine Yomut main carpet with the best flowering plants ever to appear on an *elem* (10).

—The rare and unusual, including a pair of Paiwan leggings such as I have never encountered and a raffia fiber Kongo royal open-work mantle. And finally,

—The oddball, such as Mae West’s double platform shoes—“normal” high heels embedded in much larger ones (11).



9. Ottoman-style Cairene carpet (detail)



10. Yomut main carpet (detail)



11. Mae West's platform shoes



The curators expended titanic effort in selecting and introducing each object, at the very time the great task of transferring the TM's collections and establishing the new quarters was underway. They deserve our thanks for their work, which included every effort to make the "Identity" theme manifest. It must have taken excellent sleuthing to locate the illustrative prints, paintings, and photos that accompany many of the textiles and show them in use (12), whether on the back of a Native American warrior or under the feet of Henry VIII.

The general theme is subdivided into more specific categories—"Identity Markers," "Political Identity," "Spiritual Identity," "Transforming Identity," "Cosmopolitan Identity," and "Aggrandizing Identity"—that determine the location of the objects on view. In many cases, however, individual items of apparel or other textiles fall into two or more of these categories. The decision to group together all representatives of one "identity class" seems problematic to me. I would have preferred a regional/cultural organization, putting like with like in terms of tradition, place, and date, and then highlighting not one but all the categories that might have applied to each object. The present organization works, for instance, when three prayer rugs or mats are

placed together. But a Mamluk-style carpet of the early Ottoman period (ca. 1540–60) is separated from the ca. 1550–70 Cairene carpet mentioned above, the latter being put in the "Political Identity" section due to its Ottoman style. It would have been preferable to see the two carpets juxtaposed for comparative purposes and visual coherence.

The curators really went the extra mile with their highly informative labels, many of which are posted online, with images, at [museum.gwu.edu/sites/museum.gwu.edu/files/Unraveling-Identity-Expanded-Labels.pdf](http://museum.gwu.edu/sites/museum.gwu.edu/files/Unraveling-Identity-Expanded-Labels.pdf). This salutary practice, if continued, will surely widen the TM's audience and benefit the community of textile lovers, but to be truly and lastingly useful, it should be extended to include the complete replication of text and image in a form more accessible than a pdf document. I considered the carpet labels to be somewhat less specific and effective than those for the textiles, but dedicated effort is evident throughout.

Being an arch quibbler, I must note that certain types of items and certain regions are privileged over others. There are, for instance, two Safavid jackets, exhibited in separate areas. One seems misplaced in the "Cosmopolitan Identity" group, its main fabric being ascribed to India at a time when many Safavid and Mughal silks prove very difficult to distinguish.



12. Rugs and textiles exhibited with large-scale images illustrating their uses

More to the point, that fabric features impressed, diagonal, cross-cutting lines between major motifs, an eccentricity of Safavid production, applied in the manufactory after weaving. The one indisputedly Indian component, a fine strip of patterned chintz, is also present on the second jacket.

Of the four batiks, nary a one is of the first order, though the *kain panjang* with Flash Gordon imagery is a hoot, and a welcome example of "Cosmopolitan Identity." Other Indonesian textiles include a splendid, large Toraja (Sulawesi) ikat, a wonderful Lampung (Sumatra) *tapis* (woman's ceremonial sarong) and a fine Lampung double-red ship *palepai* (ceremonial hanging), an Iban (Borneo) *pua* (though it's classic, one with a stronger design would have been preferable, given the low lighting), and a silk wrap with interesting imagery from a small eastern island. But the exhibition includes nothing from Sumba or Timor, no Batak textile, none of the *lawon* from Palembang famed for their "color field" character, and nothing from Bali.

The most sorely neglected continent is Africa. Many wonderful traditions could have been represented, or represented more spectacularly (such as the Kuba). Something in bark cloth could have come from the African or the Indonesian collections.

Terminology is another issue. The introductory text, fine in other ways, includes the following: "Clothes and fabrics can express who we are, what we are becoming and how we want to be perceived." Also: "People and cultures imbue fabrics with multiple meanings." "Fabric," however, denotes yardage as yet unmodified by being transformed into a final artifact, such as a textile or item of apparel. To be sure, a fabric will manifest qualities such as costliness of the materials and fineness of the techniques employed in its making, and it may carry imagery of cultural import, but it has yet to become anything that will be seen in the world (except on a museum wall centuries after manufacture). I find this usage misleading. It would have been much better were "textile" substituted for "fabric" here.

More objections: The label of a Safavid medallion carpet (R33.1.2) reads, "These classical carpets are defined by a shared main feature, a central star medallion with pendant cartouches and finials." Well, not exactly. Extant late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century carpets tend to have central medallions, but other types exist in illustrations (discussed by Jon Thompson) and in reality.

The label of a "Mamluk" carpet (R116.2.4) dates it to "ca. 1500." I cannot really fault the curators for wanting to push this fine, large carpet back before the Ottoman conquest (1516), but it is without question a "Mamluk-

style" carpet from about the mid-century. A closely related (though grander) example arrived in Florence in 1570. The curators have followed the lead of Walter Denny, who has added decades to the ages he assigns to Mamluk-style rugs on view at the Metropolitan Museum.

The label of the Flash Gordon batik states that the quality of the cotton cloth and the batik work "reveal the economic status of the gifted batik artist." Nothing of the sort. Unlike some contemporary American, European, and Japanese masters of their crafts, workers whose skills enabled the production of wonderful textiles in most commercial traditions around the world were much put upon, often grossly exploited, and ill paid. So it was for batik makers, whose workshop masters, whether Dutch or native Javanese, claimed the profits of their work.

The label of a classic Navajo first-phase "chief's" blanket, a phenomenal example of the oldest and best type, features an image by Karl Bodmer of a Native American warrior wearing a similar blanket about his upper body. Given that illustration, there was no need to wrap the real blanket around a mannequin (13), when it could have been fully displayed in all of its splendid simplicity. A loss.



13. Navaho "chief's" blanket on mannequin, with part of the illustrated label visible at lower left

The label of a Bamum tunic correctly specifies this garment as being worn by a class of royal guards, pictures of whom are shown dancing in front of the Fon (king), and nicely describes the resist-dye technique employed, but nowhere includes the name of the cloth: *ndop*.

These are quibbles, however. My principal beef is with the design of the exhibition as a whole. I am an advocate of strongly colored walls, especially for textiles: deep blues, purples, greens, subtle mixtures where warranted. Sometimes a warm tan, ochre, or even ceiling-wax red might work. Failing these, walls should be white. Indeed, some of the exhibition walls were purple, and that was good; however, far more of them were painted a dispiriting light bluish gray. This insipid color, far from enhancing the textiles placed against it, seemed to drain them of all visual vigor.

The saddest part of the display was the section devoted to what should have been a highlight: the already-mentioned Mamluk-style and Safavid medallion carpets, plus an Ushak large-medallion carpet and an embroidered Portuguese rug, the first three hung lengthwise to potentially dramatic effect. Not only were they placed against the dismal grey, but they were essentially unlit, seriously impeding their appreciation (4).

Another problem throughout the exhibition was juxtapositions that a thoughtful designer would have avoided. Adjacent to the enormous carpets just described,

and backed into a corner, was an example of contemporary fiber art—a headless, tightrope-walking figure, wearing European printed cloth sold in Africa (14). The creator was a Nigerian living in England, and his message was about precarious identity. The work simply had no business being there, and it was done a disservice by its placement. I maintain that all the examples of fiber art should have been exhibited together, regardless of the identities they were assigned.

A similarly jarring juxtaposition involved the Safavid silk textiles woven for the Thai market, shown on the top floor of the exhibition. These are weavings of the utmost refinement, yet they were dominated by a bizarre, blown-up illustration, in starkest black and white, of an architectural scene with a Pierrot-type figure leaning out of an upper window. For the life of me, I could not understand what it was doing there. Being the least congested, the top-floor arrangements were the easiest to view and navigate, but more could have been done to minimize visual confusion and enhance their general coherence.

My quibbles and more serious criticisms notwithstanding, The TM's inaugural exhibition is the product of much ambition and thought, and does considerable justice to the amazing collections it represents. It is well worth seeing, and gives promise of many pleasures in the future, should the museum and its staff gain the support it and they deserve.

*Jeff Spurr*



**14. Yinka Shonibare, *Lady Walking a Tightrope*, 2006, lent to “Unraveling Identity” by the Newark Museum. The headless figure’s Victorian-style dress is made from European printed fabric produced for export to Africa.**

## ARTS Comes East



From May 29 through 31, the Antique Rug and Textile Show (ARTS) will be coming to the Boston area. Held in San Francisco for the last six years, the show gives visitors the chance to browse through some of the best antique rugs and textiles available on the market, to mingle with fellow collectors, and to attend special exhibitions and other events. (See *View from the Fringe*, Nov. 2011 and Nov. 2014, for reports and photographs from two past San Francisco shows: [ne-rugsociety.org/newslett.htm](http://ne-rugsociety.org/newslett.htm).)

Plans for ARTS East are nearly complete. Events are summarized here, but keep checking [artsrugshow.org](http://artsrugshow.org) for updates, and to register for the opening reception.

ARTS is the biggest rug and textile event of its kind in America. Don't miss the opportunity to attend its first show on the East Coast.

**Location:** Grogan & Company, 22 Harris Street, Dedham, MA 02026

**Opening Reception:** May 29, noon to 8 p.m. Dinner and wine will begin at 5:00 p.m. Advance registration on [artsrugshow.org](http://artsrugshow.org) is recommended (and substantially discounted).

**Public opening:** Saturday and Sunday, May 30 and 31, 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

**Exhibitors:** Approximately twenty-five international dealers of antique rugs and textiles

**Exhibition:** "Kazak Art," curated by Michael Grogan

**Other activities:** "Under-\$500 Room" and seminars for beginning collectors

*Ann Nicholas*

## ICOC in DC



**Qarabagh embroidery (detail), in "Unraveling Identity"**

The thirteenth International Conference on Oriental Carpets (ICOC) will be held in Washington, DC, August 6–9, 2015. This conference is being organized in collaboration with and in support of the new Textile Museum, on the campus of the George Washington University. Events will include a series of lectures, special admission to the important inaugural exhibition "Unraveling Identity: Our Textiles, Our Stories," a reception, admission to other Washington exhibitions, access to the TM's new conservation and storage facilities in Ashburn, VA, and an optional post-conference tour to Philadelphia and New York City.

Registration for ICOC XIII will begin in early April. See [icoc-orientalrugs.org](http://icoc-orientalrugs.org), which will post further details of the conference. Extraordinarily favorable hotel rates are being arranged. A carpet fair will be separately organized.

*Wendel Swan*

## Parviz Tanavoli Retrospective at Davis Museum, Wellesley

Rug collectors know Parviz Tanavoli as the author of many books on Persian pile and flat-woven rugs, from *Lion Rugs of Fars* (1978) to *Shahsavan* (1985) to *Afshar: Tribal Weaves from Southeast Iran* (2010). In 1997, in fact, he spoke to NERS about Afshar weaving in Kirman Province.

Tanavoli's greater repute, however, derives from the visual art that he himself has created; he is widely cited as "the father of modern Iranian sculpture." His monumental works in steel or bronze command breathtaking prices and are in the collections of leading museums. But he sculpts in smaller, more colorful and playful media as well—even neon. Some of his pieces suggest the old-fashioned locks with which he was fascinated as a boy in Tehran; others—the ones for which he is best known—are calligraphic, and give three-dimensional, highly expressive form to the Persian word *heech*, or "nothing"—a term replete with mystical significance.

Nearby Davis Museum, at Wellesley College, is the first venue in the US to mount a solo exhibition of Tanavoli's art. NERS members should not pass up the chance to see his splendid sculptures, which are exhibited together with his work in other media: paintings, drawings, prints, ceramics, and jewelry.

The retrospective "Parviz Tanavoli" will be on view through June 7, 2015. For more information about the exhibition and associated events, see [wellesley.edu/davismuseum/whats-on/current/node/55066](http://wellesley.edu/davismuseum/whats-on/current/node/55066).



**Parviz Tanavoli, with *Big Heech Lovers* (2007)**

## Rug and Textile Events

### Auctions

- Apr. 11, Wiesbaden: Rippon Boswell, Vok Collection I
- Apr. 21, London, Oriental Carpets, Christie's King St.
- Apr. 21, London, Islamic and Indian Art, Bonhams New Bond St.
- Apr. 22, London, Arts of the Islamic World, Sotheby's
- Apr. 23, London, Art of the Islamic & Indian Worlds, Christie's King St.
- Apr. 24, London, Art of the Islamic & Indian Worlds, Christie's South Kensington
- Apr. 30, Vienna, Carpets & Textiles, Dorotheum
- May 9, Vienna, Fine Antique Oriental Rugs IV (Munkacsi-Jeffries Collection) Austria Auction Company
- June 3, Boston, Grogan & Company, Fine Oriental Rugs and Carpets

### Exhibitions

- Toronto, through Apr. 19, "From Ashgabat to Istanbul: Oriental Rugs from Canadian Collections," Textile Museum of Canada
- Wellesley, through June 7, "Parviz Tanavoli," Davis Museum
- Washington, through Aug. 24: "Unraveling Identity: Our Textiles, Our Stories," GWU-Textile Museum

### Fairs and Conferences

- May 29–31, Dedham: ARTS East Dealers' Show, Grogan & Company
- Aug. 6–9, Washington, DC, ICOC XIII

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**The New England Rug Society** is an informal, non-profit organization of people interested in enriching their knowledge and appreciation of antique oriental rugs and textiles. Our meetings are held seven or more times a year. Membership levels and annual dues are: Single \$45, Couple \$65, Supporting \$90, Patron \$120, Student \$25. Membership information and renewal forms are available on our website, [www.ne-rugsociety.org](http://www.ne-rugsociety.org); by writing to the New England Rug Society, P.O. Box 290393, Charlestown, MA 02129; or by contacting Jim Sampson at [jahome22@gmail.com](mailto:jahome22@gmail.com).



**The New England Rug Society**

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