



THIRD SEPHARDIC CEMETERY:
THE INSPIRATION OF THE PRAYER CARPET DESIGN
by Stanley Bulbach

[This article is a revision of one first published in 2004 in *Handspinners*, an internet magazine, published by Roberta Murray, Alberta, CA.]

Since my art work looks so different from the European style tapestry work that is familiar to the public, I am frequently asked about my design process. While my art work is created with the same weft-faced, flatwoven technique that characterizes European tapestry weaving, my design process is clearly quite different and takes the traditional Near Eastern approach. Most simply stated, the European tradition tends to mimic the art of painting, making the structure and the materials go in any and all directions even when against the inherent nature of the structure and materials. In contrast, I strive to give the flatwoven structure and materials the freedom to alter designs. The result is art work that is inherently abstract. My design process also confronts the viewer with the aesthetic nature of not only the materials themselves but also the weaving technique.

As a result, my contemporary art from the heart of New York City is intended to be viewed and enjoyed hung on the wall like the canvases of modern painters. On the other hand, my art work is a genuine weft-faced carpet, handwoven in the original Near Eastern way with the same type of prized ancient original materials.

In classic tapestry work, the design is traditionally developed independently from any special non-decorative function of the piece. The designs do not reflect much about the materials used; nor do those designs reveal much about the weaving techniques incorporated. According to weavers and writers on tapestry, the tapestry design has complete freedom just like painting does. The materialization of those designs in their final woven formats seems to have no significance beyond the weavers' personal experience in having fabricated them, except that they are woven, and not painted. In



contrast, my designs have everything to do with the traditional use of the woven object, with the selected materials, and with the nature of the flatwoven structure. For example, consider “Third Sephardic Cemetery.”



On West 21st Street in New York City, tucked away from view from the busy Avenue of the Americas (in the photo behind the intrepid bicyclist), lies the third and last of Manhattan’s three Sephardic cemeteries established by the Jewish community of Mediterranean descent early in the 19th Century. Later, when that community was replaced by waves of newer immigrants, these tiny graveyards were left behind as some of my city’s portals into its distant past.

One of the Third Cemetery’s striking features is its ancient dogwood trees whose heavy branches become beautiful white canopies in the spring, spreading over the fractured tombstones that cover over the ground like Moroccan tile work. Tucked away on the quieter side street, this hidden hallowed plot is unknown even to most New Yorkers.



I wanted to capture in a carpet some of the spirit of this special small, quiet place. Instead of mimicking a painting, I wanted to give the structure of the flatweave and the character of the yarns and dyes, and the nature of a traditional carpet the freedom to translate it in their way.

The Format: A Carpet Bed

Traditionally, Near Eastern carpets were not used for shod foot traffic. Most carpet uses were personal. That is also a reason why Near Eastern carpets tend to be smaller than room size and relatively long, like the dimensions of a person’s body.

One of the traditional uses of carpets in the Near East was as beds. Those carpet beds did more than merely warm and soften the ground for sleep. The most important stages of our lives usually occur on beds. Beds are where we sleep, where we dream, where we convalesce, where we make love, where we conceive, where we are born, and where we come to the end of our days. With designs selected for their importance, Near Eastern carpet weavers could weave carpet beds that were special places with protective powers.

In Third Sephardic Cemetery, I wanted to capture a sense of sleeping in the enfolding flowering branches of the ancient huge, dogwood trees and dreaming about the past, about how death borders life so closely, and how all of these dimensions are inter-layered together in my city. I wanted to capture a sense of the counterpoint that the mosaic of fractured stones created as a foundation underneath. And so these were some of the considerations of the specific format that began to influence the design process from the start.



When people stand in front of my art work, I want them to appreciate the piece as an authentic traditional carpet. I also want them to appreciate that they are looking at special, prized, brilliant wools and with rich complex undyed colors. I want them to appreciate the limited, but rich colors of the ancient dyes that had such an important influence on history. And I want them to appreciate that the designs and images they see are reflecting the function of those carpets, the nature of those materials and the nature of the woven structure.

The Materials: Wools, Yarns, Dyes

I personally believe that a large part of the process of enjoying fiber art is the appreciation of the materials used, even before taking in the structure or design. Although this is a traditional aesthetic consideration in much Near Eastern carpet making, it is not a primary consideration in most tapestry work in the west. There is woefully little said in the Western world about standing in front of a weaving and simply soaking in the qualities of the fibers and dyes used. In contrast, we are more familiar with this approach in the woodworking arts, appreciating why special species of woods were selected, noting how the wood is worked with or against its grain, etc.

A prime example of that type of aesthetic sensitivity is raku, the Japanese ceramic art that derives great aesthetic appreciation of the nature of the clays and the glazes used. In raku, the goal of the artist is to let the materials best express their own natures as freely as possible with the least amount of controlling interference. For some reason, our western culture is still not all that familiar with these concepts as applied to the weaving arts.

Wools come with many different physical characteristics. I am enamored of the special lustrous long wool wools that are traditionally prized in the Near Eastern carpet making arts. I prize their glow and the ever-changing ways they polarize

and reflect light differently under different conditions. These wools come from sheep of many different shades ranging from sweet-butter whites and bluish platinum through an infinite range of silvers, greys and browns, to deep charcoals and jet black.

When handspun into yarns, the coloration of these wools varies with the variation of the fleece itself. When woven into designs, these subtle variations, called “abrash” are prized highlights of the inherent nature of the materials used. Again, this is similar to the appreciation of the prized irregular qualities in raku pottery and in the undulating grains in fine woods.

I find these handspun wools to be so attractive in their undyed state that I followed the North African tradition and do not cut off the warp yarns left over at the ends of the work. Instead I knot them and leave them as part of the art work to be savored and enjoyed.

I use undyed lustrous wools and their grey-scale spectrum generously. I supplement the palette of the sheep’s natural colors with the limited palette of ancient, traditional time-tested vegetal dyes. The use of wools from colored sheep and the use of a limited number of natural dyes yields a palette that is instantly recognizable to lovers of oriental carpets. I believe that they capture a lot of the feeling of my city, its formalities, its light and dark places, its chiaroscuro. And I love to play the grey-scale spectrum against the primary colors of vegetally dyed yarns.

In addition to these features, slight variations in the strength and thickness of the yarns means that the weaving itself is slightly uneven. Instead of edges and woven lines tending to be perfectly straight, they have inevitable variations, undulating imperfections that breathe character and spirit into the work.



The Flat-Woven Structure

The nature of flat woven structure further influences the potential of the design. The flat woven design structure is quite mathematical. The borders of different colored yarns travel so many warps horizontally; and so many wefts vertically. As such, it is a perfect format for repeating patterns exactly no matter how

complex they might be, simply by repeating the same math. In this art work, pattern is rhythm, and rhythm is movement. There is an inherent musicality in the woven structure that is missed by mimicking painting.

For me, a major part of the charm of these extremely willful materials is that the more I might try to weave repeated patterns that are perfectly identical, the more their similarity highlights their differences and irregularities due to slight variations in the yarns' size, shading, and other physical characteristics. Examining these patterns also reveals a fascinating contest between the cunning of the human hand and the strong nature of the materials being worked.

Inherent in the flatwoven structure's ability to repeat patterns is a very strong tendency for foregrounds and backgrounds exchange their relative positions like in optical illusions. What seemed to be in front, can suddenly seem to be behind. And when added to the abash and the slight waviness of all straight lines, and the rhythm of patterns, all this can animate the most static of designs.

Another characteristic of the flat woven structure is the way in which it favors the creation of design borders in some directions, and resists them in other directions.



Similarly, it favors the creation of some curves but not others. In some directions straight lines can be created simply by changing the color of the weft yarn. In other directions a straight line can be almost impossible to create, resulting in an open slit, as is familiar in many Anatolian kilims.

Whereas classical tapestry art develops techniques to work around and obviate these inherent proclivities, flatwoven carpet weaving tends to take advantage of them by encouraging them to overtake realism, to abstract design elements, and to

animate them. Elaborate art theories have been written about the Cubists in early 20th Century European art history. But the roots of Cubism are inextricably bound up with the influence in Europe from traditional African arts, especially wood carving, shields, textiles, etc. In those traditional ethnic arts, cubist-like images reflected the nature of the materials used. But when the western world discovered that unfamiliar abstract vision, it was repackaged and promoted with esoteric art theory.



Similarly with the flat woven structure. It naturally tends to encourage some shapes and lines in some directions, while resisting other shapes and lines in other directions. In doing so, it imposes a strong abstracting force upon the execution of designs, a tendency carpet weavers have traditionally used as an artistic goldmine.

In this particular project, the woven structure encourages the development of the design as a pattern of triangles and hexagons. And the confusion inherent to the flat woven structure instilled a dynamic interaction among the stones, the dogwood leaves, the blossoms, the branch, and the fragments of blue sky peeking through.

Conclusion

This woven piece reflects all the above considerations and influences. Just as carpets traditionally created a special “place,” this particular carpet has a design that captures some of the spirit of a special hidden corner in my neighborhood, a place from at least three different layers of time: a time almost two centuries ago before the cemetery was part of a living community; a time now as we pass by and discover it; and a time after our lives are completed, which is what a graveyard is all about.

The design reflects the nature of a bed, an ancient traditional function of carpets, with supporting boughs to hold one on the bed while one dreams, perhaps even a bed upon which to die.

The design reflects the nature of the wools and traditional dyes, especially the gray-scale spectrum intermingling with the primary colors which characterizes so much of New York City. The dark greys are gradually exchanged for light silvers.

The design also reflects the patterns inherent in the flatwoven structure, mostly triangles and hexagons that are reminiscent of Moroccan tiles and Jewish stars.

And the design reflects the confusion of primacy of layers and surfaces, both organic and inorganic.

This piece is an extremely complex piece. And, for me, it is a particularly moving piece. And where this artist did briefly attempt to wrestle undue artistic control away from the medium, was with the addition of a small circle. The flatwoven technique does not take kindly to creating circular designs. But I had to add the scarlet ladybug I just happened to meet one day at rush hour when racing past the Third Sephardic Cemetery in my neighborhood.



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