

Classical Anatolian Carpet Revival

Jozan Magazine has asked Christopher Andrews to tell about his venture and release of a line of carpets that include variations on the theme of 15th and 16th century Lotto and Holbein carpets.

by Christopher Robin Andrews, 30 March 2007

Herein I want to describe a journey I have taken, deep into the heart of the art of the classical “Oriental” carpet, which has transformed me over the last decade from someone with a casual appreciation of traditional carpet patterns into a person who is now intimately involved in every detail of their design, manufacture and sale.

In the Spring of 2007, after many years of work, our company “Classical Carpets” launched its inaugural line.



We are dedicated to reviving the classical antique carpets of Anatolia and the Caucasus, some of the rarest and most celebrated carpet designs in the world. The original versions of these carpets date from the 13th through the 18th centuries. They are extremely rare, highly valued and displayed in the world's finest museums and art collections.

We have studied the color and structure of these masterpieces in detail, as an inspiration for the 21st century. Our designs are not just literal copies of specific carpets, or loosely derived modern interpretations; rather, we have sought to capture the essence of these patterns.

As I have worked as an architect and designer for many years, I have always had an appreciation for traditional craftsmanship and design. The often anonymous craftspeople who put their heart and souls into the crafting of useful and beautiful things are an essential part of the world's cultural heritage.



In the mid 1990's I studied with the renowned architect, writer and carpet collector, Christopher Alexander. Alexander's life work has been to teach the “timeless way” that is at the heart of crafting traditional environments, art, and functional artifacts, using “pattern languages” and organic processes that come out of basic human needs and nature's inherent geometries. Through Alexander's work, I was introduced to the deep geometrical structure of the early Anatolian carpets, initially without really understanding the tradition and craft involved, rather just marveling at the magic of beautiful designs, textures, and colors.

I was especially drawn to the “classic” 15th & 16th century Anatolian patterns, these designs that had been so arresting at the time of their inception, that they were imported in large numbers into Europe, over hundreds of years, where they were appreciated and painted by celebrated Western artists, like Lotto and Holbein, by whose names we now call some of them.

Alexander suggests that the designs for these carpets are built around what he calls a “field of centers”. Each design element of the carpet, from the borders to the medallions, has this quality, which is like that of a living being. The geometry and the colors of the carpets work

together to reinforce these centers at all scales, ranging from that of the single knot, to that of the whole carpet. This "life" is what draws us into the design of the carpets, and is why the classic patterns resonate so deeply with us. These ideas are thoroughly explored in his book "A Foreshadowing of 21st Century Art: The Color and Geometry of Very Early Turkish Carpets. (Oxford University Press).



In the Summer of 2001, my wife and I were in Istanbul on our honeymoon. In addition to exploring the streets of that incredible city, the Topkapi Palace, and the mosques of the architect Sinan, with their soaring structure, sinuous spaces and glorious Iznik tile work, and partaking of the generous hospitality of the Turkish people, we spent a lot of time looking at carpets, in the shops around Sultanahmet, and in the Grand Bazaar. But it was to the classic carpets in the Vakiflar and the Turkish and Islamic Museum, with their bold colors and fantastic geometry that we kept coming back.

In Istanbul we tried to find contemporary versions of these classic carpets. Strangely, there were but a few, and they clearly paled in comparison to the originals. When I spoke to rug dealers about this they sympathized. Some suggested that the colors and designs of the original models were too powerful, that they don't fit contemporary taste for a more subdued, "background" carpet or for simpler "tribal" designs.

So I gave up on this quest. We purchased some modest new "tribal" carpet designs and resigned ourselves to appreciating these classic carpets in books and museums.



However, over the years I continued to look at and sketch these classical carpets, studying their color and geometry, knot by knot, warp and weft, until I began to have a glimmer of an understanding of the intentions and genius of their designers, dyers and weavers.

I also learned more about the resurgence in the last few decades of the use of handspun, naturally dyed wool. Sparked by the work of chemist Harald Böhmer and the DOBAG project in Turkey, weavers all over the world are again using natural materials in designs inspired by traditional patterns.

In 2005 I formed a partnership with two families of carpet makers, one in Anatolia and one in the Caucasus, combining their hand crafting expertise with my passion and growing knowledge of these classical patterns. Since then we have further refined the designs and the technical aspects of production, including the wool quality, natural dye colors, shearing and washing. Now our vision of reviving these classical carpets can be shared with a broader audience.

In the Caucasus, V. Dadash is directing our weaving and dyeing operations in his workshop. Dadash comes from a family with a storied history of carpet dealing and making. In Central Anatolia, where many of these classic carpet designs were first created, the director of our workshop is I. Tekin, who also specializes in museum quality carpet restoration and repair.

We make each of our patterns in limited editions. Each carpet is carefully documented, including the provenance of the design, the wool and dyes used, and is signed, numbered, and dated by our master weavers. This documentation is bound into a special hardbound folio which is included with each carpet.

We use only handspun wool and natural dyestuffs in our carpets. Handspun wool is both stronger and has a more varied feel in the way it picks up dye than machine spun wool. These dyes have been proven over centuries, are stable and chromatically harmonious with each other, and mellow subtly with age. This subtle variation and aging is essential to the feel of life in the carpets.

We have also paid careful attention to the quality of the finishing and washing of the carpets. Our carpets are hand sheared, with a low pile, like the original carpets. This reveals the rug structure, as the individual knots can be seen clearly. It also gives the carpets a more sensuous and supple “handle”. It is not hard to imagine using these carpets as table or wall coverings, much as was depicted in Renaissance paintings, when they were viewed as objects too beautiful and valuable to have underfoot. Our carpets are gently hand washed with mild soap and water. The natural colors stay bright and the wool soft. We decided against using artificial aging techniques, which often shortens a rug’s useful life. We think this is how these carpets looked when they were first made. With normal use, they will naturally mellow and patina over time.



All the spinners, dyers, weavers and carpet finishers working on these carpets are adults working under safe and fair working conditions. The carpets are signed by the weavers, and they take great pride in their work.



Although we carry a small number of carpets in stock, many of them are bespoke (made to order). Bespoke production enables us to fine tune the details within a range of size and color, or more extensively tailor the patterns, colors and sizes for a special order or edition. This also allows us to produce unique carpets of the highest quality, while keeping costs reasonable.

Clients can also commission classical carpet designs, specifying sizes, colors and pattern details. After extensive study of the relevant antique carpet precedents a precise cartoon is prepared for the weavers. Fragments, or “vagierhs” are then woven, to test the balance of color and design.

For our inaugural line we have chosen three classic Anatolian designs, the 15th century “Lotto” and “Holbein” and the 16th century “Star Ushak” carpet, a design that originally developed out of these previous two, and was also influenced by Ottoman tile work and bookbinding. These designs are all linked to one another in their basic geometrical structure. They employed an endless repeat field with stars, crosses, and octagons, that deepened in complexity as this design line developed.

The Lotto pattern carpets are named after the Italian Renaissance painter Lorenzo Lotto (1489 - 1556), who depicted these carpets in at least two of his paintings, including "The Alms of Saint Anthony" (1542, San Giovanni e Paolo, Venice) and "Family Group" (1547, National Gallery, London). The earliest known appearance of a Lotto pattern carpet in a Western painting is in Sebastian del Piombo's "Portrait of Cardinal Bandinello Sauli" (1516). The prevalence and diffusion of this design throughout Europe is demonstrated by their appearance in more than 80 old master paintings. It has been estimated there are about 500 Lotto rugs still in existence in private and museum collections around the world. Their manufacture between the 15th and 18th centuries is variously attributed to the Ushak and Konya regions of Central Anatolia.

The Lotto pattern is characterized as an endless repeat arabesque, a yellow vine like structure on a red ground. The exact origins of this pattern are unknown, for some the pattern seems to have an anthropomorphic quality, which has been described as three "birds" with "eyes" and "wings", others have attributed the star and cross octagonal geometry with symbolic religious significance, both Christian and Islamic. These patterns are also thought to be related to earlier Seljuk carpet patterns, as well as to older tribal patterns. The carpet historian Charles Grant Ellis divided the field patterns of the Lotto carpets into three styles --the "Anatolian", the "Kilim" and the "Ornamented". The "Anatolian" field is considered to be both the earliest and the most refined of this pattern's development.

The major borders most often found on Lotto carpets include the "Kufic", "Cartouche" and "Cloud Band". The Kufic border is generally thought to be found in the earliest carpets.

Our "Sleeping Maid Lotto" is inspired by a 1656 painting by the Dutch Master Johannes Vermeer, which shows a carpet with a cartouche border. We have integrated this border with a classic red and yellow "Anatolian" field with light blue highlights. The dominant color of this carpet is a deep and earthy brick madder red, complemented by a vibrant golden euphorbia yellow.



The Small Pattern Holbein carpets are named after the German renaissance painter Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543) who depicted this design in his painting "George Gize" (1532, National Gallery, London). It has been estimated there are only seventy or so antique Small Pattern Holbein carpets still in existence, mostly in museums, with some in private collections. Like the Lotto pattern carpets, their manufacture between the 16th and 18th centuries is attributed to the Ushak region of Central Anatolia.

The Small Pattern Holbein, which is considered to be a precursor to the Lotto, is also characterized as an endless repeat, here with two interlocked larger "guls" (medallions) and one or two smaller ones. In what are considered the most highly developed designs, although the overall configuration of the guls repeats, the color details of each one varies, which gives the pattern a kind of vibrating quality.

The major borders most often found on the Small Pattern Holbein carpets include the variations on the "Kufic".

Our "Blue Baku Holbein" is based on the widely published design of a carpet that was once part of the Wher Collection in Switzerland. This carpet has a deep indigo field, and classic Kufic

border, to which we have added a mitered “corner solution”. The weft is dyed red, as is typical in the antique Ushak carpets. This carpet uses madder and cochineal, which gives the red a rich burgundy color. Although brand new, this rug has the shimmering feel that is found in the most exceptional antique classical carpets.

It is thought that the Star Ushak carpets were originally produced between the 16th and 18th centuries in the Ushak region of Central Anatolia. The earliest known Western painting that shows the carpet pattern is "The Ring of the Doge" by Paris Bordone (1534, The Accademia, Venice).

The endless repeat design is characterized by two medallion like figures, one an eight pointed star, the other a diamond, set in a lattice like field of flowers and leaves. The design has a transitional quality between the strict orthogonal geometry of the earliest known carpets and the more curvilinear quality of later designs. The pattern has been considered by some to be a precursor of the Medallion Ushak, by others it is considered a contemporary development.

The Star Ushak design has been linked to Ottoman tile and bookbinding designs. Some scholars have also associated these designs with Persian Safavid carpet patterns, however the direction of the influence is debated. The Ottoman bookbindings predate the Persian Safavid Empire. This might support an earlier date for the emergence of this design.

Our “Konya Star Ushak” is based on the design of a carpet in the Museum of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. The wool has a 20% mohair content, which strengthens the yarn and gives it a subtle sheen. The pile is hand sheared to a height of ~5/16", a little higher than one might find in the antique carpets. The size of this carpet seems to call for a more lush and deep pile. The colors are also a bit brighter, the medallions are a dark blue, rather than blue black, and the flowers of the field are a light greenish gray, giving the carpet an overall celebratory feel.



We are currently working on the detailed designs for our second series of carpets, which includes a Lotto with a Kufic border, a large scale blue ground Medallion Ushak with a Kufic border, and a bright yellow field “Large Pattern Holbein”. We are also in the early stages of working with Stefano Ionescu on an authenticated carpet line based on the incredibly beautiful and well preserved classical Ottoman rugs found in the Transylvanian churches. These are extensively documented in Ionescu's book--Antique Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania.

This journey I have taken with these carpets, over the last decade, had been tremendously rich and rewarding. I have worked with generous and talented people all over the world, from Anatolia, to the Caucasus, to Italy, as well as here in the United States, who have taught me so much about the genesis, the geometrical structure of these designs, and the process of their manufacture.

It is difficult to deny that these designs have a unique power. They are a particularly relevant testimony to the power of great art to span across seemingly unbridgeable cultural boundaries, between design and craft, and between East and West. We hope that by reviving these classic patterns, using time honored materials and methods, we can help contribute to the creation of

welcoming environments suitable for both quiet private contemplation and lively public interaction.

We are infinitely indebted to the anonymous designers and weavers who first created and refined these magical designs. As gifts to God, or as a material manifestation of the richness of the earth, in its animal and plant life, and the power of the human mind, these carpets will never be forgotten.

Christopher Robin Andrews, Designer & Principal of [Classical Carpets](#), 30 March 2007