

the nickle arts museum

**made in afghanistan**

rugs and resistance

1979 – 2005







## **Made in Afghanistan: Rugs and Resistance, 1979-2005**

*Made in Afghanistan: Rugs and Resistance, 1979-2005* is an exhibition of rugs that offers insight into the recent political history of Afghanistan. Traditionally, the pile woven carpets made by Afghan tribal groups included symbols more often associated with life and faith than death and war. However, beginning with the Soviet Invasion of 1979, weavers have incorporated imagery that is at once disturbing and defiant. The events surrounding the period of Taliban rule and American Occupation have, similarly, provided fodder for woven imaginations. This exhibition, co-curated by Michele Hardy and Robert Fyke, features carpets from a number of private collections as well as the Jean and Marie Erikson Collection, all brought together for the first time in Canada.

The earliest rugs to be called “war rugs” appeared following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. According to the often speculative literature on the subject, war carpets are thought to have originated near Herat in northwest Afghanistan. Likely they were woven by members of tribal groups with long traditions of carpet weaving. Many war rugs are attributed to the Baluch, for example, an ethnically diverse nomadic group who occupy a vast region on either side of the Afghan-Iran border. Baluch carpets are renowned for their striking geometric designs, somber palette, ‘floppy’ feel, and use of goat hair along the selvages. The earliest war rugs are inventive variations on traditional designs. *Made in Afghanistan* has several examples that have border designs consistent with older carpets; multiple bands filled with chained S-shapes and flowers. Center fields, alternatively, are patterned with rows of repeating elements; traditional flowers, vases, birds, and animals, and introduce the first motifs inspired by Soviet tanks, helicopters, and guns. The arrangement, scale, and simplification of war imagery, suggests that the designs of these early war rugs were memory-based rather than designed on paper, and that production was more likely informal and centered in the home than in formally organized workshops.

Rugs woven in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation (1979-1989) continue to explore these new motifs largely within the framework of traditional design. Repeating, geometric field patterns tend to characterize much tribal production, but with tremendous variations. Some Baluch sub-tribes, for example, living south of the town of Herat in Western Afghanistan, are known for their inclusion of figures<sup>1</sup>. Pictorial carpets depicting scenes from myths and epics have an especially long history in Iran. Iranian sculptor and scholar Parviz Tanavoli notes how stories about the lovers Khusraw and Shirin were particularly popular in Ferdows (a town in eastern Iran) among Baluch weavers. Given the strong ethnic and economic ties between Iran and Afghanistan, as well as a relatively permeable border, it is likely pictorial designs and preferences for them were carried eastwards by Iranian Baluch. Tanavoli notes seeing many Khusraw and Shirin rugs in Afghan markets in 1978<sup>2</sup>. Whom the early war rugs were woven for is unknown. Their study, as noted above, is characterized more by speculation than ethnographic research. Some writers have suggested that war rugs were woven to sell to members of the Soviet army; however, it is unlikely conscripts could afford them or that the market was very large<sup>3</sup>. An alternative market existed in Peshawar, Pakistan, where most foreign aid agencies were stationed. Rug collector and US Army officer Tatiana Divens notes seeing a war rug purchased by an American Diplomat in Peshawar just six months after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan<sup>4</sup>.

The Soviet occupation forced thousands of Afghans to flee the danger and devastation of war and Soviet rule. Afghan families migrated west to Iran, east to Pakistan or even north to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, or Tajikistan. If they could afford it, they fled to Europe, America or Australia. For many, life in exile has meant refugee camps where Afghans of various tribes, ethnic divisions, and languages live together. Rug weaving, once the prerogative of tribal women who wove rugs for their families' use, is increasingly practiced by men and young boys<sup>5</sup> who likely have few other work options. Although rugs woven with traditional designs continued to be made during the Soviet era, pictorial rugs became more prevalent. This is undoubtedly related to the migration of so many Afghans both to urban centers and to refugee camps where craft production has been reorganized.

War rugs are increasingly woven in organized workshops with overseers and designers attempting to cater to new markets. These markets developed with the arrival of initially Russian, and later American military personnel, aid workers, diplomats, and journalists based in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The evolving international market for war rugs has encouraged the development of named, standardized, designs that can be ordered abroad.

After the bombing of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, war rugs become increasingly iconic. Following the American air strikes and arrival of land forces in Afghanistan in late 2001, the imagery portrayed on war rugs shifts. Soviet military equipment, for example, is replaced by American guns, tanks, and aircraft. Moreover, where these motifs were earlier highly stylized, they become increasingly three dimensional and realistic. Some of the war rug imagery is copied from promotional pamphlets the Americans distributed to win Afghan support. *Made in Afghanistan* features a rug entitled “9-11” with twinned US-Afghan flags and a dove directly copied from a US pamphlet. Referring to the situation in nineteenth century Iran, Tanavoli notes that after the introduction of photography, weavers added images of contemporary royalty and dignitaries to their existing repertoire of mythic and historic figures<sup>6</sup>. A parallel situation appears in contemporary Afghanistan. Robert Fyke, co-curator of *Made in Afghanistan*, has suggested that the rapid development of new Afghan war rug designs following the US occupation, their increasing realism, and altered perspectives suggests the influence of CNN and the Internet.

### Discernment Dilemmas: Locating the Politics of War Rugs

The war rugs of Afghanistan have not had broad appeal in the market. Although there have been numerous exhibitions, they remain the purview of a relatively small group of Western collectors. It would seem that for most rug enthusiasts, as for most art collectors, their authenticity is questionable. Collectors of rugs, like collectors of other art objects, ethnic or otherwise, prefer ‘traditional’ art forms to those viewed as tainted by commerce,



new materials, new technologies, or other signs of change and modernity<sup>7</sup>. Where tribal rugs were apparently produced by women to enhance their families' spiritual and material well being, rugs produced for commercial purposes are deemed 'inauthentic'<sup>8</sup>. Like African masks that have been 'danced' (legitimated through use), rugs woven for family life are deemed authentic—those produced for sale are considered tainted by the market.

In 1976, Nelson Graburn edited a collection of provocative articles that point to the elitism implicit in debates about authenticity. In his introductory essay to *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World*<sup>9</sup>, Graburn argues for the value of art forms that have developed in contexts of cultural contact, change, and tourism. Had they existed at the time, an article on Afghan war rugs would have not been out of place<sup>10</sup>. The book examines various new arts—arts that may be rooted in cultural tradition but that utilize new methods, incorporate new motifs, symbols, languages, and materials, while aiming for new or expanded markets. For example, in her chapter Mari Lynn Salvador, discusses the evolution of *molas*, appliqué panels stitched by Cuna Indian women of the San Blas islands off the coast of Panama<sup>11</sup>. Molas developed with the arrival of new materials, new sources of inspiration, and marketing opportunities. Collectively the book provides evidence for the skill of artists in remote corners of the world to creatively engage change and adapt their ways of working to new markets. It challenges notions of authenticity as well as tradition.

Another aspect of the concern with authenticity is the issue of 'voice' and resistance. Do war rugs, particularly the most recent generation of war rugs, 'articulate' Afghan resistance? There has been discussion about how authentically war rugs represent Afghan views: are they statements of resistance or kitsch produced for Western consumption? While the rugs produced during the Soviet era often celebrate the Mujahidin's (loosely aligned opposition groups who fought the Soviets) victory over the Soviets and would seem to suggest Afghan sovereignty, post 9-11 rugs appear to increasingly reflect American sentiments and views of the war. Jim Scott's now classic article of 1986 examines what he terms "everyday forms of peasant resistance" in an attempt to recover the perspective of peoples often overlooked by state-centric histories, and counter views that peasants are passive and ineffectual.

Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: footdragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no co-ordination or planning: they often represent a form of individual self help: and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does “between revolts” to defend its interests as best it can<sup>12</sup>.

Weaving carpets with war imagery may, like the everyday forms Scott suggests, be one of the few options available to Afghans devastated by years of war, poverty, destruction. The question, as Scott reminds us, is not how effective these forms of resistance are at overturning the apparatus of state or occupying forces, but how well they manage to balance sustenance with the expression of agency. I am struck, for example, by the dramatically masculine shift in carpet design from 1979 to the present. Given the increasing role of men and boys in the production of carpets, is this an effort to counter the debilitating, emasculating effects of war (where men are forced to take on tasks once prescribed to women)?

## Reading Resistance

Afghan weavers have clearly responded to Western desires for certain kinds of rugs and in so doing have made conscious choices about what is depicted and how. The pictorial rugs featured in *Made in Afghanistan* are not as distinct from ‘traditional’ rugs as they may appear at first glance. While I have noted a trend towards realism, they remain folk-ish. Even the most refined of the post 9-11 rugs are highly stylized—the figures more caricatures than portraits, the weaponry crudely drawn, with awkward space relations, unsympathetic colors, and poor dyes.

While weaving poses certain technical restrictions on design, detailed rendering is possible should weavers choose to do so. War rug weavers clearly do not. While there are recognizable and named types of rugs, as Lendon<sup>13</sup> notes, each rug is different. The same pattern may be repeated more or less accurately, in different color combinations, and contain different filler motifs (the small motifs used to fill in open space) speaking to the hand (or perhaps the voice) of individual artists. War rugs, with their portrayal of the weapons of war speak to Western stereotypes of endemic, tribal warfare, especially Islamic warfare. But they also speak to notions of the noble savage—their seemingly innocent, child-like portrayals of the guns, tanks and the effects of war are not, I suspect, accidental or inevitable.

The question has to be asked: is it possible to cater to a largely American market while weaving for Afghan sovereignty? There are many different types of war rugs—some have proved more commodifiable than others. Referring to the rugs woven immediately preceding and following 9-11, there are those that depict actual events and identifiable figures as well as images of hoped-for events, and composite, iconic images. *Made in Afghanistan* contains images of political figures, notably, Massoud, leader of the Mujahidin who was assassinated two days before the bombing of the World Trade Center. It also contains images of the *Loya Jirga* (Grand Assembly) and the signing of the Afghan Constitution, January 4, 2004. Maps of Afghanistan feature prominently in many of these carpets, framing political narratives. Moreover,

map carpets depict and identify the shape of Afghanistan and its (many) composite provinces, as if to affirm the country's forever threatened sovereign integrity ... The profile of the nation appears ... to link both the specific and generalised political subjects within an overall idealisation of national identity and independence<sup>14</sup>.



Carpet designs are widely shared and even reinterpreted to reflect altered political conditions. *Made in Afghanistan*, for example, contains a rug called “Najibullah” (late twentieth century) depicting the ruler the Russians left in power on their departure. The same rug is reinterpreted as “Uncle Sam’s Hat” (2005) illustrating the change in political power.

While rug production may have been primarily domestic in the distant pre-colonial past, certainly by the last quarter of the nineteenth century rugs were made extensively to trade or sell by weavers even in the most remote corners of Central Asia<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, rugs may move into and out of different commodity states—their original intended use may alter, pushing goods onto the market or withholding them<sup>16</sup>. In spite of this, contemporary collectors and dealers continue to venerate authenticity, narrowly defined as old, ‘traditional’, and non-commercial. Debates about authenticity and commerce undermine efforts to discuss war rugs and resistance except in binary terms. A more discursive approach, attuned to the contexts of production is necessary. So too is field research.

Carpets and textiles have always communicated cultural values to those who made and used them. Recent research has shown that textiles often offer producers an avenue for the expression of counter discourses, even subversive discourses<sup>17</sup>. War rugs communicate in a different language than that woven by tribal women weavers before 1979. The signs and symbols used in this dialogue are culled from the media, from propaganda, and history. Weavers of war rugs are actively recovering, even reinventing Afghan history, critiquing the war and Western stereotypes. War rugs express their creative engagement with color and design, as well as war, political, and economic change.

**Michele Hardy**  
**Curator of Decorative Arts, The Nickle Arts Museum**  
**February 2006**

## Endnotes

- 1 Eiland, M.L., (1981). *Oriental rugs: A new comprehensive guide*. Boston: Little Brown, p.117).
- 2 Tanavoli, P., (1994). *Kings, heroes, and lovers: Pictorial rugs from the tribes and villages of Iran*. London: Scorpion.
- 3 Bonyhady, T., (2003). Out of Afghanistan. In T. Bonyhady & N. Lendon, *The rugs of war*. Canberra, Australian National University.
- 4 Divens, T., (1989). "Photos from the front: A preliminary inquiry into Afghan war aksi." *Oriental Rug Review*, 9, 2, 13-16.
- 5 Bonyhady, *ibid*, p.10.
- 6 Tanavoli, *ibid*, p.9.
- 7 Price, S. (1989). *Primitive art in civilised places*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- 8 Spooner brilliantly examines the assumptions surrounding tribal production, commoditization and authenticity. It is unlikely, for example, that tribal women *never* wove carpets for exchange. Spooner, B. (1986). Weavers and dealers: The authenticity of an oriental carpet. In A. Appadurai, (Ed.). *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 9 Graburn, N.H.H. (Ed.) (1976). *Ethnic and tourist arts: Cultural expressions from the fourth world*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 10 The earliest war rugs appear only after the arrival of the Soviets in 1979.
- 11 Salvador, M. (1976). The clothing arts of the Cuna of San Blas, Panama. In N.H.H. Graburn (Ed.), *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (pp. 165-182). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 12 Scott, J. (1986). Everyday forms of peasant resistance. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, p.6.
- 13 Lendon, N., (2003). Near and far. In T. Bonyhady & N. Lendon, *The rugs of war*. Canberra, Australian National University, p 30.
- 14 Lendon, *ibid*, p 28.
- 15 Helfgott, L.M. (1994). Ties that bind: A social history of the Iranian carpet. Washington: Smithsonian Press; Spooner, B. *ibid*.
- 16 Appadurai, A. (Ed.). (1986). *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 17 Messick, B. (1987). Subordinate discourse: Women, weaving, and gender relations in North Africa. *American Ethnologist*, 14, 210-225; Salvador, *ibid*.

## List of Rugs in Exhibition

from the collection of Max Allen

*World War I Aeroplane*, c. 1920, wool on cotton

*King and Hero*, c. 1985, wool on wool

*Mountain Scene*, late 20<sup>th</sup> century, wool on wool

*Constitution*, 2004, wool on wool

*Uncle Sam's Hat*, 2005, wool on cotton

from the collection of David W. Smith

*Invasion of the Soviets*, c. 1979, wool on wool

*Helicopters with Camels*, c. 1979, wool on wool

*Vases*, c. 1979, wool on wool

*Herat*, c. 1985, wool on wool

*Repeating Arms II*, c. 1985, wool on wool

from collection of Lloyd Erikson

*Bullets*, c. 1985, wool on wool

from the collection of Charles Campbell

*Najibullah*, late 20<sup>th</sup> century, wool on wool

from the collection of Robert Fyke

*Warrior*, c. 1985, wool on wool

*Repeating Arms I*, c. 1985, wool on cotton

*Ground Attack Aircraft*, c. 1985, wool on wool

*Friendship Bridge*, c. 1990, wool on wool

*Jam Minaret*, c. 1995, wool on wool

*Panjshir Valley*, c. 1991, wool on wool

*Citadel*, enc 20<sup>th</sup> century, wool on wool

*Exodus of the Soviet Union*, 2004, wool on cotton

*Massoud*, 2002, wool on wool

*9-11*, 2004, wool on cotton

*Search for Bin Laden in Tora Bora*, 2004, wool on cotton

*Loya Jirga*, 2004, wool on cotton

*Prayer Rug*, c. 1985, wool on wool



## Collector's Statement

In 1990, I became an enthusiastic collector of Afghan War rugs. My first rugs, woven only 10 years earlier, depicted the shock and horror of war—their stories reflecting the grim realities of the Soviet Occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989). As an artist, I was moved by the weavers' responses to current events, their daring, inventiveness, and skill. The rugs provoked questions about the situation in Afghanistan, the nature of power, politics, and creative agency. My research began.

As my collection grew, I noticed a shift in the rugs woven following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989. Rugs produced during the ensuing Civil War, reinterpreted views of historic monuments and living cities peppered with the war motifs developed earlier: Soviet inspired tanks, guns, aircraft, and bombs. I wondered if these new rugs would continue or if the weavers would tire of their novelty and return to more traditional patterns?

9-11 changed the course of world history as well as the development of rug making in Afghanistan. A new style of war rug appeared, not using the older, Soviet motifs of war, but new motifs based on American models, and images drawn from the media. The bombing of the World Trade Center and US hunt for Osama Bin Laden were recurring themes, graphically and movingly rendered in wool. Some of the most recent carpets speak to Afghan nationalism—the Grand Assembly (*Loya Jirga*) electing Hamid Karzai the president of Afghanistan and the signing of the Afghan Constitution. Perhaps these will encourage new traditions of carpets, carpets that reflect and promote peace, democracy, and Afghan sovereignty.

War carpets are dramatic woven testaments of Afghan political history—ever changing, in flux, informed by and informing tradition. In his powerful book of quatrains, Afghan poet Khalilullah Kalili speaks of the fluidity of history

We are this bitter fruit, falling upon the earth.

Thus are we in the clutches of Time!  
Oh spring of liberty! What else but your grace  
Shall render this bitter fruit, sweet?

آن میوه تلخیم که ریزد بزمین  
در پنجه ایام چنینیم چنین  
جز فیض تو ای بهار آزادی چیست ؟  
کاین میوه تلخ را نماید شیرین

I hope to see another chapter in Afghan war carpets, when the motifs of war are finally replaced with motifs of peace and life. Perhaps, with time, war carpets will become peace carpets.

**Robert Fyke**  
**February 2006**

## Acknowledgements

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Opening reception, March 3, 2006, The Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary features a live performance by the musicians Amir Amiri on santur and Linling Hsu on violin.





### Photography

John Hails

### Design

Christine Sowiak

### Printing

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### Photographs

front cover:

*Kalashnikov*, Collection of David W. Smith

back cover and wrap around:

*Repeating Arms I*, Collection of Robert Fyke

inside front cover:

*Prayer Rug*, Collection of Robert Fyke

inside back cover:

*9-11*, Collection of Robert Fyke



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**made in afghanistan**

**rugs and resistance**

1979 – 2005

25 February – 31 May 2006

Curated by Michele Hardy and Robert Fyke

This exhibition brings together rugs from several private collections and traces the recent political situation in Afghanistan. It offers a poignant view of Afghan resistance and cultural survival against a backdrop of violence and turmoil.

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