

CORRECTING THE RECORD ON AZERBAIJANI CARPETS

On May 7, 2011, I drove from my home in Cherry Hill, NJ to Washington DC, to give a talk on carpets being held in the carpet showroom of David Zahirpour. David was originally from Iran, emigrated to Israel then eventually settled in the DC area. The event was organized by the DC based Karabakh Foundation, and the opening remarks were made by Diana C. Altman, the Executive Director of KF, and Adil Baguirov, member of the Board of Directors and co-founder. The topic was on the subject of Azerbaijani carpets and the names they go by other than Azerbaijan. Our host for the evening, David Zahirpour, gave the attendees a quick tour of his oriental carpet gallery.

The first speaker was Dr. Rovshan Ibrahimov, visiting professor of international relations from Qafkaz University in Baku, Azerbaijan. He brought with him a slide show to help him show the techniques and methods of traditional carpet weaving from Azerbaijan. About 30 carpet lovers attended our program. Both of us spoke to the idea to add the name "Azerbaijan" to their repertoire of terms to use in describing Oriental carpets. The program presented a first step toward achieving better recognition of Azerbaijan carpets, which for various twists of history generally are not attributed to Azerbaijan. To the best of our knowledge, this was the first time for a public discussion on correcting the historical record by adding the name of Azerbaijan to all the carpets made by Azerbaijani people living in both the Republic of Azerbaijan as well as the carpets made in Iran by ethnic Azerbaijanis. I also had a slide show, of sample 19th century carpets from a private collection, and a map that is published in every Sotheby's Auction catalogue that featured antique oriental carpets. Their map of the classic oriental carpet weaving areas clearly shows Azerbaijan as the name of the area where most of the so-called Caucasian, and many of the so-called Persian carpets originated.

On June 4th, once again the action was in Washington DC, also organized by the Karabakh Foundation. This time the host was the prestigious Textile Museum. There were indoor and outdoor exhibits. The KF table was outdoors and the weather was perfect. There was a large stage under a tent, and people were sitting on chairs and lounging on the grass, listening to a dazzling performance by the great Azerbaijani kamancha player Imamyar Hasanov, who mesmerized his audience with a brilliant solo playing a mixture of mugham and tesnif - the meter free modal improvisations and the metered traditional songs of Azerbaijan. After his solo, there were some dances by a costumed troupe of international dancers who presented traditional dances of the Caucasus. Finally, Diana Altman took the stage and delivered a brief speech about the Karabakh Foundation and its goals of promoting Azerbaijani culture in the USA.

I was assigned the duty of standing by the table with the display of pictures and some history of Azerbaijani carpet weaving and design. People came up to the display and some asked questions. There were two journalists, DC based Azeri diaspora members Shafaq Mehraliyeva, with a small voice recorder, who asked questions in English and got answers in English, and Anar Garibov with a video camera and an Azerbaijani man who held a microphone and asked me questions in Azeri and I had to answer in Azeri too. The themes were about Azerbaijani carpets and what we were trying to do to raise public awareness that tens of thousands, perhaps a million oriental carpets were woven during the past two centuries, by the hands of Azerbaijani weavers, and not one of them had the label Azerbaijan.

This is the second public demonstration and talk about this touchy subject of what to call these world class textiles. According to Richard Rothstein, a friend of mine who has a showroom and warehouse of antiques and a large collection of some of the finest oriental carpets in Mt. Laurel NJ, only minutes from where I live, the vast majority of the so-called Caucasian carpets, and perhaps up to half of the so-called Persian carpets are in reality Azerbaijani carpets. He derives his statistics from a book on Azerbaijani carpets by famed Azerbaijani carpet expert Latif Kerimov, and from personal experience handling and viewing thousands of oriental carpets.

Richard has a website with a webpage on this subject of correct attribution of provenance of oriental carpets.

<http://www.richardrothstein.com/caucasian-rugs-persian-rugs.html>

Our plans for the future are to organize more lecture demonstrations about Azerbaijani carpets at every suitable venue, to enlighten everyone who loves oriental carpets that Azerbaijan is the country of origin for so many of the finest oriental carpets, and to persuade the dealers, the auction houses, the scholars who write books on oriental carpets, and all the museums around the world to correctly identify and label those carpets that were woven by the people of the lands called Azerbaijan in both the Caucasus and Iran.

JW: Diana, can you tell us about KF and its efforts to raise awareness that so many of the most beautiful oriental carpets were woven in Azerbaijan?

DA: We are calling this drive our Azerbaijani Rug Initiative (ARI). It's a 5 part initiative.

- 1) Building a KF ARI community of experts and aficionados of oriental carpets
- 2) Bringing the general public to a sensory and intellectual appreciation for Azerbaijani carpets
- 3) Preparing a strategic plan to implement accurate and proper nomenclature in the public record and public awareness regarding Azerbaijan's prominent place in the world of oriental carpets
- 4) Launching an initiative ensuring that museums, showrooms, auction houses, homes and other repositories of oriental carpets provide proper attribution of provenance for Azerbaijani carpets
- 5) Raising awareness among the general public of Azerbaijan's historic and continuing role as one of the world's major carpet production centers

JW: That sounds perfect. Exactly how do you see this 5 step plan being implemented? Who will you call on to help with this ambitious initiative?

DA: This is not a six month plan, this is an integral part of our organization's long term functioning. This thread is woven into the very fabric of our work. Also please bear in mind that we did not invent this, we are tapping into this interest in correcting the historical record which been in play for a long time, and what the KF has to contribute is a track record in cultural programming and coalescing community of diverse individuals. We have a vast network of people and organizations and the timing is on our side because online social media has recently come into its own and we can use that tool to achieve our goals in ways we could not have done even five years ago. We are experienced professionals in the cultural world and we aim to bring our expertise to this all important cause.

JW: Do you plan to go beyond your local Washington DC territory where your two previous programs, one at the carpet gallery and the other at the Textile Museum, were recently held?

DA: DC is home to not only KF, it is home to the U.S. Library of Congress, Smithsonian Institution, international organizations, research institutes, Embassies, and has many decision makers and organizations in the cultural world. That said, we are going to go wherever this mission takes us. In this age of globalization the meaning of the word communities is expanding all the time. KF enjoys a vibrant active online community at www.KarabakhFoundation.org. We also interact regularly with an extensive community of supporters on the ground in places from Maine to California to Japan.

