

Our Weaving Mother

Azerbaijan's Nomadic
and Village-woven Rugs





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Dedication

To My Friend Dr. Mark R. Jones

You were the man that helped me to realize my dreams. Without you, none of this would be possible. Your interest and inquiring mind about oriental rugs inspired this project. You are the most imaginative and perceptive person I have ever met. Very few people have these gifts. You have faithfully believed in my vision and understood the importance of this project.

You came in as a curious investor, and have become my most loyal and trusting friend. You were the Godsend that made this all possible.

To My Father Mozafar Khazai

I dedicate this work to my late father – the man who initially cultivated the passion I have for thinking ambitiously and having big dreams. Acting as a living example, he nurtured the virtues of discipline and hard work within me, which have led to my life's achievements and overall success. His unending generosity, courage, friendship, networking, and ability to live life large will always leave me in awe.

Azerbaijan (also Romanized as Azarbayjan) is a historical region of northwestern Iran, between Lake Urmia and Caspian Sea. This mountainous land named 'Aturpatakan' after Atropates (Aturpat) a Persian noble, Satrap of Media, who succeeded to regain northwestern parts of his satrapy after Alexander's invasion. Aturpat remained loyal to Darius until the last day of the last Achaemenid king, afterwards he changed side, joining the Greeks. His heirs entered the Arsacid royal house by marriage, fixing their ancestor's name or throne-name on his territory.



Three provinces of Iranian Azerbaijan region



*Painting of Atropates meeting with Alexander the Great.
National Museum of History of Azerbaijan*

Aturpat most probably means 'protected by fire' or 'protector of fire'. A name related to ancient Iranian faith Zoroastrianism. Actually he and his successors did protect the faith in their court, receiving grand 'magus' (originally a title for Zoroastrian priests) to keep holy fires flaming. One of these sacred fires which kept its reputation during coming millenniums known as 'Atur Goshnasp' in Middle-Persian and 'Azar Goshasp' in New-Persian. It was ultimately placed in a holy temple on the Lake Urmia and thanks to its fame, as the time past, the name of 'Aturpatakan' and its modified pronunciation 'Azerbaijan' was interpreted as 'the land of {sacred} fire'.



Ruins of Azar Goshasp Temple in Takab



Where is called “Persian Azerbaijan” or “Iranian Azerbaijan” in some rug discourses is the mainland of Azerbaijan and the state called the Azerbaijan Republic is a Caucasian country, neighbor to Iranian northwestern borders, where inside Caucasia could be considered a gate to Azerbaijan and so into the Iranian Plateau with Araxes River as natural borderline chosen by Qajar-ruled Persia and Tsarist Russia. Formerly called Ilkhanate of Arran, this new state have been called ‘Caucasian Azerbaijan’ ‘Russian Azerbaijan’ or ‘soviet Azerbaijan’ and latterly Azerbaijan Republic in rug markets during the last century.

In the mainland of Azerbaijan the cities of Urmia, Ardebil, Maragha and Tabriz have in turn played their roles as the capitals for Azarbayjan since ancient eras up to now. Meanwhile the mountainous land has been a rural habitat for nomads, semi-settled nomads and villagers since the Bronze Age. Stretching from the extreme east of the Caucasus to the north to the northern confines of the Zagros to the south, Azerbaijan includes natural environments of great contrasts. Between the high mountain blocks, where sufficient rain permits rain-fed agriculture, lie low basins, where arid climatic conditions prevail and where the agriculture depends on irrigation.

Sabalan Mount





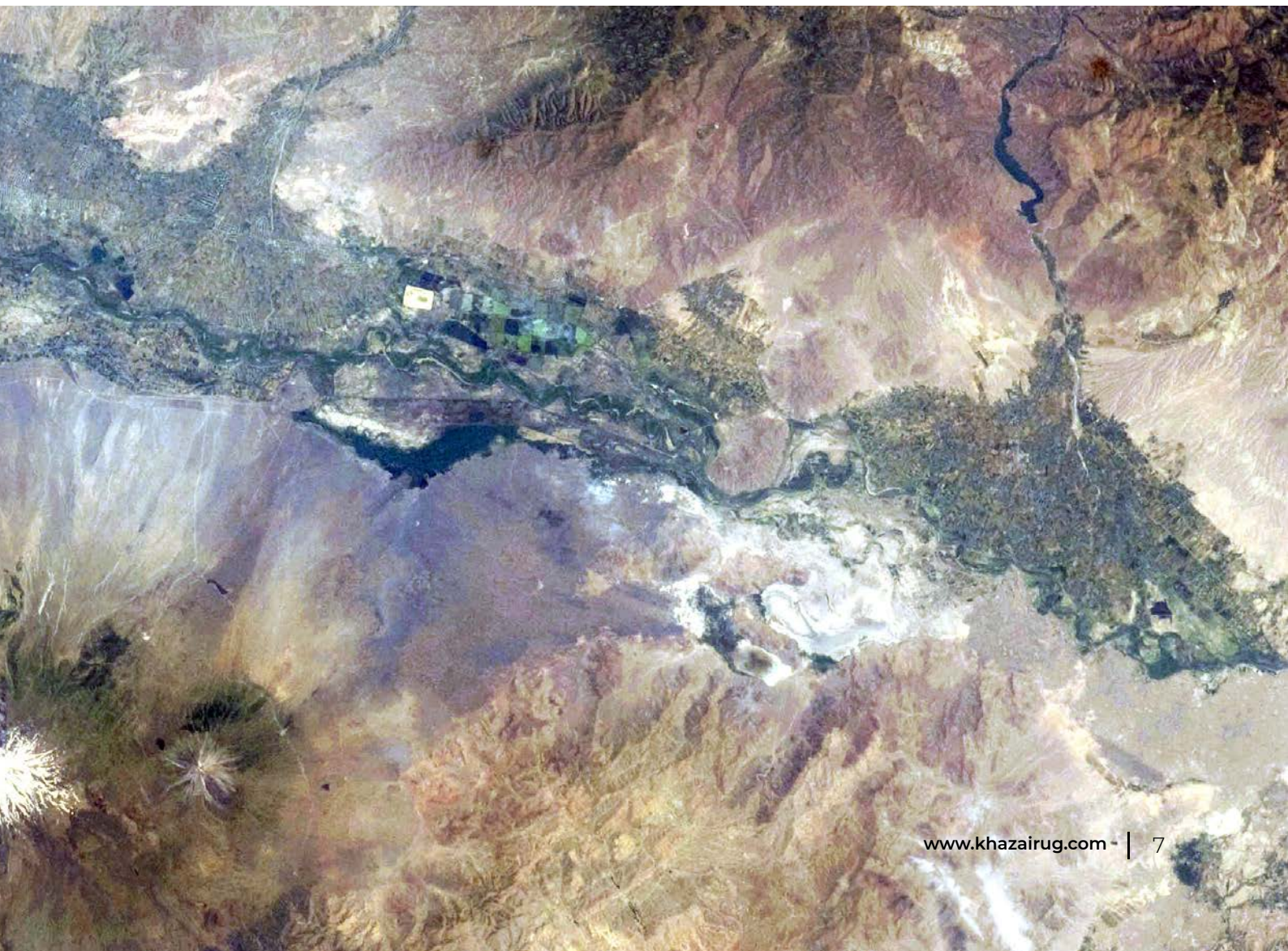
Azerbaijan is the land of impenetrable strongholds on high hills with natural springs inside. Such environment have been chosen by various folks with different origins during millenniums. Despite their different languages or religions, these folks have used to share lots of cultural aspects of their every-day lives, such as cuisine, music and rug weaving which is a vital craft for mountainous people, whether be Turk, Kurd, Armenian, Tat or Assyrian.





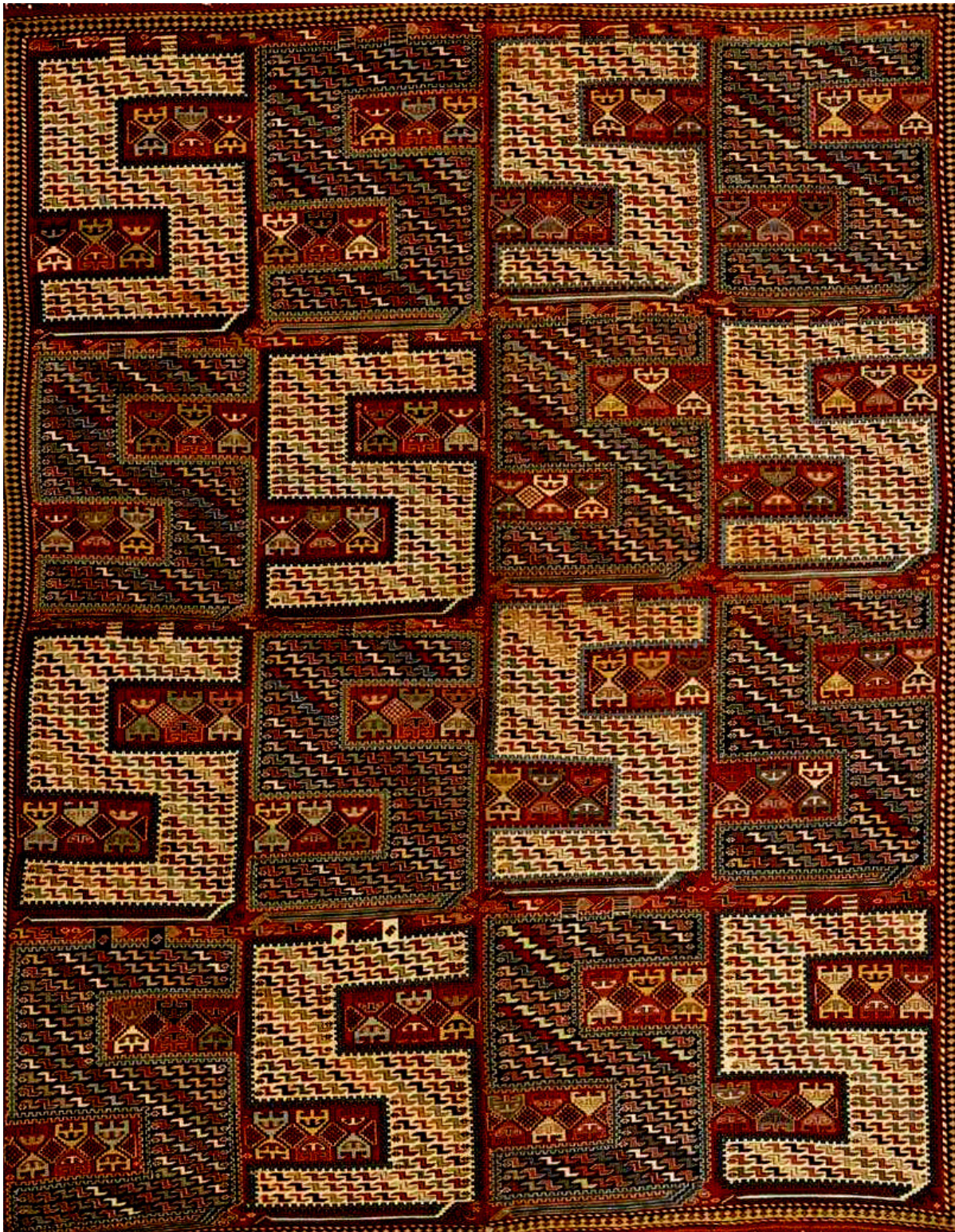
Across Aras (Araxes) River stretches Arasbaran Mountain range, making the topmost of Azarbaijan. The Area of Arasbar has a unique nature with a mixed climate of Hyrcanian, Caucasian and Mediterranean features. Dense thickets appear here and there out of thick clouds as if rooted in heaven. Here nomads weave verni or verneh, a flat-weave with soumak structure, which is patterned with added wefts after weaving.

Photograph of the Aras river from space





Verneh patterns include stylized plants, birds, mammals and fantastic creatures all arranged colorfully in and around a big geometric medallion framed in the square of margins. The main pattern used in venehs is a dragon motif which indicates a far-eastern origin. It may resemble both figure 5 and letter S, meaning “dragon” among the nomads and “water” among the village people.

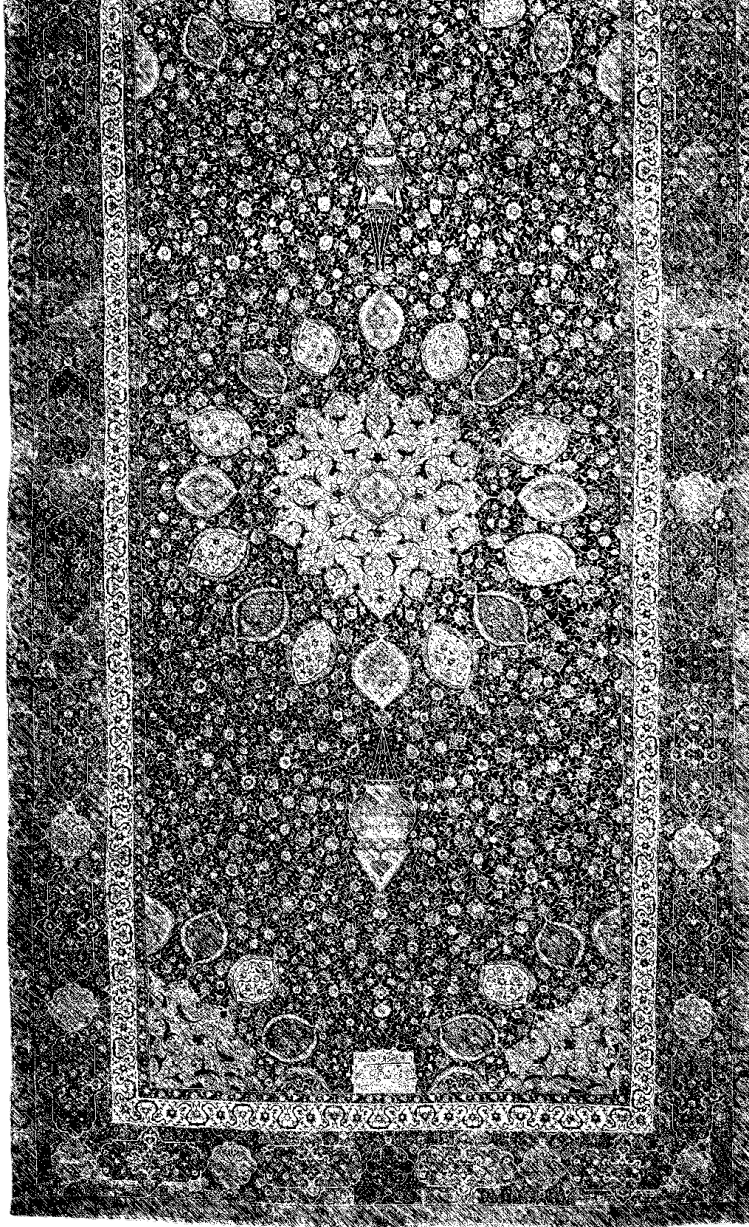


Azerbaijan Verneh from Karabakh

Vernehs are originally from Caucasian Karabakh, used by nomads to contain and transport bedding, became popular down the Araxes in Arasbaran and Mughan Plain due to their location on the way from Karabakh to the ancient city of Ardabil which had used to be a major route for several centuries.



Azerbaijan Verneh (Kilim), Mugan plain



Ardabil's name tied with one of the most praised Persian carpets ever, Sheikh Safi Carpet or simply Ardabil Carpet, woven under the command of Shah Tahmasp (1576-1514) for the shrine of Sheikh Safi-ad-din Ardabili, the forerunner of the House Safavi.





Ardabil (Sheikh Safi) Carpet



Ardabil Carpet is an iconic example for city-woven style of design and weave, being widely imitated in the workshops of Ardabil, Tabriz, Isfahan and Kashan, but despite the fame it has brought for Ardabil as a court rug center among art historians, the ancient city is considered a center for nomadic and village-woven pieces in rug markets.

Ardabil Bazaar





These pieces are woven chiefly in the surrounding rural areas. Contemporary rugs of these areas employ designs similar to Caucasian designs, including geometric triple-medallioned ones filled with rectilinear motifs of stylized flower, plants and animals.

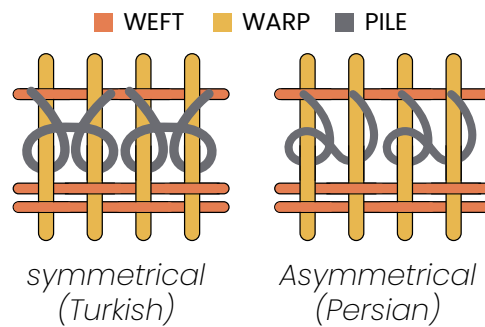


*Ardabil carpet with Kuba design, Azerbaijan, NW Iran,
222x150,5 cm, circa 1940-1930*



*Ardabil rug, Azerbaijan, NW Iran,
first half 20th century*

Ardabil rugs have symmetric (Turkish) knots at a density up to 160 per square inch on a cotton foundation. The wool used for piling is obtained from high pastures of Moghan Plain where it has its own breed of sheep known as Moghani.



An Ardabil rug's backside

Moghani breed's wool is usually thick and durable (perfect for rug weaving) with very natural light hues, which lead to lighter tones on Ardabil palette. This would be obvious if one comprise an Ardabil rug with its similar Caucasian pieces.



The breed of sheep known as Mugani



Shepherd of Mugan plain



Ardabil rug, Azerbaijan, NW Iran, 20th century



Ardabil rug, Azerbaijan, NW Iran, 20th century

Ardabil used to be considered a holy city during the Iranian history for several reasons one of which is of course the Mount Sabalan standing tall in the western sky. The volcanic mountain and its surroundings are part of the Armenian-Azerbaijan knot of mountains, where Pontus and Taurus mountain chains have their eastern roots and Alborz and Zagros their starting point. Tales say it is the mount Zoroaster had used to meditate on its hills and beside its hot springs. Nomads believe when all Sabalan' snow melt down it would be the end of time.

Several streams and streamlets water a fertile area northwest of Ardabil called Meshgin or Meshkin Inspired by Caucasian designs, antique Meshgin rugs have been a base for contemporary Ardabils. Meshgin rugs have symmetric knots and are double-wefted on a cotton foundation. Knot density is about 65 per square inch.

Arshoq Castle, a.k.a. Kohneh Qaleh (old castle) in Meshgin Shahr.

Mount Sabalan is in the background





*Antique Meshkin (Meshginshahr) rug, Ardabil Province,
Iranian Azerbaijan, late 19th century*



*Antique Meshkin (Meshginshahr) rug, Ardabil Province,
Iranian Azerbaijan, early 20th century*



Antique Meshginshahr rug, Ardabil Province, Iranian Azerbaijan

From the western heights of Sabalan streams Talxe-Roud or Aji-Chay. Both Persian and Turkish names mean 'Bitter River' alluding to its alkali quality. Reaching ultimately to Urmia Lake, Talxe-Roud and its branches water miles of Azerbaijan pastures and its rich minerals (mostly copper) make Sheep wool coarse and durable which answer well to the need of mountainous folks for warm and durable floor coverings.



Aji Chay or Talkheh Roud (Bitter River)

On its way lies the rug-weaving district of Heriz (also Romanized as Heris) the most elevated dwelling place of the mountainous Azerbaijan. Heriz is the main rug center between Ardebil and Tabriz. Dwellers of Heriz were mostly rug-makers in the past, making the region one of the most well-known Persian rug producing areas. Nowadays the craft loses gradually its dominance as the traditional life-style fades. All the same, Herizes are still famous for their unmistakable colors and designs as well as their versatility of size.



Heriz Rug, 20th century



Heriz Rug, 20th century



Heriz Rug, 20th century



Heriz Rug, 20th century



The exclusive property of material has affected the designs and furthermore made Herizes of the most long-lasting amongst their kind, and that explains why there are a good number of antique Herizes in museums around the world, keeping the original designs alive.





Antique Heriz rug, Azerbaijan, NW Iran, late 19th century



Antique Heriz rug, Azerbaijan, NW Iran, Sold in Sotheby's auction



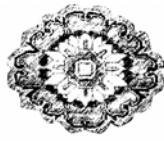
Antique Heriz rug, Azerbaijan, NW Iran, sold in Sotheby's auction



Coarseness of wool made weavers to tend to rectilinear patterns suitable for free weaving designs, rough and vivid. The point is these free designs follow the basics of curvilinear designs (medallion as the main example) and that makes the most recognizable characteristic of Heriz rugs.



Detail of Heriz Rug



Patterns used in Heriz recall some of Tabriz and Herat but due to their sharp angles, they have become ultimately something different and unique. Rectilinear medallions are mostly big, separated from their matching corners. All-over designs, mostly with Herati (fish) patterns, are also common.



Details of Heriz Rugs



Antique Heriz rug, Azerbaijan, NW Iran, sold in Sotheby's auction

However coarse in texture and pointy in design, Herizes are delicate, mild and fine in coloring. Sabalan's nature provides a special kind of madder's root which brings several shades of brownish red on palettes, as well as acid-moderated pinks. The hue of this madder's root is so unique you can't fail to recognize, especially on the grounds of Heriz runners.

The Khaki-gold used in Heriz, also, works as a sure sign to Heriz pieces. Different shades of it shine gleamingly out of deep rosy and navy blue.



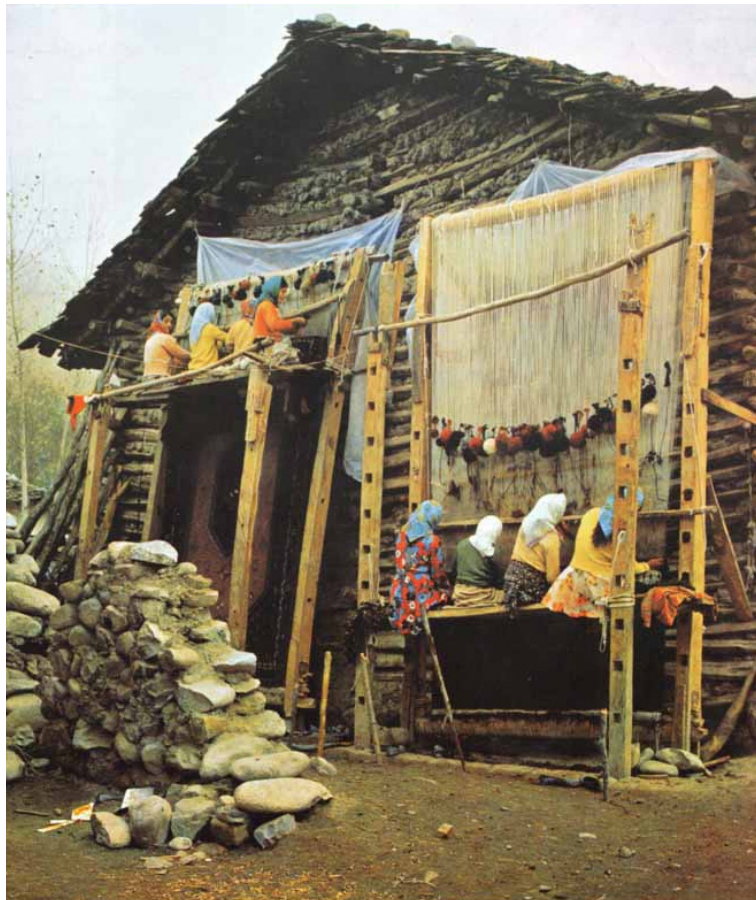
Naturally dyed yarn made with madder root



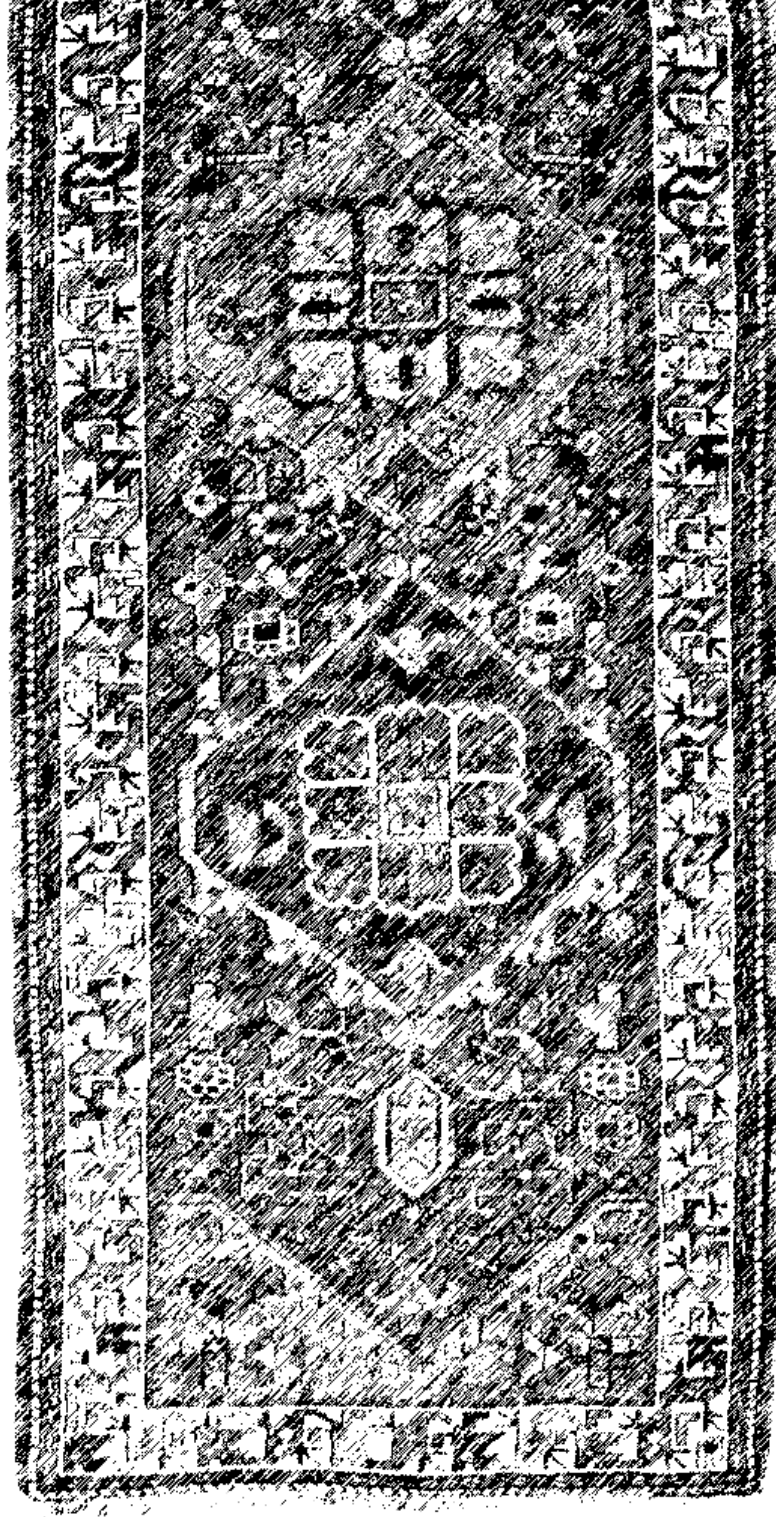
Heriz Runner Rug, 20th century



There are lots of town and villages in the Heriz district. Ahar, Bilverdi, Bakhshaish, Mehrivan, Sarab, Sharabian and Gorevan to be mentioned. Despite sharing the basic design, each rural area has its own individual features in rug weaving and every single piece has its own charm thanks to weaving without loom-drawing. There are initial samples in weavers' minds, but every piece find its own charm at the end. It would be a difficult task to find two pieces alike.



Weavers working on vertical loom Azerbaijan, circa 1900



Some of these villages' names are used by the rug trade to denote quality and grade rather than local attribution. For example a coarsely woven rug with a Heriz pattern may be described as a 'Gorevan', and a finely knitted one may be called 'Serapi' or simply 'Heriz', while Mehrivan (Mehraban) refers to a grade of Heriz rug between Heriz and Gorevan in quality.



Small, narrow Gorevan runner, Heriz district of North West Persia, circa 1920



Antique Gorevan runner, Circa 1915



Antique Serapi rug, Azerbaijan, NW Iran, 19th century



Mehrivan (Mehraban) rug



Bilverdi and Ahar rugs are woven in the basic Heriz design, with the symmetric knot but with single wefts which is a big exception in Azerbaijan weave structure. Ahar weave is fine and its patterns tend to be curvilinear.

Details of Ahar Rugs







Antique Ahar rug, Circa 1900

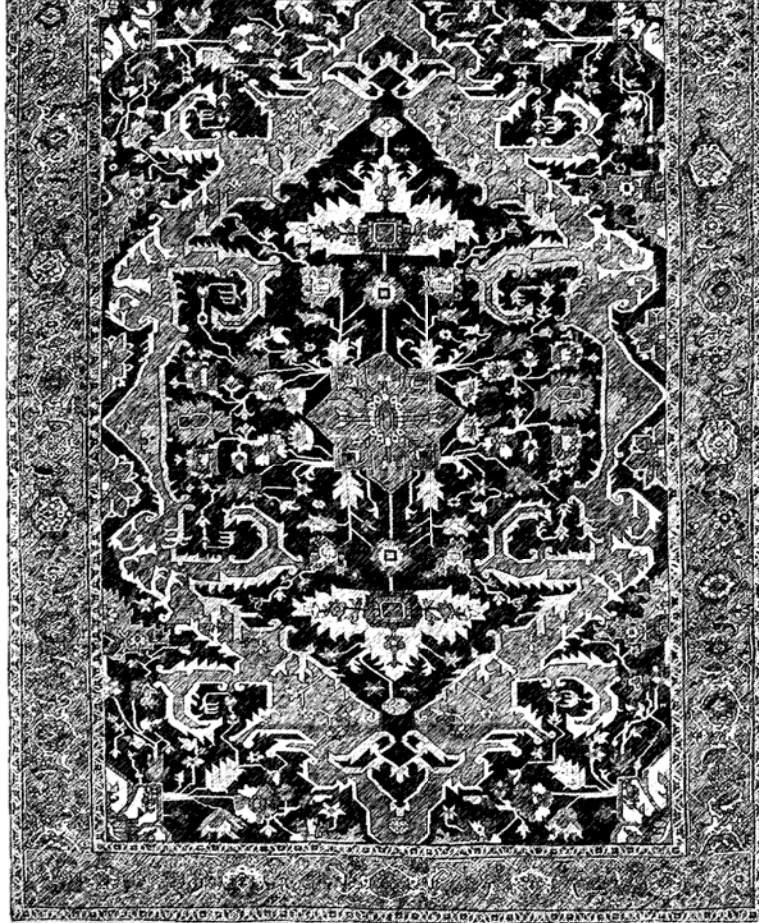


Antique Ahar Rug, Circa 1930

Contemporary Ahars have medallions and spandrels. The symmetric knot is used at a density of about 65 per square inch on a cotton foundation. Other Single-wefted rugs of the Heriz area may also be termed 'Ahar'.



Antique Ahar Rug, Circa 1930



Another term with opacity is ‘Serapi’ which is a Western invention for antique Herizes. Nobody knows when this term entered western markets. Inside Iran the term has no use. For sure it is an American term being used to distinguish some antique Herizes high grade in weave and raw material. But obviously the pieces are not from Sarab only, but from all villages alongside Talxeroud which make the Heriz district.



Serapi, 19th Century



Serapi, 20th Century



Antique Serapi rug, Azerbaijan, NW Iran, 19th century



Sarab is a spa town between Sabalan and Bozqoush Mounts. Persian words 'Sar' meaning 'head' and 'âb' meaning 'water' make exactly 'headwaters' as the springs of the area make a source for Talxe-Roud. Sounds of chattering streams never stop in Sarab; neither on or under the stone and earth. On rocks there has been carved Urartian cuneiform inscriptions and the town has an Ilkhanate mosque with khaki brickwork and turquoise kashani (Qashani). It seems the life has never stopped in this pastoral area since the 8th millennium BC, from when has remained traces of an initial rural life in the area.



Razliq Inscription in Sarab





Sarabi pieces are long-lasting, not just because of the materials used but also for their trustable weave. That's why there are still plenty of antique Sarabs in bazar, in usable condition.

Pieces woven in Sarab are mostly Kallegi (rather wide runners) and runners which are favored sizes in Azerbaijan, especially the Heriz district. Knots are Turkish/symmetrical, pile is woolen and warp and weft are cotton, dense and heavy, to match the wool's coarseness.



Sarab rug's backside



Sarab Kallegi (runners) Rug



Sarab Kallegi (runners) Rug



Repeats of gem medallions make common designs of Sarab runners. Some of these medallions are filled with rosettes or tiny gems and in some designs the medallions are surrounded with strips.

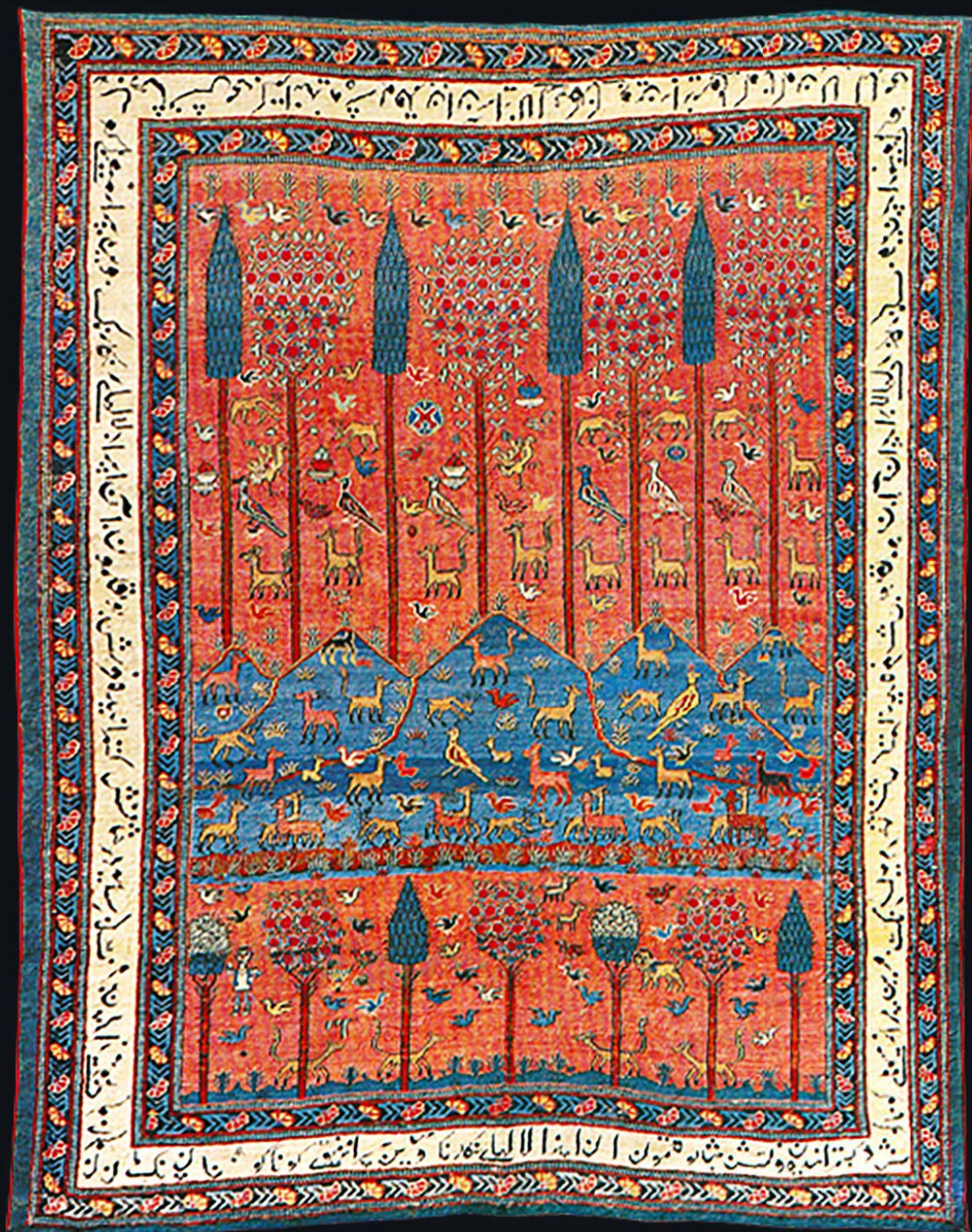
Sarab Kallegi (runners) Rug







After Heriz itself, 'Bakhshaish' may be the biggest name of the district. Bakhshaish (or Baxshayesh), a Persian word meaning clemency, is located right in the middle of Heriz by the Talxe Roud bank. It has used to be the most famous name among northwestern Persian antique rugs. Its world reputation backs to the second half of the 19th century when Tabrizi merchants developed their business and lots of woven goods found their way to Western markets.



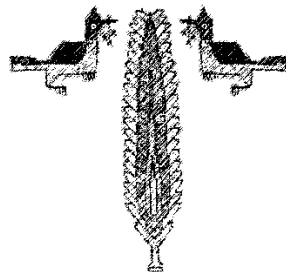
Antique Bakshaish rug, 19th century



Today Bakhshaish's weavers retain their old reputation with their trustable technique and their still long-lasting raw materials. They produce the most fine-woven pieces of Heriz. Actually some experts give the title 'Bakhshaish' to all Heriz pieces with excellent and dense weave. Here carpet sizes are more favored than area rugs.



Antique Bakshaish village rug



Famous antique Bakhshaishs have mostly Herati patterns in all-over designs. Experts often mention their similarities with both old Sultan-Abad pieces and Caucasian designs. Unique tribal-influenced designs could also be found amongst them with animal motives grazing on hills and between trees, reminding the very biome of Azerbaijan province. 'Tree of Life' had been also a favored design and there remained some exquisite examples of the symbol in museums around the world.



Antique Bakshaish village rug



Antique Bakshaish village rug, Sold in Sotheby's auction



Antique Bakshaish village rug



Antique Bakshaish village rug

Being separated from Bakhshaish antique style, new Bakhshaish pieces follow the total basics of Herizes, namely the large central medallion design in a free rustic style with fine rectilinear patterns the total shapes of which are derived from curvilinear designs.



Antique Bakshaish village rug inspired by Heriz design

Bakhshaishs enjoy the most elaborate compositions among Herizes. It seems the very elegance of antique patterns are kept in every single line of new pieces, despite the change from all-over to central designs. In other words, we can describe new Bakhshaishs as detailed and intricate Herizes.



Antique Bakhshaish Medallion rug



Antique Bakhshaish Medallion rug, late 19th century



Antique Bakhshaish Medallion rug



Antique Bakhshaish Medallion rug, Sold in Sotheby's auction



Karaja (also Romanized Qarājeh, Karadja or Gharaja) is another rural area on the north-western part of Heriz district, down to the Azerbaijan Republic's frontier. Karaja rugs don't have much in common with typical Herizes except in quality of raw materials. In other aspects these pieces have their very own style, technically and aesthetically.

Medallions are basic motifs for central designs. In fact they're the hearts of such designs. So it's somehow strange to see them serving as a repeating pattern in an all-over design. This is exactly what makes Karaja designs distinctive, not only in Heriz or Azerbaijan, but in all over Iran.



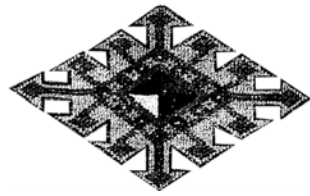
Antique Karadja (Karaja, Qarajeh) rug, Iranian Azerbaijan



Antique Karadja (Karaja, Qarajeh) rug, Iranian Azerbaijan



Antique Karadja (Karaja, Qarajeh) rug, Iranian Azerbaijan, early 20th century



Another typical Karaja design is a three-medallioned one, appropriate for narrow pieces which are very common in the region. Karaja medallions are hexagonal and hooked. This sort of medallions are actually well-known as “Karaja frames”. A bigger one, usually with a different color, is located in the middle, and the two smaller ones hang upward and downward.



Antique Karadja (Karaja, Qarajeh) rug, Iranian Azerbaijan, early 20th century



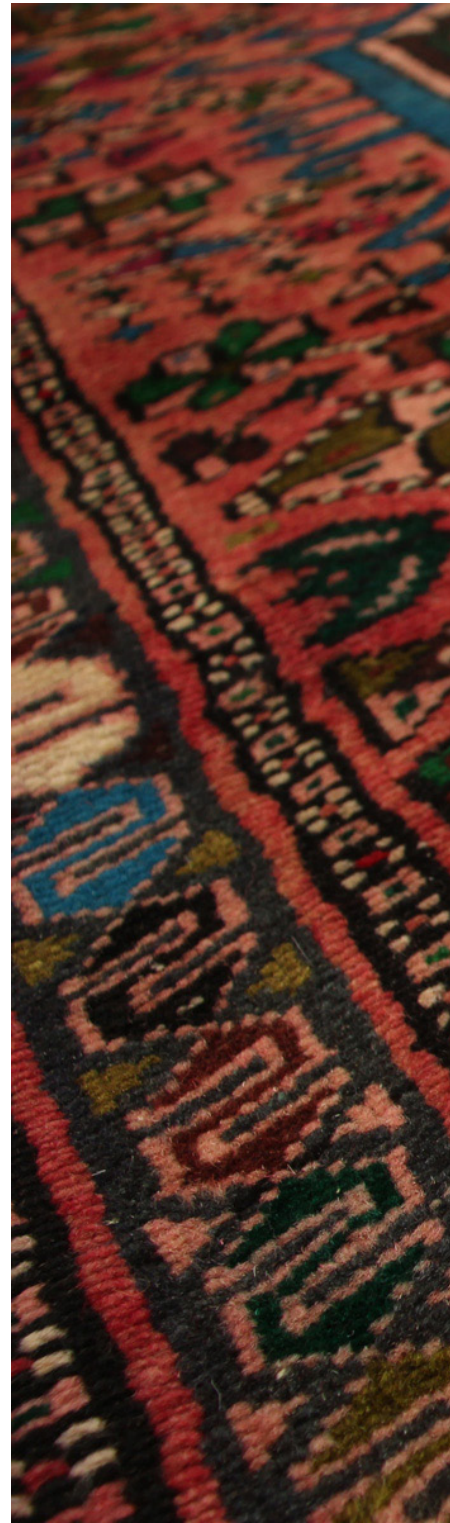
Dissimilar to their neighbors, weavers of Karaja make single-wefted carpets. If you see a double-wefted piece with Karaja design that would be called Karadagh or Qaradagh (the Turkish name for Arasbaran Mountain).





Antique Karadagh/Arasbaran rug in a yellow ground, Iranian Azerbaijan

Karaja Knots are Turkish/symmetrical, pile is woolen and warp and weft are cotton. Completely woolen pieces are also available. Selvages are flat, similar to other Azerbaijan's pieces. Knot count reaches to the average of 100 knots in inch. All carpet sizes are made but long and narrow pieces are favored. Red is the dominant color for Karaja grounds. Dark blue and cream are also used for grounds but such pieces are rare. Rose and brownish shades of red are also used for patterns as well as light blue and pistachio green.







Westwards you reaches to Tabriz, capital of Eastern Azerbaijan province and the biggest city in western Iran, with a population of over 1.73 million. Tabriz was named World Carpet Weaving City by the World Crafts Council in October 2015. Making it the first capital of the modern Iran, Shah Ismail the great crowned in Tabriz as the Shah of Persia in 1501 to kindle a revival for the Iranian culture.



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Beside its rug weaving tradition (which is courtly and city-styled), Tabriz has been well-known as a center for rug trading. Being located on the route to Trabzon and Istanbul, the city has been also the main gathering place for European rug traders.

Bazaar of Tabriz is one of the oldest bazaars in the Middle East and the largest covered bazaar in the world. It is one of Iran's UNESCO World Heritage Sites, attracting tourists from all over the world, especially to its rug souk, in where all nomadic and village woven pieces are gathered.

Bazaar of Tabriz





Down the capital city of Tabriz, rises Sahand Mountain. Unlike the Sabalan Mount, where nomadism plays a major role, the Sahand is a predominantly rural area with agriculture and a village-based animal husbandry.

On the Sahand eastern skirt lies Hastrud (also Romanized as Hashtroud). The name literary means 'eight rivers' in Persian, referring to actual eight rivers of the area which flow towards Lake Urmia.





Hashtrud inhabitants are of both Turk and kurd origins. This shows itself in weave tradition of the area. Hashtrud rugs are designed with a style of Herati (fish) patterns: geometricized like Heriz patterns and rustic like Kurdish village-woven pieces.



Hashtrud Rug

Hashtud pieces are gathered ultimately in Tabriz bazar being also called Shahsavan or Amroullah which are the names of Hashtudi former tribes. The later refers to a Kurdish tribe and the first is the most well-known tribal confederation of Azerbaijan since the Safavid Era.



Hashtud Rug

Meaning 'Shah Lovers' or 'Shah Adherents', the tribal confederation established by Shah Abbas the great to rival with rebellious Qizilbashs and protect northwestern parts of Persia against Ottomans. Most of Shahsavans were Turks but there were also Kurds, Georgian and Armenians among them. Originally from the Mughan area, they have been ultimately settled from Lake Urmia to Ardabil and Zanjan provinces.



Shahsavan Kilim

Weavings of the Shahsavans consist mainly of flat-woven rugs and flat-woven functional pieces such as saddlebags, mafrash, and animal trappings rather than piled rugs. Shahsavans' soumaks have world reputation. Soumak (or sumak) is a flat-weave in which the weft encircles groups of warps. Simple structure of soumaks recalls Kilims but they enjoy normally more intricate patterns and designs.



Shahsavan soumaks are designed with colorful geometric patterns like eight-pointed stars or hooked lozenges, stylized birds and animals and rectilinear floral motifs. Dark and light blue, shades of red, yellow, green and brown are frequent in such pieces.



Antique Shahsavan Mafrash Panel In Reverse Soumak Technique, Circa 1890



Shahsavan Soumak rug, handwoven in NW Iran



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