

Feature

# Societies display woven designs of Oriental history, culture

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Staff Writer

The Triangle Rug Society and the Chapel Hill Preservation Society are offering the fastest and safest route to the Orient. Enter the Horace Williams House, and you enter a different dimension, window-side and first-class, via an elaborate camel headdress. "It's not an opportunity you get very often," says Nelda Lay, a member of the rug society.

The Triangle Rug Society will be offering this opportunity to visit the Middle East through Feb. 29, in hopes of fostering an understanding of oriental rugs and textiles beyond their popular conception as elegant living room carpeting. The current display is titled, "Carolina Caravan: Oriental Rugs and Textiles from North Carolina Collectors," and it focuses on Middle Eastern rugs as a new artistic form and cultural expression.

"It's a chance to see collections and antiques from the Middle East," Lay says.

The collection includes rugs from such modern-day areas as Iran, Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, and dates from the mid-19th to early 20th centuries. The display depicts various designs, cultural relevancies and artistic qualities.

The rugs and textiles — handmade woven articles such as bags — represent the Caucasian, Persian, Turkish and Turkoman areas. Each has a distinguishing style that is highlighted in the display pieces. For instance, Caucasian rugs, from the area of the modern-day Soviet Union, are characterized by bright colors and geometric patterns.

Included in the display are various rugs, animal trappings and bags. According to Lay, each work is a one-of-a-kind item. These items served functional as well as ceremonial purposes, which were expressed in their design, color and quality.

The rugs shown were commonly used for everyday purposes. Of the two unusual prayer rugs, one was most likely decorative — its origin lies in an Armenian Christian area. Dowry gifts were distinguished by their high quality and tight weave. Many rugs for local use and not export were flat-woven, while the pile rugs were more exotic. "One piece belonged to John Kennedy," Lay says.

The animal trappings served a primarily ceremonial purpose. Also on display are two animal coverings, one for a horse and one most likely for a donkey. Lay says the most unique piece is the camel headdress. The camel head trapping, an ornate headdress of shells and weave, greets the visitor as he arrives.

Bags in the display differ in function and design. Animal bags, one possible pillow bag, wall bags (to be attached to the tent) and saddle bags were commonly used objects. Lay says the personal bags are outstanding pieces. They were called the chanteh and were highly ornamented and utilized long straps for carrying on the body.

The Rug Society and Chapel Hill Preservation Society do not limit the display's value to cultural bearings. They also emphasize the artistic merit. Preservation society member Ann Womack says, "The design and color are part of the artistic value. I appreciated their beauty and how

they were made."

Various patterns in design are exhibited in the collection. Floral patterns such as boteh and Mina Khani are common. Floral and geometric patterns are expressed in the Suzani style, which was often a part of the dowry and resembles patchwork quilts in its paneled composition. Anchors, arrows and stars are common. As is characteristic of many orientals, abstract animal designs such as crabs and dragons are woven into the patterns.

Color variations and analyses are also represented. Cochineal is a scarlet red derived from a Mexican bug, lac is a deep purple obtained from an Indian insect and madder is a rust acquired from a root. They are all color examples that reflect the recent detailed study of rugs that the Triangle Rug Society seeks to foster. Other colors include shades of blue, green, yellow, neutrals and white, and were often vegetable dyes, Lay says. These colors enrich the artistic appeal of the works and indicate function and origin.

The consideration of artistic merit and history, as expressed in design and color of the rugs and textiles, typify areas of increased study in which the Triangle Rug Society is active. Lay said, "The society is interested in orientals for enjoyment, general education and fun." In addition to concern for art quality, the society views textiles as a viable source of anthropological and archeological knowledge.

"The display is a chance to see a true picture of culture," Lay says. "Every piece had a function." Not only



DTH/Matt Plyler

Ann Womack examines a South Persian camel head trapping

do the rugs have historical value in their age, they also indicate certain values in a culture through their design and function.

Part of their value arises from their human worth. "Each piece was handmade and hand-tied," Womack says. Because there has not been a rug show in Chapel Hill in 12 years, the collection is an unique opportunity for Lay and the rest of the rug society members. They say it is a chance to see a true picture of culture. Textiles are a "true art form," and each piece is handmade and original.

Appreciation of oriental rugs and

textiles now extends beyond enjoyment of the simple aesthetic qualities. Shows are no longer uncommon, and, in fact, recent shows in the area include a 1985 showing at Duke University, a 1987 showing at Meredith College and the current showing at the Horace Williams House. In conjunction with the display the society sponsored three lectures and a rug identification and appreciation evening. Various information on oriental rugs and textiles and the Triangle Rug Society may be obtained from the House, located at 610 E. Rosemary St.

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