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The Aesthetics of Chaos

A Visual Introduction of Women's Narratives
in Afghan War Rug Artistry



Curated by

Saman Khodayarifard

The School of Religion, Theology, and Peace Studies, Trinity College Dublin

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Women's Narratives in
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Featuring a collection of
21 war rugs curated by
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11-24 May 2024

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The Chaos

Afghanistan, located along the Silk Road, served as a gateway between East and West. Throughout its history, Afghanistan endured countless invasions from various empires. Continuous wars, chaos, border changes, and shifts of power were common events in the Middle East, and Afghanistan was not an exception. Within this context, Afghanistan's cultural mosaic took shape, blending elements from Iranian, Indian, Greek, and Islamic civilizations.



Buddha of Bamiyan, 544 A.D. . Destroyed in 2001

In 1857, Britain sought to create a buffer between Iran, Russia, and its colonies, notably India, by occupying southern Iran. This forced the Qajar king to sign the Paris Treaty, separating Herat from Iran and recognizing Afghanistan as a sovereign nation. In 1919, after three wars, Afghanistan, under the leadership of King Amanullah, achieved victory over Britain and proclaimed its independence. King Amanullah emphasized the education of women, establishing schools in Kabul and sending Afghan girls to Europe for education. After his forced resignation, various kings ruled Afghanistan, and the communist coup of 1978 marked the beginning of over four decades of a relentless and bloody war, inflicting immense suffering on millions of Afghans. The story of war rugs originates from this era.



92nd Highlanders at Kandahar. Oil by Richard Caton Woodville Jr. 1878-1880

The Rug

The enigma of how the first rug intertwined with modern weaponry may never be fully illuminated. Yet, delving into the annals of rug weaving history reveals a rich tapestry where every tangible or abstract theme finds expression, from paradise and rituals to hunts, myths, and historical figures.

What adds weight to the exploration of war rugs is our ongoing ability to connect with generations of rug weavers from that era. The availability of sufficient data from this historical period has the potential to alter our understanding of the artistic and narrative significance of hand-woven rugs.

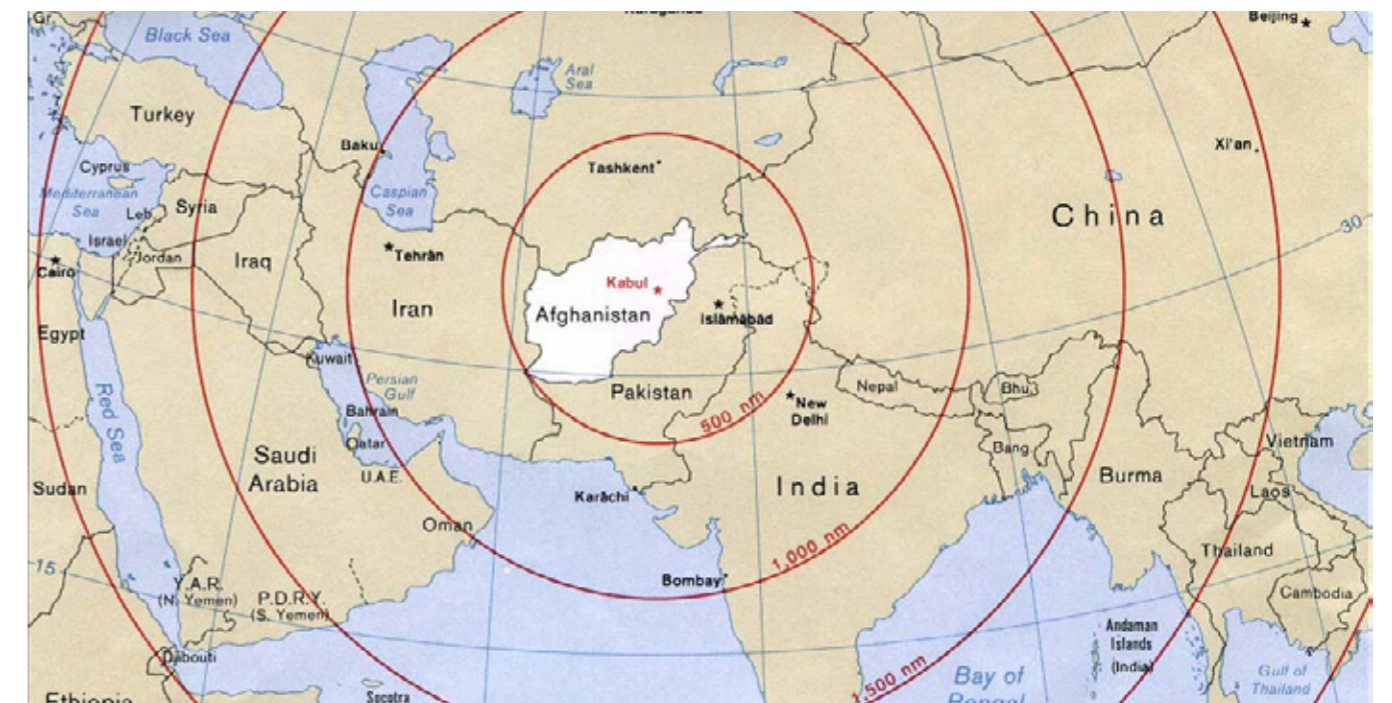
Broadly speaking, we witnessed three chapters of war rugs. The initial phase involves motifs of weaponry, incorporated partially into the overall design, drawing inspiration from traditional Afghan rugs, where one or more motifs of war implements are delicately woven into the design according to the weaver's preference. This period, the shortest of the three, coincides with the Soviet and Democratic Republic of Afghanistan's propaganda influence. However, discerning which rugs support the Mujahideen or the People's Democratic Republic is nearly impossible.

During the second phase, rugs maintain their traditional weaving techniques and design but incorporate a greater number of weapons and tools. While war motifs may adorn entire borders or fields, the overarching design still features traditional floral and geometric patterns, with weapons intricately woven into among them. This period spanned from the middle of 80's until after the American invasion in 2001.

The third phase, significantly influenced by the events of September 11th 2001, sees a direct connection to one of the world's largest carpet markets, the United States. Rugs become entirely customized, with smaller dimensions, reduced quality, larger motifs, and a shift in design structure, taking on a more graphic or animated style. Most of these rugs are manufactured in carpet workshops in Pakistan by Afghan refugees.

An examination of market demand and commissions reveals that the emergence or dominance of an artistic style often correlates with the support of rulers and the affluent, coupled with public acceptance. This correlation can be observed in the trajectory of many renowned European paintings and sculptures. In the context of war rugs, market demand did not stifle creativity; instead, it was the mass-produced, factory-woven rugs from Pakistan that deviated from true artistic expression, resulting in a disconnect between the creators and their creations.

In recent times, the production of war rugs in Afghanistan has dwindled significantly. With the rise of traditional rug markets featuring Iranian designs, there is less inclination to weave nomadic Afghan rugs resembling war rugs. Nevertheless, the third-generation war rugs reveal a unique aspect, the incorporation of war motifs into the very identity of village and nomad Afghan rugs. Even if the rug's theme is unrelated to war, these motifs make subtle appearances as intricate details, filling empty spaces within the overall design. In fact, village and nomad carpets have now reverted to traditional designs, but with a limited incorporation of war motifs intertwined within those patterns.



Azimuthal Equidistant Projection Centered on Kabul, Afghanistan 1986

The Art

A primary function of Persian painting has been the adornment of literary works, and serving as a significant narrator of historical events. Iranian art schools have historically been associated with the capital city of the country during their respective eras. With each shift in ruling power and the emergence of a new kingdom, a different city was chosen as the capital, resulting in the decline of painting schools associated with the previous royal court. In the late 8th century, Timur invaded Iran, and his successor Shahrokh relocated the capital from Shiraz to Herat. This move prompted artists from Shiraz and other parts of Iran to migrate to Herat. Within the workshops of Shahrokh's court, they established the Herat school, one of the most illustrious periods of Iranian art. Among the most prominent artists of the Herat school was Behzad, credited with innovations such as depicting daily life and portraiture, especially of rulers.



Construction of the fort of Kharnaq
Kamal ud-din Behzad



Battleground of Timur and the Mamluk Sultan of Egypt
Kamal ud-din Behzad

Following the rise of the Shaybanids, the capital moved to Bukhara, prompting artists to relocate from Herat to Bukhara. However, the influence of this historical period is still evident in Afghan art, especially in the realm of war rugs. The most significant similarity between Persian painting and Afghan war rugs lies in their philosophical underpinnings and aesthetic structure. Both art forms exhibit a narrative style that avoids explicit storytelling, instead focusing on the essence and substance of the narrative. The narrative portrayal of rugs featuring city landscapes and military camps eschews perspective, opting instead for multiple separate fields. Another shared aspect is the tradition of explanatory inscriptions, common in Persian painting, also found in many Afghan rugs, providing insight into the depicted scenes.

Who are the creators of these works? We often encounter pictorial, eastern images or depictions of monarchs on carpets. A carpet adorned with tanks, helicopters, and jets, with bright colors and bold patterns, may evoke video game imagery for contemporary viewers. These carpets are merely intriguing and amusing until we delve into their origins and the historical period in which they were created. Once we realize their Afghan origin, we are prompted to contemplate on how deeply entrenched in conflict the lives of these people are, ultimately leading to the creation of such works.

In samples of war rugs and nearly all village and nomad rugs, the weaver translates a concept or element from nature and their environment into an abstraction on the rug. They select colors, compositions, and color-to-pattern ratios. In these rugs, the weaver's vision transforms the world around her into captivating designs on the rug.

The Aesthetics

In the East, carpets are part of the concept of home, serving as a vital platform for creation of patterns and designs. They offer an opportunity to display, adorn, and create. They are a reflection of life through the weaver's eyes and mind, aligning with the ongoing artistic traditions in the region. These carpets are not an attempt to recreate an image, but rather serve as a narration of the essence of their existence. While war photographs and paintings confront us with the stark reality of conflict, these rugs, through the distinctive perspective, worldview, and aesthetic sensibilities of Afghan women, transform horrifying war scenes into captivating visual narratives. With their skillful coloring and paradisiacal patterns, even the most extensive warfare does not seem pathetic or grotesque.

In the Afghan women's narrative of war, each motif holds its own independent identity as a beautiful element within the carpet. For instance, a grenade is not depicted as a deadly weapon but as an object that should be aesthetically pleasing, as the carpet is woven to enhance the beauty of the home.

In essence, the weaver of a tank or a military jet represents it to the extent that we can recognize its model, but ultimately does so with distinct, sharp colors such as blue, red, and purple, distancing itself from the reality we know. And in the grand scheme of things, it is the portrayal of life that takes center stage, inevitably overshadowed by the ongoing war.



Afghanistan - A woman pulls weeds by an old Russian tank in a potato field in the Bamyan valley June 16, 2012. Ken Scar, Flickr

Standing amidst the war, the weavers are not mere narrators of the story, but a part of it; all probably having lost someone in the conflict or becoming refugees in another territory. Their relationship with weapons and military tools is essentially the same as their relationship with the surrounding environment, which, before the onset of war, led to the creation of plant and animal motifs. These rugs weave a beautiful narrative of the era's grotesque realities.

What truly distinguishes the war rug from the oriental carpet tradition is not merely the presence of military equipment, but rather its representation of everyday life—the same thing that Behzad pioneered in Iranian painting. In fact, the significance lies not only in the inclusion of weapons and military equipment within the carpet, but also in how they are depicted—how they are displayed, and their shape and color. The artistry of women engaged in carpet weaving lies in transforming any concept into a beautiful representation. From their immediate surroundings, Afghan women weave anything they find beautiful or important into the carpet. That is, they actually find beauty in a tank or transform it into a beautiful image.

Never say in a world full of war
Of what use is my peace?
You are not one! You are a thousand!
Light your own lantern.

Rumi

تو کلو همه نه شنند
وز علم من صرا اند
تو دهی نه ای هزارها
تو صراغ خود نه افروز

عزف،



97 × 136 cm, 2000 A.D, Wool on cotton foundation

The “Ghazi Amanullah Khan” 1379 (2000)

Ghazi Amanullah Khan remains a beloved figure in Afghanistan’s history, prominently depicted in war rugs. This image of him with a cane is inspired by a photo taken in London in 1928.

He was a progressive king, who abolished slavery, liberated women from the mandatory hijab, fostered the concept of nationhood and brought modernity to Afghanistan through his reforms. He led Afghanistan in the Third Anglo-Afghan War, leading to the nation’s independence.

Despite his remarkable contributions, his reign lasted only a decade. In 1929, he was sidelined from power through a conspiracy orchestrated by influential religious and conservative figures of the time, however his enduring image continued to dominate Afghan carpets.

Carpets depicting him are consistently woven in this form (left image), and this particular carpet was woven on the 40th anniversary of Amanullah’s passing.

Notably, some weapons are depicted in the carpet, with an interesting detail being the bullets fired from these weapons, a less common motif.



Portrait of Muhammad Shaybani 1507 by Kamal ud-Din Behzad



140 × 220 cm, circa 1980 A.D, All wool

The March Rug

This rug holds a significant place in this collection as it marks the beginning of the journey into collecting war rugs. It stands out as the only rug among these carpets which has been acquired from outside of Afghanistan, adding a unique dimension to this collection. Purchased eight years ago from an Iranian collector, this rug was found in the early 2000s in Isfahan, further enriching its story and provenance.

The rug presents a myriad of rare and intriguing features. Firstly, it showcases over 20 human figures, each distinct something which is not found in any other rug. Additionally, there are several half-human figures, raising questions about the weaver's intentions or possible estimation errors during the weaving process.

The depiction of various weapons and military tools adds another layer of rarity, especially considering its age of approximately 40 years and its status as one of the initial samples of war rugs. Considering its larger-than-usual dimensions, weaving period, and design intricacies, this rug could be seen as a form of propaganda for the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan or as a reflection of the socio-political landscape of its time. The presence of Soviet military equipment and Russian letters further contextualizes the rug within the historical backdrop of Afghanistan's conflicts.

Upon closer examination, deliberate patterns emerge, revealing fascinating details. Notably, along the bottom borders on both sides, there are two helicopters, but flowers are depicted in place of propellers. This juxtaposition prompts contemplation on Afghan society, the role of Afghan women, their aesthetic traditions, and the narratives embedded within the rug's imagery.

Despite being considered contemporary rugs, war rugs continue to unveil new layers of meaning and complexity. This particular rug, like many others in the collection, holds untold stories waiting to be discovered.



A Soviet-style military parade, held on the occasion of 5th anniversary of Afghanistan's 1978 Saur Revolution in the streets of Kabul on April 27, 1983



The figures on the rug, adorned with various hats and headwear, offer insights into the diverse ethnic and religious groups present in Afghanistan. Its asymmetrical and fluid design is complemented by numerous botanical motifs, creating a visually captivating piece. Notably, some figures are depicted utilizing military equipment, a rarity in such rugs.



Mujahideen rebels are seen in the area between Kabul and Jalalabad in Afghanistan in February 1980. Photo: Alain Mingam/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images



136 × 177 cm, 1989 A.D, Wool on cotton foundation

The Watch Pattern Rug

The “Watch Pattern” carpet holds special significance within this collection. Produced in the year 1368 in the solar calendar (1989 Gregorian, the year of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan), its appeal extends beyond mere chronology.

First, the depiction of two wristwatch faces from the “Seiko” brand in the center of the carpet distinguishes it from typical war rugs. Additionally, by blending Farsi and English words, this carpet conveys multiple messages to the viewer. Furthermore, the inclusion of Afghan city names, names of other countries, along with English words whose meanings are not immediately clear, as well as the images of tanks, helicopters, and jets in its margins, all play significant roles in shaping the narrative and meaning of this remarkable carpet.

Overall, this carpet signifies the importance of instruments or equipment as symbols of wealth and power. This perspective resonates with the tradition of Afghan migrants who would photograph themselves alongside possessions acquired abroad, sending these images as symbols of success to their families in Afghanistan. From this viewpoint, the clock, featured as a decorative element, symbolizes notions of power and wealth. Moreover, the military motifs in this carpet are not only symbols of aspiration and hope for victory but, given this historical context, also represent symbols of dominance and power.



An Afghan migrant photograph in Tehran, 1990's. Photo Riahi book



120 × 173 cm, circa 1990 A.D, All wool

The Clock and Camp Rug

This rug depicts an aerial view of a city, including buildings, nature, and a military camp known as “Qol-Ordu” in Afghanistan. These camps, found in almost all Afghan cities and usually on the outskirts, were historically used by the Soviet army and subsequent governments in Afghanistan, with their names changing over time.

An addition to the narrative illustration, the placement of the clock in the center of the rug adds an intriguing element. The presence of a clock in this rug may signify a fascination with tools and possessions, which is significant in developing countries.

In this carpet, which fully commits to a narrative in its design, urban life is depicted without humans- only trees, buildings, and military equipment can be seen. In its depiction, trees can emerge from the mountaintops or rooftops, and the clock surpasses the size of several buildings. The weaver’s unconventional sense of scale and proportion adds a unique dimension to the artwork.



26 April 2011, taken by Sgt. Daniel P. Shook, U.S. Army



Rodric Braithwaite’s “Afgantsy”



86 × 157 cm, circa 2000 A.D, All wool

The Malan Bridge and Zafar Camp Rug

Malan Bridge, spanning the Harirud River, serves as a vital link between Herat, Kandahar, and Sistan. Its commercial significance to Herat has made it popular among Afghans. Many myths surround its origins, attributing its construction to the pre-Islamic era by a Zoroastrian priest named Barzumir, who prayed for a child and vowed to build a bridge over the Harirud to provide easier access to the temple. Historical records indicate that the bridge was constructed in 1100 AD, yet due to its strategic importance, there likely existed a predecessor facilitating the connection to Herat.

The centrality of buildings in war rugs has emerged as a prominent pattern, and Malan Bridge is one of its most famous examples. In this work, roads, buildings, and Malan Bridge are depicted through three distinct scenes. Large images of artillery motifs are scattered throughout the background of the rug, with the phrase “Malan Bridge” prominently inscribed on the rug.



Malan Bridge, Ahmad Najim TAKI, Flickr



Bagram Air Base, Derrick Goode, Flickr



85 × 144 cm, circa 1995 A.D, All wool

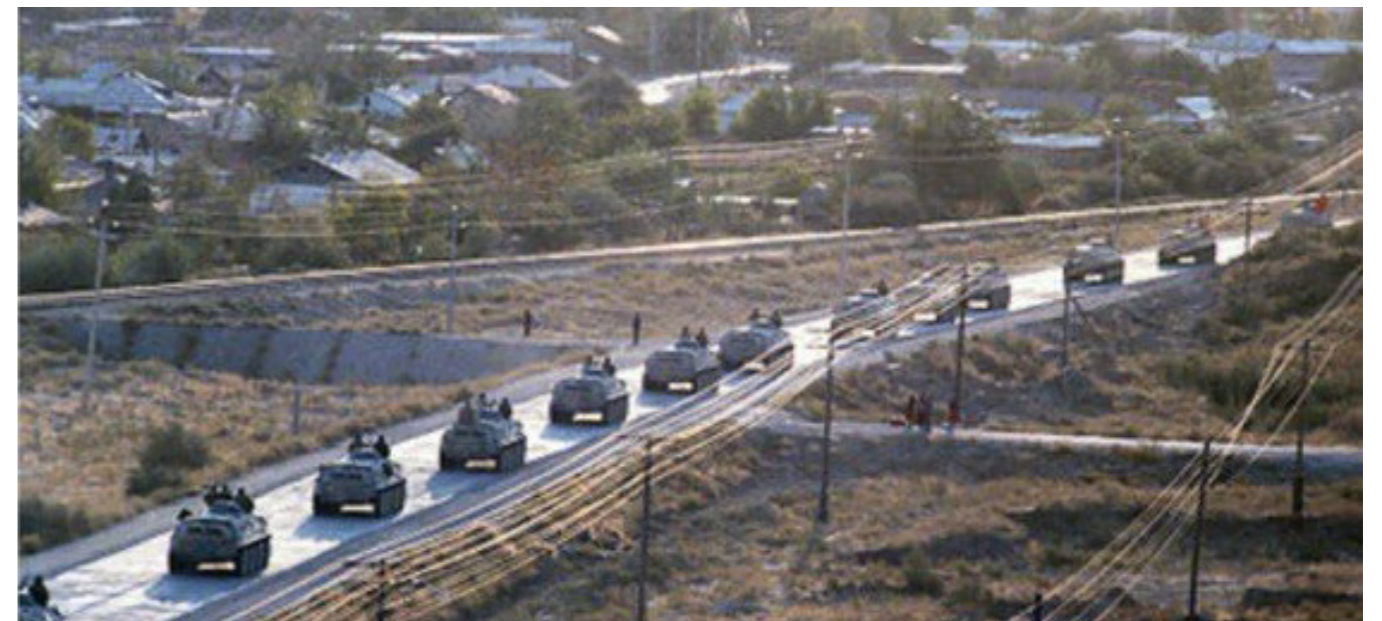
The Farah Camp Rug

“Qol Ordu” is the title of this particular style of narrative carpet, originating from the village of Timani in central Afghanistan. This carpet intricately portrays the influence of painting on war-themed carpets, offering a comprehensive and lucid depiction.

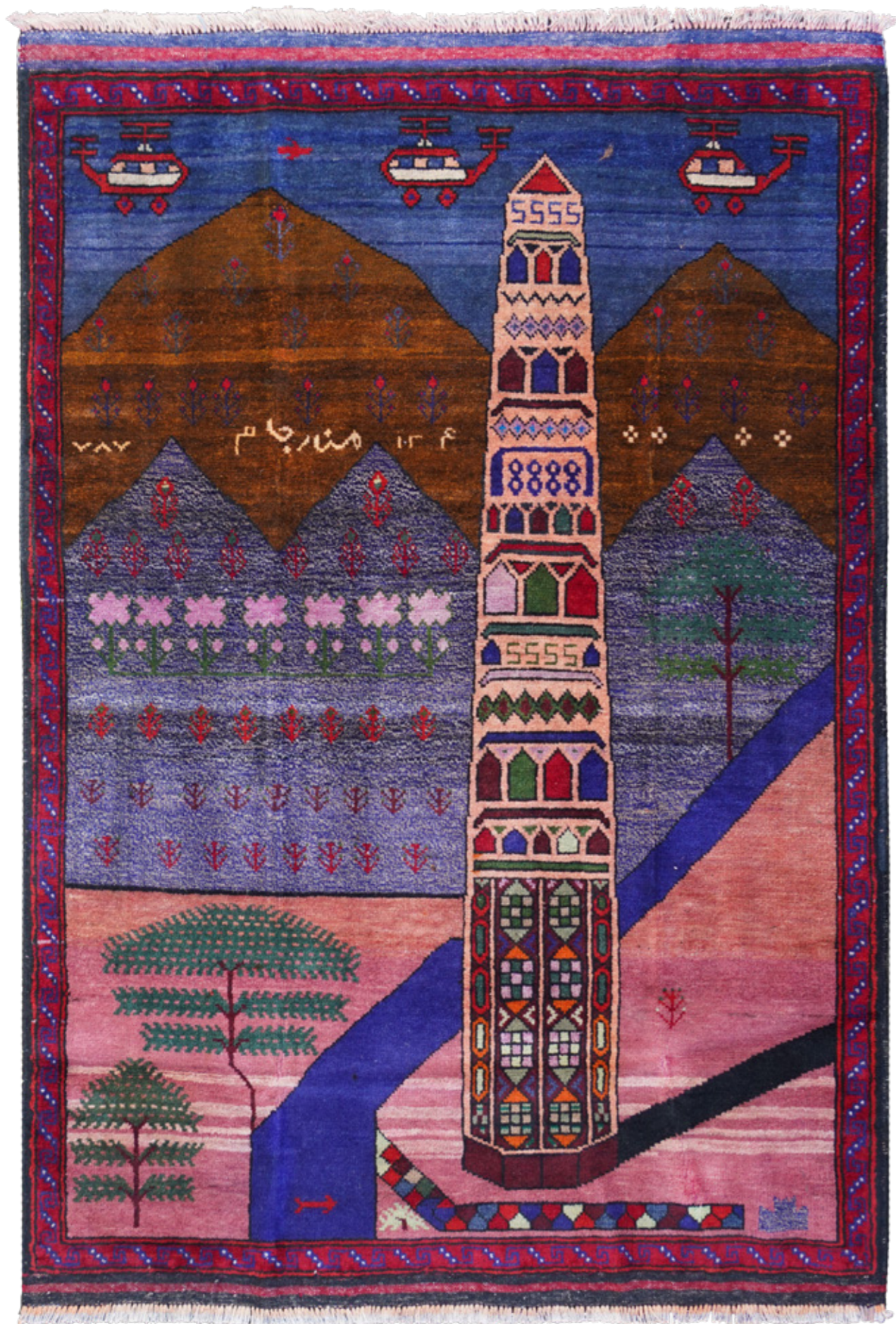
The narrative unfolds with meticulous details: Qol Ordu-i-Farah (a Soviet military camp) is depicted on the right side, distinctly separated from the city of Farah by a road. The scene includes houses, flowers, trees, shadows, mosques, apartments, and vehicles, each meticulously placed at varying levels, reminiscent of the temporal and spatial nuances found in Persian paintings.

Throughout the carpet, the presence of jets, helicopters, and tanks is evident. Notably, a comb-like motif adorns the sides of the camp, potentially symbolizing metal barriers erected to fortify the camp’s defenses.

Above the artwork, there is an inscribed writing, that, regrettably, remains unintelligible, leaving its potential message undiscovered.



Soviet APCs depart Afghanistan as part of the first phase of troop withdrawal in 1986. © RIA Novosti archive/ Yuriy Somov



88 × 130 cm, circa 1995 A.D., Wool on cotton foundation

The Jam Minaret Rug

Minar-e Jam, a historical monument in Afghanistan built in 1194 AD, holds a dual distinction as both a prominent historical landmark and a noteworthy artistic creation. The incorporation of architectural elements into battle paintings is a common feature that actually diversifies the subject matter of these paintings, with the primary aim being to reference the location and time of the event.

The creator of this piece depicts mountain landscapes in their most lush and green state, incorporating a touch of exaggeration. The depiction includes flowers arranged in an artificial order, a bright blue sky, and a red fish, all symbolizing the presence of life within the river. The scene is completed with three helicopters flying above the mountains. Like a poster, the rug displays the name of Minar-e Jam and also includes numbers that, although their order may seem incomplete, indicate the year of the carpet's weaving.

Regarding the depiction of Minar-e Jam, which is a cylindrical Minaret standing at 62 meters tall, the weaver has tried to remain as faithful as possible to the style of Minaret's decorations, but since the aim is not accurate portrayal, the colours chosen for the Minaret bear no resemblance to reality. The inclusion of cobblestones surrounding the Minaret and the depiction of its shadow symbolize the weaver's effort to portray everything in a beautiful and pleasing manner. Yet, within this pleasantness, there are also reminders of the presence of war.



Jam minaret.

© Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan



Timurid conqueror Babur advances through Jam and the mountains of Kabul, 1502 A.D



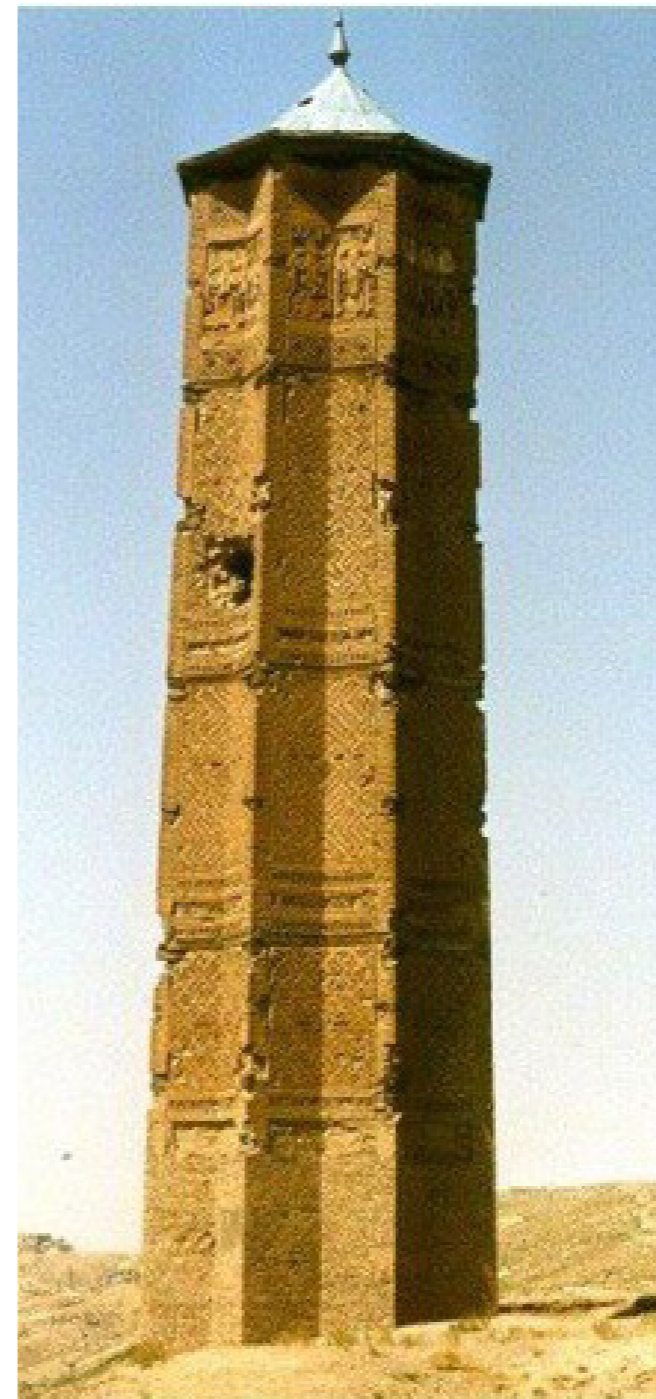
92 × 147 cm, circa 1990 A.D, All wool

The Minarets Rug

This rug's design features a reflective pattern showcasing two minarets. At the bottom, 'Jam Minaret' is inscribed. Thin lines surround both sides of the Minaret, representing mountains.

The rug's design divides it into four sections, with a mosque juxtaposed alongside each Minaret. Visual cues suggest the distant Minaret could be a representation of the Ghazni Minaret, distinguished for its metallic dome. This can be inferred from the contrasting colours of the dome and the body of the Minaret. A notable feature is the thin lines that serve as separators, giving the rug a painterly quality, enhancing its complexity and beauty, and making its analysis a challenging yet rewarding endeavor.

The presence of tanks and weapons suggests that the rug is over 30 years old. Moreover, two small maps of Afghanistan are woven into the design, accompanied by the word 'Afghan'.



Ghazni minaret, 12th-century



Jam minaret, David Adamec 2006



110 × 140 cm, probably 2007 A.D, All wool

The Cityscape Rug

The Afghan people identify this rug as a depiction of the city of Herat. The date on the rug is written as 28/01/1386 (17/04/2007). A notable technical aspect of this piece is the use of vibrant colours.

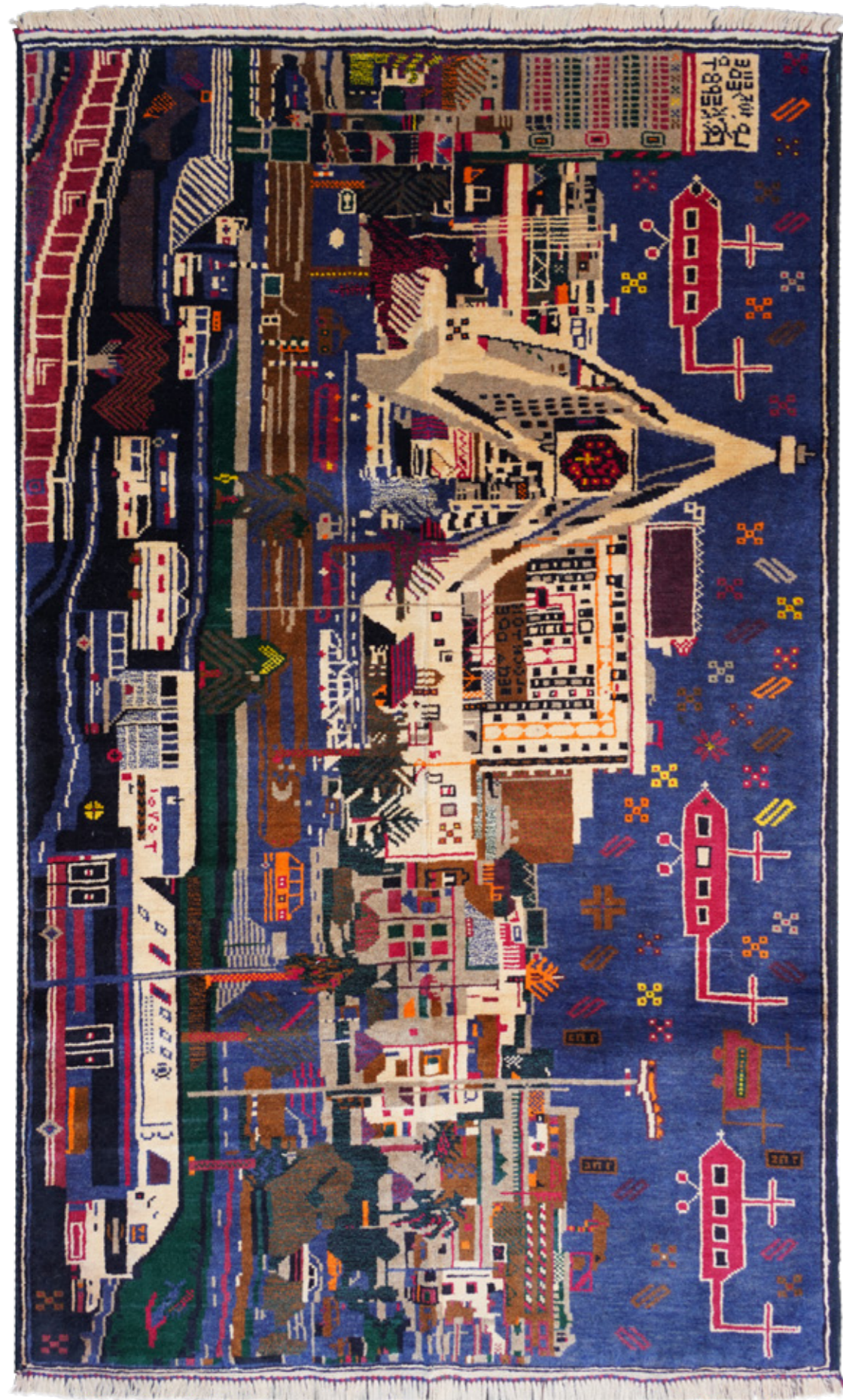
In this portrayal, fruit trees, floral borders, and buildings both near and far, along with a military element in the form of a helicopter, are clearly visible. The interplay of colour and pattern, coupled with the bold and distinctive execution of this work, have transformed it into a remarkable war rug. However, this portrayal of the city is more of an imaginative and romanticized representation than a realistic one.



Afghan migrants, Photo Riahi book



The city of Herat, Rodrigo Nieto



92 × 158 cm, probably 2010 A.D, All wool

The Chowk-e Shahr-e Now Rug

The carpet Chowk-e Shahr-e Now, named after one of the main squares in Herat city, showcases exquisite details. In the upper left corner, the year “1389”(2010) in the solar calendar is elegantly inscribed in English. Depicting the daily life of Herat city, this carpet is recognised as a war rug due to the inclusion of three American helicopters. The carpet’s striking and rich colour composition elevates it to a remarkable piece of art.



A U.S. Chinook helicopter flies over the city of Kabul, Afghanistan, Sunday, Aug. 15, 2021. © AP Photo / Rahmat Gul



The Choke square in Herat, © Yama

The Tank Rug

In the third generation of war rugs, both the motifs and overall pattern are altered. These rugs omit the intricate details typically found in traditional carpets, with a noticeable absence of iconic motifs like Lachak and Toranj and elaborate three-layer borders. Instead, they present a stark portrayal of the theme of war.

In this rug, two tanks take center stage, dominating the entire field in a striking and unconventional composition. The tank motif also claims the entire borders. In these pieces, any narrative of war is abandoned. Their sole intention is to parade the war theme, reducing the carpets to superficial examples, aptly referred to as tank rugs or Kalashnikov rugs. This marks the point where the influence of the market overtakes that of the weavers and their artistic expression.



137 × 178 cm, circa 2010 A.D, All wool

The Prayer Rug

This rug depicts the interior courtyard of a Mosque. At the lower portion, a square rug takes center stage, representing the Mihrab. Above, the mosque's minaret rises, surrounded by a narrow border of botteh (Paisley) motifs.

Up to this point, everything belongs to the plant motifs, flowers, and symbolic designs of the rug, but behind this layer, tanks and fighter jets enter the scene. It is as if only the mosque, especially when looked at from within, remains untouched by war with no trace of it, the rest of the scene is war.



143 × 212 cm, circa 1990 A.D, All wool

The Kilim

The sole kilim (flat woven carpet) in this collection is estimated to be around 15 years old. Weaving patterns onto a kilim presents a greater challenge compared to rugs, particularly when it comes to creating non-geometric patterns. In the case of this particular kilim, there is no specific theme- rather the weaver's primary objective is to display as many weapons as possible.

However, the weaver skillfully incorporated four soldier figures standing alongside a tank. It was woven during the period of American occupation, and the shapes of the soldiers exhibit slight variations compared to those seen in previous periods. This repeating pattern is unique among Afghan kilims.



100 × 160 cm, circa 2010 A.D, All wool

The Drone Pattern Rug

Another notable example of third-generation carpets, which emerged in the early 2000s, is the drone pattern. In this pattern, the primary motif is several drones in flight.

The weavers of the third-generation carpets departed entirely from the conventional concept of a carpet, which had been followed for centuries. In stark contrast to traditional Persian carpets, where the border served as a protective barrier against evil spirits, these weavers used the border solely as a framing element, devoid of its historical symbolism and significance.

Although the origins of this pattern dates back to the early 2000s, it is noteworthy that the weaving year indicated on the carpet is 2022, coinciding with the resurgence of the Taliban just a few months earlier.



104 × 155 cm, 2022 A.D, Wool on cotton foundation

The Camel Rug

Creating horizontal patterns on carpets, which usually have vertical textures, is not very common. However, in certain regions of eastern Iran and western Afghanistan, particularly among the Baloch people, carpets are sometimes woven horizontally. This approach requires greater skill and expertise in order to achieve intricate patterns.

In this rug, scenes featuring cities, nature, and military camps are showcased, with patterns arranged in two different directions. Camels are woven in alignment with the weaving texture, which is perpendicular to the other patterns, making this a remarkable rarity in rug designs. Paisley motifs that have been woven into the borders is used in some carpets to depict grenades.



140 × 205 cm, circa 2000 A.D, All wool

The Zafar Camp Rug

During the Soviet era, the Zafar camp held great significance. Situated 15 kilometers away from Herat, this camp served as a vital base for the Soviet forces during their occupation of Afghanistan.

This rug portrays the camp, featuring numerous tanks and jets, along with an anti-aircraft or anti-tank missile launcher.



96 × 163 cm, circa 1990 A.D, Wool on cotton foundation

The Kalashnikov Rug

The second generation of war rugs comprises carpets that emerged after the market saturation with the limited variety of war rug designs from the first generation. First-generation war rugs preserved the conventional design and motifs of rugs and added a few select weaponries. During the second wave of war rugs, which can be traced back to the early 1990s based on available examples, the fundamental structure of rugs remained intact, while floral and animal motifs gave way to weapons. In the existing rugs from that era, the central motif exclusively featured weapons, without incorporating any other central themes.



118 × 180 cm, circa 1990 A.D, All wool

The Lion Rug

The lion motif holds a prominent and pervasive presence in Iranian carpets, whereas it is exceedingly rare in Afghan war rugs. One possible explanation for the existence of carpets like this one is the everyday interactions of millions of Afghan refugees residing in Iran and the historical connections between the two countries.

Regardless of the design's origin and rationale, the expert execution of motifs such as lions, jets, anti-aircraft, and grenades showcases the weaver's striking ability to create abstract patterns and understand aesthetics. The unique color scheme of this piece, where motifs emerge with sharp and vibrant colors against a navy background, paired with the remarkably high density of patterns (which is uncommon in Afghan carpets), are other notable aspects of this exceptional piece.



106 × 190 cm, circa 1990 A.D, All wool



97 × 147 cm, circa 1980 A.D, All wool

The Mine Rug

This 35- to 40-year-old carpet features traditional and well-known Turkmen motifs along its borders. In the field of the carpet, a grenade, likely the F1 hand grenade, is depicted, along with six models of mines.

One row of mines showcases the Pom-2 model, which is rarely depicted on war rugs. The mines are adorned with a blooming flower. Another row of mines bears the inscription “ПМН” accompanied by the Pomz-2 model, known as the ‘Russian stake grenade’.

Above and below, two rows of anti-personnel mines are arranged. The lower row bears the inscription “МОН-50” while the upper row depicts a traditional Turkmen motif in place of a mine code. A model, potentially representing the PMN2, is depicted, accompanied by the ‘PMH2’ inscription displayed above another row of mines.

Russian letters are prominently displayed throughout this piece, alongside two lines of unreadable text, likely in Pashto, in the middle. Plant motifs are used to embellish and fill empty spaces. A motif resembling a bird’s face can be seen, albeit unfamiliar, between the top and bottom rows of motifs.



Russian F1 hand grenade



Pom 2 anti personnel landmine



Pomz-2 russian stake mounted anti-personnel fragmentation mine



PMH-2 Russian anti-personal mine



Russian MOH-50 anti-personnel mine



PMH Russian anti-personal mine



102 × 156 cm, circa 1980 A.D, All wool

The Buraq Rug

Possibly woven in Sheberghan in northern Afghanistan, this rug is a rich tapestry of mythological significance. The Buraq is a supernatural horse-like creature that served as the mount of the Islamic prophet during his Isra and Mi'raj journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and then to the heavens and back. According to the myth, Buraq will be the mount of the Prophet on the Day of Judgment as well. Buraq is said to have played a similar role in the tale of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael's journey.

According to Islamic mythology, Buraq possesses a human-like face and the ability to hear and understand sounds like a human. With every stride, it moves forward as far as its field of vision. Its hands shorten during ascent, and lengthen during descent to remain constantly in a fixed and horizontal position while moving. Various accounts depict Buraq as masculine, feminine, or genderless.

This rug, which is truly among the most unique examples of war rugs, bears a striking resemblance to a Persian painting of the Mi'raj from the "Khamsa-e Nezami" by Sultan Muhammad (1524-1576). Both the content and color palette, notably the dark navy-blue background symbolizing the night, reinforces this similarity. Considering the painting and the subject matter, the rug's design is undoubtedly several hundred years old. However, the rug is estimated to be around forty years old, placing it among the earliest examples of war rugs. The age of hand-woven rugs is typically determined by analyzing the materials, colors, and patterns.

In this rug, three Buraqs and three horses form the overall design. Interestingly, the genders of the Buraqs are different, with one depicted as male, one as female, and the other being genderless, indicated by their eyebrows. Several human figures are seen in the background, all of whom are symmetrical except for one. A female figure appears alongside an image of a man that remains unfamiliar in terms of its meaning, appearing in all three frames. Symmetrical design is generally recognized as one of the distinguishing features that contribute to the value of hand-woven rugs. In the field of the rug, a blend of human and animal motifs, serve to fill the space. What sets this rug apart from a traditional Afghan rug is the presence of three rows of tanks positioned in the middle and top sections. In a way, the rug is divided into three different frames by tanks, each part containing one of the Buraqs, perhaps signifying different times and places, as it customary in Persian paintings.





Detail of a Kerman carpet, first half of 20th century, Iran's carpet museum



Imam Ali rescues Salman from a lion and Mi'raj, first half of 20th century, Kermanshah, Iran



Mi'raj, Sultan Muhammad Nur, Ca. 1525-35



95 x 170 cm, 2000 A.D, Wool on cotton foundation

The Rug of Amanullah 1376 (1997)

The inscription above the figure, appears on a curtain-like backdrop commonly used in Afghan photography and paintings. The weaver managed to write the date correctly, but the phrase “Ghazi Amanullah Khan” is written in reverse.

This rug is created using a special method that deviates from conventional practices. The weaver uses a preexisting rug as a guide and flips it, weaving while referencing the pixelated knots on the back of the rug. As a result, in half of these rugs, the writing on the front, which should be written from right to left in Persian language, appears mirrored and is written from left to right.

Another characteristic of these rugs is extensive replication of existing designs. However, even in these pieces, the weaver’s personal touch and unique style shine through. For example, in this particular rug, a space-related error prevented the weaver from completing the head of the figure. To overcome this, the weaver adjusted proportions and made the head and hat smaller. Additionally, a notable feature of this rug is the inclusion of a small pistol on Amanullah Khan’s chest. Alongside depictions of weapons of war, Amanullah Khan rugs consistently feature bullets, as if they are being fired, further symbolizing an ongoing state of war.



Ghazi Amanullah Khan, London 1928



Born in 1989 in Iran, Saman Khodayarifard is a lecturer at The Technical and Vocational University in Kashan and holds a master's degree in carpet studies from Kashan University. His passion for Afghan war rugs, with their unique artistic and pictorial style, has led him to become a collector. Since 2017, he has dedicated himself to curating this exceptional collection, culminating in the exhibition you see today.

Khodayarifard's goal is to shed light on these contemporary art forms, inviting the world to appreciate their profound cultural significance and their complex beauty. Through this exhibition, he delves into the artistic essence of these rugs, revealing the intricate narratives woven into each rug and the cultural heritage that they embody.

