Amir

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Growing up the son of an Azerbaijani antiques merchant, Amir enjoyed the famed bazaar of Tabriz as his playground. Working in his father's shop, he discovered his love of rugs and fine textiles. Following the stint in his father's antiques shop, he apprenticed with Hassan Ahani, a prominent rug merchant in Tabriz, who specialized in the sale of semi-antique rugs. Amir quickly learned the nuances of the rug business, and after just four years left Ahani to open his own rug shop. Initially focussing on semi-antique rugs, Amir went on to expand his business to include the sale and restoration of antique rugs. He soon found himself employing a staff of restoration specialists. It was from his employees that Amir first began to learn rug restoration, and it was working alongside them that he went on to hone his craft and to run a successful business. Amir says, "It's not enough for me to sell the rug — I have to learn the inside of the rug. You need to know the soul of the rug."

By 2007 Amir was living his dream of owning and operating a successful rug shop in Tabriz, the rug capital of Persia. Being of Azerbaijani heritage, Amir was an ardent supporter of the preservation of Azerbaijani language, music and culture within the city. Such activities were considered subversive by the Iranian government, and Amir became the target of political repression. He was forced to flee his home and country, coming to the United States by way of Turkey. He found a job at Landry & Arcari Rug Company, and after two and a half years exploring the rug market, he decided to start his own business. Amir is proud to have worked with Landry and Arcari from 2013 to 2016.

Once again, he started over, this time running his own business from his residence in Beverly, Massachusetts, along with his wife, Negin, and his two children. He then moved to North Reading, Massachusetts. When people ask him about his past, he always says, "I'm new in the United States, but I'm old enough in this business."

In 2018 Amir decided to collect early "palace" Azerbaijani rugs that had been ordered by Shah Abbas back in the 1690s for use in the summer camps ("yurts" in Yayla) in Karabagh and Quba. Shah Abbas would enjoy his summers there, spending his time hunting. Amir found a couple of fragments of such rugs, but not close to enough.

Unfortunately, the rug collector community in the United States lost one of its most famous members in 2020, when Jim Dixon passed away. Amir had an opportunity to visit Dixon in his residence in 2019 and spent two very special days with him. Dixon spoke quietly, as though he was reading poetry, to explain how, where and why he had purchased each item in his collection. He was a true rug lover whom Amir feels fortunate to have met. When it came to Amir's attention that Dixon's collection would be available for sale via Skinner auction house in Boston, Massachusetts, he decided to purchase more than 40 pieces, including eight Safavid-period Azerbaijani rugs, which are featured in these pages.

Symbolism of the “Dragon Motif” in Caucasian Carpets

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The South Caucasus and ancient Mesopotamia saw the migration of many cultural motifs and symbols from one cultural area to another. From early on, the South Caucasus saw significant cultural influence from the ancient Eastern civilizations. One of the cultural motifs that “migrated” from Mesopotamia to the South Caucasus was the fantastic celestial dragon, which played a part in the cosmogonic myths of both Mesopotamia and the South Caucasus region.

The earliest iconography of the dragon, as a mythical symbol of power, strength, and immortality, comes from Mesopotamian myths. The myths of ancient Babylon reflect religious and ideological polytheism, in which the dragon Mušuššu was a symbol and personification of the supreme god Marduk. The most important properties of Marduk, which his dragon Mušuššu possessed, were:

- A source of life;
- Protection against evil;
- Giver of immortality;
- The power to determine someone’s destiny

As a result of military-political and cultural contacts of Mesopotamia with Anatolia and the South Caucasus, the symbolism and iconography of the dragon spreads throughout the territory of the South Caucasus from the end of the 2nd millennium BCE. Archaeological artifacts of this period with dragon imagery have been found in Eastern Anatolia (Hittites, Hasanlu, Ziwie) and Caucasian Azerbaijan (Nakhchivan, Kharabagh ilan). The positive symbolism of the dragon, with its talismanic function, spread in the ideology and folklore of the tribes of these regions. In their pantheistic worldview, the symbolism of the dragon takes on cosmogonic features. The dragon combines four primary substances that make up life, corresponding to the four elements:

WATER meandering like a river — the body of a dragon with fish scales;
EARTH legs of a dragon — intended for walking on the earth;
AIR dragon wings — helping the dragon fly in the sky;
FIRE fiery breath escaping from the mouth of a dragon

The animistic belief in good and evil spirits that was prevalent during this period completes the cosmogonic model of the world based on the concept of dualism. The conceptualization and cult dogmatization of the dragon ends with the assertion of the status of “good, protecting, setting fate and bringing good luck”. The symbolism of the dragon takes on a pronounced ambivalent character: it is the source of life and at the same time the source of death.

At the beginning of the 1st millennium BC in eastern Anatolia, the South Caucasus, and Central and East Asia, the process of ethnic consolidation of the Turkic nomadic tribes begins. Scythians then Xiongnu and later Blue (Heavenly) Turks create their nomadic empires. The dragon becomes one of the key symbols of the sacred worldview and social hierarchy of their society.

The Turkic nomadic model of the world was based on the idea of the unity of the cosmos and the natural environment surrounding man. The dual model of the world was expressed in the unity of heaven and earth. The personification of heaven and earth was reflected in the idea of the inextricable unity of the supreme heavenly god Tengri and his companion Yer-su (earth-water). At the same time, Tengri was the owner and giver of a special divine good called “kut” (sacred energy of the good, Mana).

In society, the union of heaven and earth was personified by Kagan (Tengri) and Katun (Yer-su, Umay). The symbolism of the dragon acquired a dualistic character, possessing both sacred and social significance.

The Turkic nomadic world was ruled by the union of a pair of rulers in the form of Kagan and Katun. In this union, Kagan personified cosmos, the blue sky, called the God Tengri. The co-ruler of Kagan — Katun — personified the fertility of the earth-water, a property given to her by the goddess Yer-su (Umay).

A relief sculpture from Yazilikaya, a sanctuary at Hattusa, led to the emergence and canonization of the motif “Dragon and Simurgh”. In the symbolism of the Turkic nomads, the “Dragon and Simurgh” personified the idea of dualism: heaven and earth, the supreme god and his wife-goddess, the ruler of the state and his wife, man and woman. This dualism was presented as a guarantee of eternal harmonious life. The Turkic symbolism of this motif embraced concepts such as luck, prosperity, protection from evil, and eternal life. Accordingly, the image of the “Dragon and Simurgh” on religious objects, weapons, utensils, jewelry, and carpets — relayed the sacred “kut” to their owner and served as a protective talisman.

To the south of the Caucasus region and adjacent northwestern territories of the Iranian plateau, from the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, the consolidation of Aryan tribes began. The concept of primitive dualism among the Aryans took the form of a doctrine — Zoroastrianism. The formation of Zoroastrian ideas about the struggle between the two principles and the role of the dragon and the simurgh in this struggle was influenced by Eastern Anatolian beliefs, particularly those of the ancient Hittites. The symbolism of the Hittite myths testifies to the connection of Zoroastrian mythology with the Mesopotamian religious and cultural tradition. At the same time, the idea of a dragon first appears



Example 1: Dragon carpet, 17th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of James F. Ballard, 1922, acc. no. 22.100.122

here — the evil that the supreme god kills. In Babylonian myth, Marduk only can subjugate the dragon and turn him into an instrument of his cosmogonic activity.

In Zoroastrianism, there is a reappraisal of the symbolism of the dragon. In accordance with the new, Avestian doctrine, the symbolism of the Avestan dragon (Azhi Dahāka) takes on negative features, whereas the prototype of the simurgh-senmurv (dog-bird) is endowed with protective properties.

The Avestan concept of the struggle between good and evil "turns" the dragon into one of the participants of this "cosmic battle". The personifications of good and evil in the form of images of the simurgh and the dragon complete the canonization of the symbolism. The presence of the struggle between the two in the motif clearly indicates its Aryan origin and symbolism.

The military and political expansion of the Achaemenids into the South Caucasus and Central Asia leads to a partial and temporary embrace of the Aryan concept of the struggle between good and evil and its personification in the motif of the "Dragon and Simurgh."

Further confirmation of the negative symbolism of the dragon among the Aryans occurs in the Middle Ages: first, in folk tales, then in literature (Firdousi's *Shahnama*).

The two different concepts and the opposite symbolism of the relationship between the dragon and the simurgh among the Turkic and Aryan peoples indicate the deep religious and ideological contradictions that underlie the eternal confrontation between Iran and Turan. Confrontation (struggle) or harmony (unity) in the "Dragon and Simurgh" motif can, with a large degree of objectivity, play the role of a cultural marker of Turkic or Aryan symbolism.

The Turkic and Aryan ethnic groups retained their original symbolism. The Turkic archetype of this motif is largely preserved in folk art and folklore, with Aryan motifs more preserved in the secular, literary tradition, and book painting.

In the Safavid era, in large "palace" rugs, the dragon motif occurs in three versions. In the first, the motif depicts the dragon's confrontation and struggle with a simurgh. In the second, the dragon and simurgh are not depicted as fighting, but as peacefully coexisting and mutually complementary in the manner of the well-known yin-yang concept. In the third version, the motif consists of paired heraldic dragons without a simurgh. In this version, the dragons confront the sacred "Tree of Life" in the form of a floral motif, a "Shah Abbasi."

In the South Caucasus (Turkic) cultural context, the "Dragon" motif is protective mythic symbol, bringing luck and prosperity and representing the sacred power of unity and harmony of the "upper" and "lower" worlds. The dragon symbolically unites in itself all four natural elements — guaranteeing eternal life. In the Aryan cultural context, the motif personifies the Avestan struggle of good and evil, light and darkness, cosmos, and chaos.



Example 2: "Dragon and phoenix" in a miniature of the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from a copy of the *Falnama* (Book of Omens), Safavid dynasty, ca. 1550. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Purchase — Smithsonian Unrestricted Trust Funds, Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program, and Dr. Arthur M. Sackler, S1986.251

CONCLUSION

1. Not all instances of the "Dragon and Simurgh" motif show struggle and opposition. If the struggle is visualized in the motif, it is "read" unambiguously and leaves no doubt about the semantics and symbolism.

2. The heraldic (mirror) image of the dragons in front of the "Tree of Life" ("flower of life") is a sacred symbol of pantheistic dualism, uniting two opposite principles. The dichotomy of absolutely identical dragons is determined by their location near the "Tree".

3. The presence of the dragon motif on weapons, clothing, jewelry and carpets provided protection, luck, and prosperity for their owners.

4. Continual repetition of the dragon motif in the Caucasian carpets of the Safavid era strengthened the mystical protection of the ruler and symbolized his unlimited power.



Example 3: The dragon mouth “islimi” design, evident in the miniatures, symbolizes power, mysticism, and magnificence. Its presence in art reflects the desire to convey these qualities. The artists skillfully utilized this design not only in miniatures but also in the creation of carpets, fabrics, ceramics, and buildings commissioned by the Shah and his family. This cohesive application of design elements across different media underscores the unified artistic vision prevailing during the Safavid era

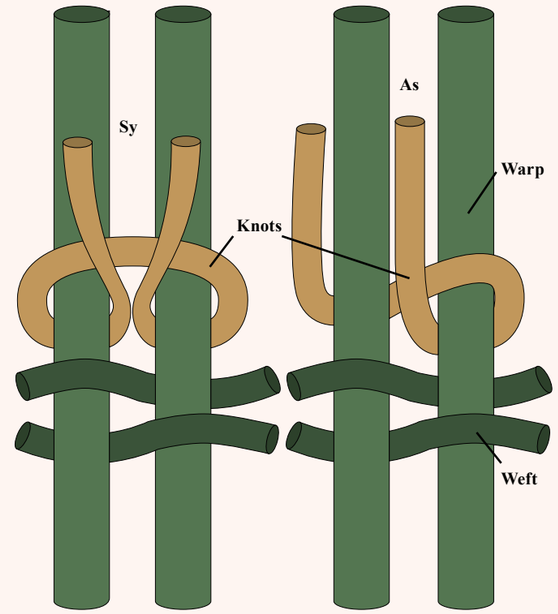


© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Ardabil Carpet, Iran, 1539-1540. Victoria and Albert Museum, 272-1893



The motif of the “islimi,” specifically the depiction of lilies, holds significant symbolic value within the context of Sufism. In this regard, I would like to highlight the insights provided by the esteemed master miniaturist, Sadigh Beik Afshar, (صادق بیک افشار), who resided in one of Shah Abbas’s palaces during the late 16th century. Sadigh Beik Afshar expounded on this motif in his book titled *Ghanon al Sovar* (قانون الصور) with the intention of enlightening his students. The fundamental principles of Sufism are also elucidated through the teachings of renowned figures such as Rumi.



Terms used for structural details in the following catalogue entries:

For the warp and weft: the direction of the spin of the yarn is given, followed by the number of strands, then the direction of the ply and the material. (Example: Z2S W: Z-spun yarn, two strands, S-plied, wool). For the weft, the number of shoots between each row of knots is given when known.

Abbreviations

W	wool
C	cotton
SY	symmetrical knot
AS	asymmetrical knot
H	horizontal knot count
V	vertical knot count

The Collection



Plate 1

Last quarter of the 17th century Karabagh rug with two eight-point star medallions and the symbol of the dragon in the border.

Dimensions: 10′10″ x 7′10″ (329 x 238 cm)
Ex Jim Dixon Collection.

Warp: Z2S W, brown and ivory twisted together and ivory
Weft: Wool, red, two shoots
Knot: SY, 9H, 8V per inch
Colors: Red, purple, navy blue, light blue, dark green, light green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: Wool

Details



Detail 1: corner



Detail 2: eight-point medallion



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 2

Last quarter of the 17th century Quba Rug with a dragon mouth islimi design, and Afshan design, and a very unusual border design.

Dimensions: 19′8″ x 8′5″ (600 x 255 cm)
Ex Jim Dixon Collection.

Warp: Z4S C, ivory
Weft: Wool, blue, light brown. two shoots
Knot: SY 7H, 8V per inch
Colors: Red, purple, navy blue, light blue, dark green, light green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: Wool

Details



Detail 1: corner



Detail 2: main design



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 3

Last quarter of the 17th century Quba rug with a dragon mouth islimi design and an Afshan or “harshang” design.

Dimensions: 19′2″ x 8′8″ (583 x 262 cm)
Ex Jim Dixon Collection.

Warp: Z2S W, brown and dark brown and light brown twisted together
Weft: Wool, light brown, two shoots
Knot: SY 8H, 7V per inch
Colors: Red, purple, navy blue, light blue, dark green, light green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: Wool

Details



Detail 1: corner



Detail 2: Afshan main design



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 4

Last quarter of the 17th century Karabagh rug with dragon and phoenix design.

Dimensions: 15′8″ x 8′3″ (475 x 250 cm)
Ex Jim Dixon Collection.

Warp: Z2S W, brown and ivory twisted together and ivory
Weft: Wool, red, two shoots
Knot: SY 8H, 8V per inch
Colors: Red, purple, navy blue, light blue, dark green, light green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: Wool

Details



Detail 1: main design



Detail 2: corner



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 5

Last quarter of the 17th century Karabagh rug with blossom design.

Dimensions: 19′10″ x 8′1″ (603 x 246 cm)
Ex Jim Dixon Collection.

Warp: Z2S W, brown and ivory twisted together, ivory
Weft: Wool, red, two shoots
Knot: SY 10H, 11V per inch
Colors: Red, purple, navy blue, light blue, dark green, light green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: Wool

Details



Detail 1: corner



Detail 2: main design



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 6

Last quarter of the 17th century Karabagh rug with dragon and phoenix design.

Dimensions: 13′8″ x 6′9″ (417 x 204 cm)
Ex Jim Dixon Collection.

Warp: Z2S W, brown and ivory twisted together
Weft: Wool, red and light brown, two shoots
Knot: SY 9H, 7V per inch
Colors: Red, purple, navy blue, light blue, dark green, light green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: Wool

Details



Detail 1: corner



Detail 2: main design of dragon and phoenix



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 7

Last quarter of the 17th century Quba rug with dragon and blossom design.

Dimensions: 17′8″ x 8′4″ (538 x 253 cm)
Ex Jim Dixon Collection.
Published in Hali Magazine #112, 213.

Warp: Z2S C
Weft: Wool, golden yellow, light brown, two shoots
Knot: SY 9H, 10V per inch
Colors: Red, purple, navy blue, light blue, dark green, light green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: wool

Details



Detail 1: main design



Detail 2: corner



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 8

Last quarter of the 17th century dragon and blossom Quba rug.

Dimensions: 18′6″ x 7′11″ (564 x 242 cm)
Published in Hali #104.
Ex Jim Dixon Collection.

Warp: Z2S C
Weft: Wool, golden yellow, light brown, two shoots
Knot: SY 9H, 10V per inch
Colors: Red, purple, navy blue, light blue, dark green, light green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: wool

Details



Detail 1: main design



Detail 2: corner



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 9

First quarter of the18th century Karabagh rug with blossom design.

Dimensions: 14′11″ x 7′1″ (453 x 216 cm)
Sold 16/12/2004 at Sotheby's.
Ex Jim Dixon Collection.

Warp: Z2S W, brown and ivory twisted together
Weft: Wool, red 2 shoots
Knot: SY 8H, 9V per inch
Colors: Red, purple, navy blue, light blue, dark green, light green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: Wool

Details



Detail 1: the corner of the rug



Detail 2: main design



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 10

Late 18th century Quba rug with Kufic border design and islimi dragon mouth “harshang” design

Dimensions: 11′3″ x 4′7″ (341 x 139 cm)
Published by Ulrich Schurmann

Warp: Z2S W, brown and ivory twisted together
Weft: Cotton, two shoots
Knot: SY 8H, 11V per inch
Colors: Red, pink, orange, purple, blue, green, yellow, brown, and ivory
Pile: Wool

Details



Detail 1: corner



Detail 2: main design



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 11

Last quarter of the 17th century silk and gold thread textile with an eight-point star design. Probably from Karabagh.

Dimensions: 6′4″ x 4′3″ (192 x 128 cm)
Ex collection J&H Grantham, MA.

Colors: Navy blue, pink, blue, light blue, golden yellow
Material: Silk and gold thread

Details



Detail 1: main design



Detail 2: close up 1



Detail 3: close up 2



Plate 12

Late 17th century silk on cotton Kaitag embroidery from Darband district

Dimensions: 6′4″ x 4′3″ (192 x 128 cm)
Ex collection S. Bettridge, Australia

Colors: Navy blue, blue, light blue, golden yellow, red, green, dark brown, light brown, ivory and purple.
Material: Silk and cotton
Techniue: Embroidery

Details



Detail 1: corner



Detail 2: medallion



Detail 3: reverse



Plate 13

16th century miniature from a *Shahnama*

Dimensions: 8′ x 5½″ (20.4 x 14 cm)
Ex collection Lawrence Kearney, Boston, MA

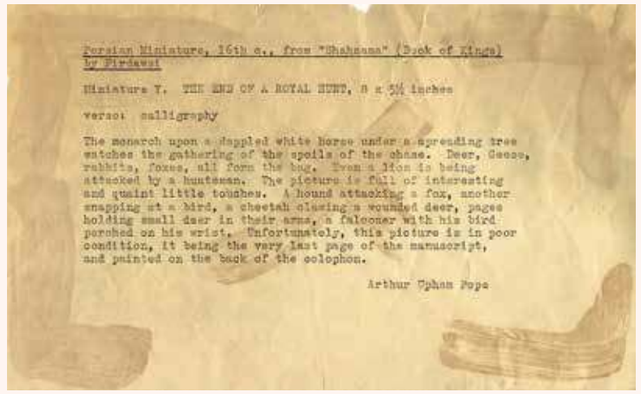
Details



1: framed



2: reverse



Persian Miniature, 16th c., from "Shahnama" (Book of Kings)
by Firdawsi

Miniature V. THE END OF A ROYAL HUNT. 8 x 5¼ inches

verso: calligraphy

The monarch upon a dappled white horse under a spreading tree watches the gathering of the spoils of the chase. Deer, Geese, rabbits, foxes, all form the bag. Even a lion is being attacked by a huntsman. The picture is full of interesting and quaint little touches. A hound attacking a fox, another snapping at a bird, a cheetah chasing a wounded deer, pages holding small deer in their arms, a falconer with his bird perched on his wrist. Unfortunately, this picture is in poor condition, it being the very last page of the manuscript, and printed on the back of the colophon.

Arthur Upham Pope

3: Letter from Arthur Upham Pope

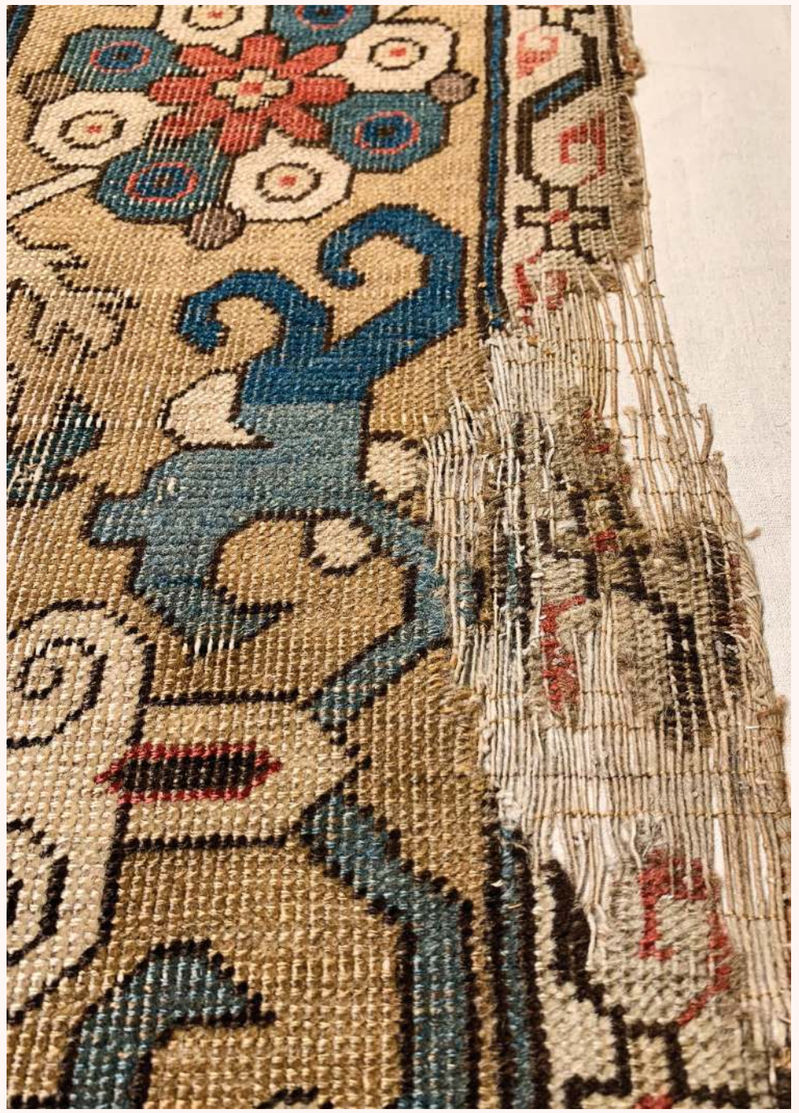
Textiles and rugs carry a deep message of love,
life, and philosophy with them from the East.
I want to bring these messages into your home and
give you these gifts of love, joy, and peace.
Each rug is made with tremendous hidden
messages about life.
I hope they will bring you joy.

~Amir

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A detail of the Dragon motive from border design of the rug on plate #7



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