

AZERBAIJANI CARPETS

My first introduction to Azerbaijan was in a book I read in 1971 when I was 19 years old and searching for larger meaning in life. I had grown up in the sleepy suburbs of Philadelphia and had become convinced while still a teenager that I needed to travel, see the world and learn a lot about how the rest of the world lives and thinks.

The book I read, *Meetings With Remarkable Men*, was written by an early 20th century mystic philosopher and world traveler, George Gurdjieff. He was born and raised in the Caucasus, and on the first pages of his first chapter, he mentioned the name of a country I had never heard of, but was about to hear a lot about: Azerbaijan. I remember like yesterday feeling as if the name, so odd to my ears, just jumped off the page. In other writings this same author mentioned his abiding interest in and expertise on the oriental carpets of the regions, from the Caucasus, Turkey, Persian and Central Asia, where he claimed to have spent years in search of specialized esoteric wisdom.

My first encounter with the carpets from Azerbaijan was filled with astonishment. I had not experienced such a wealth of feeling from a physical object. I didn't know it was possible to feel transported, merely by gazing at a woven pattern of design and color. Mr. Gurdjieff claimed that there existed in the world art that was of another level than the one we are accustomed to, art that was able to transport us to another way of feeling in this world, and the old carpets from the orient were sometimes able to do that. I felt like I was witnessing the source of the ancient legend of the flying carpet. Immersing oneself in the geometric shapes, elusive in meaning yet filled to the brim with energy, indeed the legend of the flying carpet was real.

After some years passed, my curiosity grew regarding the naming of these magnificent works of folk art. I also felt a definite preference, an affinity for the carpets from the Caucasus known as Kuba and Shirvan. When looking at a map of the carpet weaving regions, I saw that Kuba and Shirvan were located in the country called Azerbaijan. I remembered the name Azerbaijan from the book I had read, and wondered why the carpet dealers and antique auction houses, as well as the scholarly books and museum displays that followed the nomenclature of the carpet dealers, referred to these particular oriental carpets as Caucasian, when in fact it was clear they came from Azerbaijan.

The Caucasus, a large region sandwiched between Russia, Iran and Turkey, includes numerous countries and ethnic groupings such as Lezghi, Avar, Kumukh, Tat, Lak, Abkhaz, Osset, Chechen, Georgian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, and so on. When the Persian Empire ruled the Caucasus, they referred to the peoples that spoke Turkic languages such as the Azeris as Turk, and when the Russian Empire later ruled the Caucasus, they referred to all non-Slavic peoples everywhere in the Russian Empire as Tatars. Azerbaijanis are not Tatars, and although they do speak Azeri, a Turkic dialect, they are not identical to the Turks of Anatolia or the Turks of Central Asia, so it would be normal to call them by the name of the land they lived on for so many centuries, Azerbaijan.

Now, Azerbaijan is divided into a northern part, which is designated as the Republic of Azerbaijan, with some 8 million Azerbaijanis along with other minority ethnic groups, and a southern part, also designated as Azerbaijan but within the political state known as the Islamic Republic of Iran, with some 16 to 30 million Azerbaijanis, depending on who is counting.

The carpets woven by Azerbaijanis in both the northern and southern parts are geometric, in contrast to the flowery designs of typical Persian carpets of urban production. What is unique about the carpets woven by Azerbaijanis is the high level of energy that the designs and colors trigger in the attentive viewer. Not all Azerbaijani carpets are equally powerful in this regard. Many are merely beautiful, charming, pleasing as weavings, but many have a real charge to

them, as if the carpets are in possession of some mystical energy that electrifies the human imagination.

Indeed, who were the weavers of these intriguing and enchanting carpets? It turns out that most were youngish Azeri girls preparing their dowry, with their mothers and grandmothers assisting them and teaching them the ways. The vast majority of weavers were illiterate villagers. This defies all one's suppositions about people and art. The antique carpets from Azerbaijan were often so sophisticated that they rivalled the western artists of abstract art, yet the creators were unschooled as we modern, educated westerners might judge. How is this possible?

Personally, I think it is the music. Azeri weavers, like all weavers, sing while they weave, and Azerbaijani music, like other music of that region, is mesmerizing. In Azerbaijan, the musicians and singers have evolved a form of eastern music that is unsurpassed in its primordial power to transport the listener to other realms. Undoubtedly, this must have shaped the weavers' taste in design. They attempted to achieve the best in flying carpets, and when they succeeded, they created a class of folk art unmatched in the world of textiles.

Still, the misnaming bothered me. If a Kurdish weaver wove a carpet, no matter which country they lived in, be it Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Azerbaijan, or Iran, it was always called a Kurdish carpet. If a Baluchi weaver wove carpet, no matter which country they lived in, be it Iran, Afghanistan or Pakistan, it was called a Baluchi carpet. In all the world of antiques, a world in which provenance - the place and people of origin - is the single most important feature to know about, only the carpets of Azerbaijan did not get correct attribution. And this occurred primarily because the Persians called the Azeris Turks while the Russians called them Tatars. Not only is this an injustice to the people who wove these beauties, it is an injustice to the rest of us who love oriental carpets and who deserve to know the true origins of the objects of our admiration, respect and even affection.

It is true that many carpets woven in the Caucasus were woven by members of ethnic groups other than the Azerbaijanis. It is also true that the vast majority of the carpets originating from the Caucasus *were* woven by Azerbaijanis, and where the origins are unambiguous, they should bear that certitude in the naming of the carpet. There is one major antique auction house -

http://www.rippon-boswell-wiesbaden.de/content/auction_popup.php?lot=22234

that has been naming some of the carpets of Azerbaijan as Azerbaijani, but not all. Many of them remain with the misnomer Caucasian, even when it is unambiguously of Azerbaijani origin.

I can think of no legitimate reason why anyone would object to an effort to correct the historical record on the taxonomy of this important category of oriental carpets. Azerbaijan, the source of so many of the world's best examples of the magic flying carpets, deserves the credit for this accomplishment, and the world deserves to know the truth about where the adored and revered carpets come from, and who wove them.