

BOCA Museum of Art

# Afghan rugs

*the contemporary  
art of central asia*

May 3 - July 27, 2014





**TOP:** *Rug with Map of Afghanistan*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2006, 77 x 44 1/2 inches

**LEFT:** *War Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2012, 34 1/2 x 157 1/2 inches

## Afghanistan: A Timeline

### 1839-1842

1<sup>st</sup> Anglo-Afghan War

### 1878-1881

2<sup>nd</sup> Anglo-Afghan War

### 1893

The border between Afghanistan and British India (now modern Pakistan) is demarcated by the Durand Line

### 1919

3<sup>rd</sup> Anglo-Afghan War; Amanullah Khan asserts Afghan independence from British influence and becomes king

### 1929

Tajik fundamentalist Bachai Saqao ousts Amanullah, reigns from January to October; Nadir Shah becomes king

# Preface

*Afghan Rugs: The Contemporary Art of Central Asia* is an important international exhibition that brings to the United States, for the first time, one of the most distinct collections of Afghan war rugs in the world. The mostly women artists who wove the rugs abandoned their traditional nonfigurative styles to produce rich pictorial images that recount a broader story. In knotted rugs with maps, portraits of kings, khans, and military leaders, and in rugs with weapons, the weavers revolutionized an ancient craft.

Purchased throughout Central Asia and in Europe, the over 40 rugs in this collection were selected for their exceptional quality, rarity, and surprising content. They represent an encounter of timeless aesthetic tradition with the violent roiling reality of contemporary Central Asia.



Wardak Province, central Afghanistan. Image courtesy of Cultural Section of the Embassy of Afghanistan, Washington, D.C.

## 1933

After years of instability, Zahir Shah becomes king

## 1953

General Mohammed Daud, as prime minister, initiates reforms and accepts Soviet aid

## 1973

Daud overthrows the monarchy in a bloodless coup d'état

## 1978

April Revolution led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan results in the overthrow and death of Daud



# Afghan Rugs:

## The Contemporary Art of Central Asia

Afghan war rugs are fascinating on many levels, and although not much is known about their origins, the circumstances of their production, or even the identity of the artists, they offer an opportunity to learn about a largely unfamiliar world.

Located in the heart of Central Asia,<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan is an ancient land. For thousands of years, it has been a transit region and home to one of the most traveled highways—the famed Silk Road. A vast country with mountain ranges and desert areas, it covers over 250,000 square miles, making it larger than France and slightly smaller than the state of Texas.

Completely landlocked, Afghanistan borders six different countries: Pakistan to the south and east; Iran to the west; Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north and part of China to the east. At the crossroads of so many civilizations, Afghanistan has long lured travelers from around the world. It has been a nexus of ideas and trade between East and West for centuries. Powerful conquerors, from Alexander the Great to Genghis Khan, have fought



*Rug with Map of Afghanistan, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1994, 52 3/8 x 31 1/2 inches*

over the country, which gave rise to remarkable civilizations of varied peoples and cultures.

Most of us know Afghanistan as either the destination for hippie trips in the late 1960s and 70s, or as

## Afghanistan: A Timeline (continued)

### 1979

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent occupation props up the Afghan government

### 1980

Soviets place Babrak Kamal in power; the United States supports anti-Soviet mujahideen (soldiers of God)

### 1985

Mujahideen forces unite against Soviets; half of Afghan population is displaced by war

### 1986

Mohammed Najibullah takes over Kamal; US provides sophisticated weapons to mujahideen

a crucible of war. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were punctuated by a series of Anglo-Afghan Wars, with the British fighting to protect what they saw as their interests. These wars eventually led to independence from Great Britain in 1919. Afghanistan was thereafter governed by a homegrown monarch until 1973. Peace, however, did not follow as seen in the war rugs of Afghanistan.

The definition of war rugs is multifaceted. Notable factors are the multicultural tribal nature of the country, occupation by foreigners, early tourism, the entrepreneurial character of Afghans, their exposure to sophisticated military hardware, and the unending conflicts between warring factions, that caused an Afghan diaspora. A unique product of Afghanistan and its rich, albeit bellicose, history, war rugs—sold in Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i Sharif, and in the bazaars of Peshawar and Islamabad in neighboring Pakistan—celebrate for many Afghans success and independence over the Red Army. These rugs feature world maps, political portraits, cityscapes and a plethora of Soviet (then US) armaments and weapons—tanks, helicopters (such as the Hind M-21 and M-24s), and antiaircraft missile launchers. Identifiable Soviet

military hardware in rugs along with inscriptions, such as U.S.S.R., leaves no doubt to the identity of the occupiers. When the Soviets departed in 1989, Afghanistan had a communist government led by Mohammad Najibullah, who begins to figure in rugs from the late eighties. Even under the Taliban who are opposed to idolatry, weavers continued to produce pictorial rugs relating current events. With the involvement of the United States in the war, rug makers expanded their repertoire to include American military machines such as M-16s and F-16 fighter planes. This was followed, after September 11, 2001, by the addition of US currency, images of planes hitting the Twin Towers, and doves with olive branches uniting nations in more recent war rugs.

The tradition in Central Asia and the Middle East of weaving rugs dates back thousands of years. Created by knotting different pieces of colored wool to the warp threads of a loom, hand-woven Oriental rugs are an essential product of the area. They also follow the same general layout of a central field framed by a border. Both of these elements are, moreover, determined in advance of weaving once a loom is readied. Warp threads are the foundation of each rug, and are usually cotton

## 1988

Peace accords permit Red Army retreat

## 1989

Soviets withdraw; Najibullah faces resistance from mujahideen

## 1992

Mujahideen overthrow Najibullah government; civil war continues

## 1996

Taliban take over and install extremist Islamist government



Image courtesy of Cultural Section of the Embassy of Afghanistan, Washington, D.C.

but can also be of silk or even wool, the finest of which comes from the legendary Karakul sheep of Central Asia. The main producers of hand-woven rugs in Afghanistan are the Baluchi (Baloch), Hazara, Zakini, Taimani, and Turkoman (Turkmen) tribes. Many others have also contributed to the creation of both traditional and now modern rugs. While weaving is considered women's work, men and children are also involved in the process. The decision to weave a rug remains an economic one made by each family and supported by all members.

Though the materials are relatively inexpensive, it can take up to a year to produce a carpet, or large and complex rug.<sup>2</sup> Practiced by peasant communities and nomadic tribes, weaving is a professional craft inherited from generation to generation. Before weaving can start, a portable or large vertical loom is constructed, wool collected, cleaned, hand-spun, and dyed, and then a design is determined. New designs, if executed well, can fetch more at market than traditional patterns. This may have inspired the Baluchi of the Sistan Basin in western Afghanistan,

## Afghanistan: A Timeline (continued)

### 1998

US launches missiles against Osama bin Laden-training camps

### 1999

United Nations sanctions against Afghanistan; call for the extradition of Osama bin Laden

### 2001

Ahmad Shah Massoud of the Northern Alliance assassinated

### OCT. 2001

US-led intervention after terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C.

and across the Iranian border in Khorasan Province, to create some the earliest “modern” rugs, meaning rugs that are radically different from anything else produced.

## Why Afghanistan?

A rug renaissance in the 1960s, and a subsequent carpet boom in the 1970s, motivated many people, not previously involved in weaving, to work in the industry. Their ideas brought about changes and a new openness to the art of rug making. This, coupled with a long history of traders and invaders to the country, inspired some weavers to add novel motifs and then radically new images in the central panels, or fields of their rugs. Success also begets success. As noted by many rug buyers, as soon as there is interest in a specific style, the dealers at the bazaars are able to find more examples of that type. Artists and artisans are equally cognizant of the market for their wares, and they respond by producing what they understand their audiences desire. According to Kevin Sudeith, a New York war rug broker and expert, less than one percent of Afghan rugs have war motifs,<sup>3</sup> making war rugs a distinct phenomenon worthy of art historical consideration. In fact, contemporary curators were among the first to show

interest in war rugs and include them in exhibitions. Having been trained to focus on antique rugs and their established value, some dealers did not initially know what to make of the modern imagery in Afghan war rugs.

Although it is often stated that weavers began adding war motifs following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, there is a long tradition of pictorial rugs that predate the arrival of the Red Army. It is here in these image-based rugs that the first modern military vehicles appear. Some scholars found rugs with weapons “whose themes reasonably predate the Soviet occupation and the outbreak of war.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Soviet invasion became a convenient start date, or *terminus a quo*, for the appearance of war rugs. According to the Italian curator Enrico Mascelloni, who has studied war rugs in Afghanistan and throughout Central Asia, images of planes and/or weapons appeared earlier. The first war images were “confined to the rugs’ borders or arranged as small icons around a centerpiece image—often a world map, the portrait of a [tribal leader, or] khan (Amanullah, Zahir, Daud, Amin, Taraki) or a high ranking guerrilla (Massoud, Adbullah Haq) after an outbreak of hostilities. Weaponry was either absent, or secondary, and often practically

### DEC. 2001

Hamid Karzi heads government; US and NATO troops continue to fight Taliban

### 2004

Karzi elected president

### 2009

Karzi re-elected president

### 2013

Afghan forces take over military and security responsibilities from NATO



camouflaged by the concentration of other iconic designs. It was the modernity of their subjects that [has] guaranteed some cohesion with other 'armed' rugs."<sup>5</sup>

Historically, the *coup d'état* led by the former prime minister of Afghanistan, Mohammed Daud Khan, in 1973, was an important watershed moment for Afghanistan. It led to the abolition of monarchy and the formation of the Republic of Afghanistan. Attempts to rally greater nationalism and renewed efforts at modernization of the country followed. Afghans began to reflect on their collective past and emulate those who earlier had policies similar to the current and new leadership. With quasi-historical revisionism, the past continues to be used to help define the future. It was, for example, following Daud's coup that artists began weaving portraits of King Amanullah Khan (1892–1960) precisely because he is regarded as the first modern ruler of Afghanistan. In the exhibition, the portrait rugs of Amanullah from the 1980s are examples of this admiration of a past leader.

## Pictorial Rugs

At approximately the same time that Afghan artists created portrait rugs, they were also weaving maps and cityscapes into the central field of their rugs. The world maps and maps of Afghanistan are by nature abstract, though many include flags and some advertise the principal feature of each province. As noted by Kevin Sudeith, "The skies, roads, and cities of traditional landscape rugs provided a natural environment in which to insert the first war motifs."<sup>6</sup>



Portrait Rug (Amanullah Khan), knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Zurich (Switzerland), 1980s, 63 x 30 3/4 inches

The cities depicted in cityscape rugs are both real and imagined and include places around the world. One rug in the exhibition features the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul. This may seem odd until we consider that it was the world's first modern bridge between Europe and Asia when it was completed in 1973. Given its fame, a weaver could very well have seen a magazine or postcard image of this notable city with its newest engineering marvel. A postcard or brochure was also in all likelihood, the source for the city resembling a picturesque town in Germany with distinct Old World architecture. In their attempt to appeal to foreigners





Image courtesy of Cultural Section of the Embassy of Afghanistan, Washington, D.C.

and locals alike, weavers have also depicted urban centers in Afghanistan—Herat and Kabul—along with major monuments such as the Minaret of Jam, the Naghlu Dam, and Jama Masjid, or Great Mosque of Herat.

In rugs devoted to specific monuments, the representation of modern buildings and major civil engineering projects, such as a dam or bridge, come from photographs, propaganda posters, or postcards, as the weavers would not have actually traveled to any of these sites, let alone places outside of Afghanistan.

## War Rugs

In contrast to geographic and portrait rugs, what can be called classic war rugs (or armament rugs) showcase collections of weapons in lieu of a specific place or person. These rugs are again unique to Afghanistan and

northern Pakistan, where many of the Afghans were forced to flee following foreign invasions and civil war. War rugs never became part of the rug-making tradition in Iran, except in lands occupied by the Baluch, namely the Sistan Basin and areas of the Khorasan Province (Eastern Iran). Despite similar conditions, neither the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power, nor the Iran-Iraq conflict (1980–88) radically changed rug-making practices in Iran. The new genre of modern rugs, known collectively as war rugs, is associated with Afghanistan and Afghan weavers who produce the majority of them.

Some war rugs with weapons and armaments can be described as classical in their designs. In various examples, it is as if the tanks simply replaced the time-honored gul, an octagonal motif or flower found in Afghan and Turkoman rugs known

as Bukharas. War rugs can either feature a single weapon type, such as a battalion of tanks arranged in rows or columns, or they can boast a plethora of military machines. The categories are fluid and the varieties countless. A hybrid in the exhibition has a map framed by assault rifles making it both a map rug and a rug with weapons. As noted by Ariel Zeitlin Cooke in *Weavings of War, Fabrics of Memory*, some of the military equipment is rendered so accurately that those familiar with armaments can identify the make and model of a certain weapon.<sup>7</sup> It is also possible to date rugs loosely based on whether they feature Soviet or American military hardware. The most recognizable weapon in Afghan war rugs is the assault

rifle commonly referred to as a Kalashnikov, after its creator, Mikhail Kalashnikov. The machine gun he designed—the AK-47 (or Avtomat Kalashnikova model 1947)—has long been the weapon of choice not only of the Soviet army, which made it standard issue in 1949, but also of countless rebel groups and fighting forces across the globe. It quickly became both an indication of power and a symbol of modernity. This point, and the fact that millions of military assault weapons, including AK-56s made in China and the more advanced Kalikov AK-74, have been produced and used in fighting all over the world, is significant. For some scholars, the introduction of weapons as motifs in the Afghan rug-weaving tradition predates the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and is part of the radical modernization of the country.<sup>8</sup>



For weapons to assume a central role in Afghan society, there was certainly no need for a Soviet occupation and war. In the first instance, the long-standing martial traditions of the Pashtun (ethnic Afghans) guaranteed their social importance. Weapons were awarded upon puberty, and were a central decorative element with a powerful aesthetic charge for men and their homes; above all they ensured some autonomy not just in terms of foreign invaders, but also from excessive interferences by the state and neighboring tribal groups.<sup>9</sup>

War Rug with Naghlu Dam, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), late 1970s, 72 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 43 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

Like many Afghans, rug-makers across the country experienced the impact of the war. Even those from remote villages, who may not have seen fighting firsthand, were impacted. Roads were bombed and mined rendering them unusable. Images and news of war became constant on television networks like CNN and al-Jazeera. Nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes frequently witnessed over-land convoys of Soviet tanks and armed personnel carriers, along with attack and transport helicopters flying overhead. From 1979 to 1989, Russian control of the main roads and highways made them unsafe for traveling and impacted regular access to markets.

When it came to the making of rugs, weavers based their designs on a variety of sources. In addition to the semi-nomadic tribes keen observation of the world around them, for some Afghans, there has been both a long necessity for, and fascination with, military technology in the form of increasingly sophisticated arms. Local leaders, or those in neighboring villages are often armed meaning there is access to weapons. As noted by Ron O'Callaghan of the *Oriental Rug Review*, Afghan soldiers were often armed by weapons that came from those they defeated making the rifle not only war booty but "a sort of talisman."<sup>10</sup> Abandoned Soviets tanks dot many of the highways; there is always news of conflict, and the country has been rife with war images for decades. The later include any number of televised scenes, illustrations, and propaganda posters issued by the Soviets, Taliban, and Americans. In 2009, 90 percent of the population of Afghanistan was



War Rug, knotted wool, Pakistan refugee camp, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1998, 72 7/8 x 42 7/8 inches

still illiterate, so images, observations and verbal accounts of events play an important role within society.

When it comes to schools and education, there is a strong link between pedagogy and the reality of life in Afghanistan. While the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was in power, after the overthrow and death of Mohammed Daud Khan in 1978, textbooks designed to teach literacy had "the tank as a symbol of freedom for the people."<sup>11</sup> In many textbooks, tanks and guns are used as countable units of measure to teach arithmetic. It is also not uncommon to find a



question that asks one to consider the muzzle velocity of a Kalashnikov and the distance between a Russian combatant and a mujahid (one who struggles/freedom fight/soldier of God). In North America, we do not use missiles, tanks and antipersonnel mines to teach our children to count, but in Afghanistan they have, and they do, because war has so permeated society.

Today, Afghan refugees in northeastern Pakistan and in Iran are actually producing many of the Afghan rugs sold in Europe and North America. The arrival of the Soviets in 1979, followed by years of civil war, forced millions from their homes and villages, including hundreds of thousands of rug weavers. In addition to the displacement of huge sections of the population, methods of production and trade changed. Natural vegetable dyes have been reintroduced, and while synthetic dyes are still used, these are of much higher quality than the artificial colors popular in the late nineteenth century.

## Pop Imagery

With modernization comes the growth of a pop culture. In Afghanistan, the predominant culture has been war. The weapon of choice is still a Kalashnikov, and the strongest currency is often the American dollar. Influenced by mass media in the form of posters and US propaganda leaflets, artists were simply mimicking the mainstream when they started reproducing the most ubiquitous images after 9/11. Afghan weavers are simply responding creatively to the present situation while also holding a mirror up to the West, as



*War Rug with Map of Afghanistan*, knotted wool, Baghlan (Afghanistan), acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1998, 71 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 45 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

noted by Nigel Lendon, associate professor at the Australian National University.<sup>12</sup> By depicting the Twin Towers and US currency on prayer-sized or smaller rugs, weavers are making modern and iconic references in their work, which transcend traditional rug-making boundaries.

Whether produced in Afghanistan, Pakistan, or parts of Iran, Afghan war rugs reflect the country's recent history and, thus are, not only profound, they are contemporary in a way that traditional and antique style rugs are not. The novelty of their designs has made them attractive to curators, intellectuals, and collectors not afraid to embrace new directions in art. At the same time, war rugs are vernacular yet also like history paintings. They are the production of





*Twin Towers Rug*, knotted wool, Afghanistan after 2001, acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), 2004, 32 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches



*Portrait Rug (Prof. Buranuddin Rabbani)*, knotted wool, Herat (Afghanistan), acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1998, 34 1/4 x 18 inches

women artists, and of communities speaking globally not just locally. War rugs reflect Afghanistan's historic and modern place as a busy cultural crossroads. They reveal the observant and innovative nature of the people who produced them. The older these war rugs become the more they will echo not only a specific geo-political moment in the history of Afghanistan but perhaps, more importantly, the evolution of art by a progressive minority of artist weavers.

— Annemarie Sawkins, *Ph.D.*  
Curator

<sup>1</sup>Central Asia is east of the Caspian Sea, south of Russia, and west of China. It consists of the five former Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The region's southern reach includes Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan, and eastern Iran.

<sup>2</sup>By definition, the difference between a rug and a carpet is the size. Rugs measure forty square feet or less. Carpets are larger and typically created on vertical looms. Horizontal looms and handlooms, by contrast, can easily be taken apart and transported on the back of a pack animal. Nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes use these to produce a variety of rugs and smaller weavings.

<sup>3</sup>For information on war rugs and particularly their availability in the United States, visit [www.warrug.com](http://www.warrug.com).

<sup>4</sup>Enrico Mascelloni, *War Rugs: The Nightmare of Modernism* (Milan: Skira editore, 2009): 29.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Kevin Sudeith, *War Rugs, Volume One: Pictorial: Mosques, Monuments, Minarets & Modern Cities*. (Long Island City: Warrug, Inc., 2008): n.p.

<sup>7</sup>Ariel Zeitlin Cooke, "Common Treads: The Creation of War Textiles Around the World," in *Weavings of War, Fabrics of Memory* (Michigan State University, 2005): 5–6.

<sup>8</sup>For a more complete explanation of this idea and others see Enrico Mascelloni, *War Rugs: The Nightmare of Modernism*, (Milan: Skira editore, 2009).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid, 78.

<sup>10</sup>See <http://www.rugreview.com/stuff/afgwar.htm> for more on the specifics of weapons depicted in Afghan war rugs.

<sup>11</sup>Olivier Roy, *L'Afghanistan, Islam et modernité politique* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1985), 68.

<sup>12</sup>Mimi Kirk, "Rug-of-War," *Smithsonian.com*, February 4, 2008.

# WAR ICONS

Translated from the Italian by  
Claudia Pessarelli

The military effectiveness of the Kalashnikov assault rifle was questioned even when it debuted in 1947. However, no one ever questioned its iconic nature or romantic appeal. The guns popularity is arguably due to these more than its military achievements. Its international myth was established when it became the weapon of choice of the guerrillas fighting colonial and imperialist power in the 1950s and '60s. Its essential form, one straight and one curved element, fitting together perfectly, also contribute to its allure. While done in the name of mechanical efficiency, the architects of abstraction in modern art earlier established the marriage between such primary visual archetypes. Indeed, had they lived to see this invention,

Wassily Kandinsky, the Bauhaus group and avant-garde artists in general would have appreciated it. The Kalashnikov represents, in an object, the timeless ideals of earlier Suprematism and other Soviet avant-garde movements. At the same time the final users' appreciation is not surprising, because of the highly effective simplicity of the device and its firepower. Consequently, a picture of a man with his Kalashnikov becomes mythical since with it, he fights injustice. A symbol of rebellion since the 1950s, the Kalashnikov is simple to use, clean, disassemble, and sketch. Most importantly, its shape is more effective than its functionality. A memorable icon, it is capable of engraving itself into our visual memory. Although in the field of assault rifles it has been surpassed by many other more technological firearms, the Kalashnikov remains a symbol of rebellion, at least in Afghanistan.



*World Map Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1989, 37 1/2 x 62 1/4 inches

In Afghanistan, the Kalashnikov has been the main lightweight weapon of the anti-Soviet mujahideen, the militias that fought each other after the Soviets withdrawal, then the Taliban, who controlled the country from 1996 until 2001, and now fighting the Western coalition troops. Would it be a surprise that the Kalashnikov is the most reproduced weapon in Afghan war rugs? And still is despite its outdated functionality?

Indeed, if there is a weapon that substantially changed the results of the first phase of the Afghan Wars, it was the Stinger missile supplied by the Americans to the anti-Soviet guerrillas. This weapon, with its automatic search and destroy, can shoot down combat helicopters. Stinger missiles appear in some war rugs, usually along with other types of weapons. Despite its combat effectiveness, the Stinger missile is a marginal subject. The older Enfield rifle—more widely used than the Kalashnikov, in the early stages of the conflict—is equally rare. Tanks, combat helicopters and fighter-bombers are often reduced to their most basic form with only initials in Cyrillic to determine their origin. In many war rugs, words are also a mere visual element, often filling space with little meaning. It is not uncommon to find words that contain both Latin and Cyrillic characters and are indecipherable.

Like other forms of visual art, war rugs were born out of a distinct set of circumstances. Now, more than thirty-years of conflict have exponentially expanded the number of war rugs. Their continuous production has given them a certain



*Rug with Geisha*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1994, 75 1/4 x 44 1/2 inches

international fame. However, rugs with weapons preceded the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. They are part of a modernist propaganda (a weapon as an element of visual excellence in the modernization of a country). Through the late twentieth century, Afghanistan was considered indefinitely “medieval”. In many artifacts the most basic designs, such as bullets or tanks, appear to be a reinterpretation of traditional motifs such as the *boteh* (a droplet-shaped motif or paisley) in Persian rugs or the *guls*, (octagonal motifs), in those from Turkmenistan. Whoever wants to find “history-in-the-making” in war rugs, is likely to be confronted with multi-centennial traditions that determine the visual structure of the rug itself (and perhaps its meaning)





*War Rug with Peacocks*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1994, 57 1/2 x 33 1/2 inches



*War Rug with Military Base*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1994, 82 3/4 x 44 1/2 inches

more than the bombing in progress, or the proliferation of weapons. Some people even believe that they contain strategic coded messages of tactical battles to come. The irony is that the rug production is extremely slow and marketing uncertain in the age of real-time communication!

This exhibition presents works of artistic, as well as technical, excellence in a surprising variety of subjects and languages. The majority of the rugs belong to the early stages of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In a cultural landscape fragmented and disconnected by thirty years of butchery, the specificity of the ethnic areas and their respective languages has been devastated. Yet the people continue

to survive despite mass migrations and bombings, maybe even taking advantage of the multiculturalism in the “no man’s land” of refugee camps. All works on display are subject to the despotism of stylization, typical of the textile world and its technologies. Some rugs simulate naturalism while others look almost Cubist. You will see urban landscapes crossed by airplanes, world maps with flags of all countries, and portraits of important people.

In some of the rugs you may wonder where is the war component. It is the modernist character of these rugs that relates them to those with



military equipment. Very often, in older specimens, as in the rug that shows a dam on two levels, or in the portraits of King Amanullah, weapons are confined to the frame or in subordinate spaces. Later they become the subject of the rugs, having tiptoed into the rugs. It is important to note that these types are rare and often made by skilled weavers who reproduce with surprising creativity abnormal subjects in the textile world, such as faces and landscapes. A certain naturalist tendency has been tied to earlier figurative Persian and especially Baluchi rugs, since the shahs of the Qajar dynasty (in power in Iran from the late eighteenth century to World War I) appreciated the naturalism of nineteenth-century European art. This significantly influenced not only Persian painting, but also rug-making. The Qajari pictorial rugs manufactured by Baluchi weavers were produced in Afghanistan up to very recently when, more technically concise war rugs began to replace them. One can see the evolution of a scene of three geishas with musical instruments and a prince as weavers copy, replace, and simplify elements. Guns replace the guitars and other artifacts of war appear in different places. The geishas become mujahideen and the prince morphs into a surrendering Russian soldier.

Since the goal of the exhibition is to summarize the complexity of the history of war rugs, some artifacts are of modest quality but of extraordinary anthropological importance, such as, the dollar bill rug or the rug with an American aircraft carrier intercepting the airplanes aimed

at the Twin Towers in New York. We call this production of powerful iconic invention, “pop” because of its relationship to Pop art.

The war rugs, considered together, are not “pacifists” and, paradoxically, many of them speak of a beauty that may seem scandalous: the beauty of guns and even of cannons. However, it is worth mentioning that the traditional rug motif closest to a bullet is a stylized cypress tree or maybe a flower or *boteh*. Along with this, we should recall that the initial discovery of Afghanistan by western youth happened in the 1960s and 70s. From San Francisco to Milan, people shouted “put flowers in your guns.” We began by stating that the success of the Kalashnikov also lies in its abstract iconic beauty. As for other symbols abundant in many rugs, the Kalashnikov may attract the curiosity of another time and place. In that case, we can say the beauty of its form created one last victim: the effectiveness of its function.

— Enrico Mascelloni  
Curator

<sup>1</sup>For a better understanding of these and other theories, refer to *War Rugs: The Nightmare of Modernism*, Milan: Skira, 2010.

## Works in the collection

### Geographic Rugs

*World Map Rug*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, Acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1993, 76 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 113 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*World Map Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1989, 37 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 62 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Rug with Map of Afghanistan*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2006, 77 x 44 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*Rug with Map of Afghanistan*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Mazari-Sharif (Afghanistan), 2006, 81 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 55 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*Rug with Map of Afghanistan*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1994, 31 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 52 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*War Rug with Map of Afghanistan*, knotted wool, Baghlan (Afghanistan), acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1998, 71 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 45 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Rug with Map of Afghanistan*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan (dated 1989), acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2007, 72 x 39 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

### Cityscapes and Major Monuments

*Cityscape Rug*, knotted wool, Baluchistan (Eastern Iran or Southwestern Afghanistan), acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), late 1970s, 47 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 81 inches

*War Rug with Naghlu Dam*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), late 1970s, 72 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 43 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Cityscape Rug with Bridges over the Bosphorus*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Europe, mid-1980s, 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 60 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Cityscape Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Zurich (Switzerland), mid-1980s, 33 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 54 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*Cityscape Rug* (possibly New York), knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1994, 58 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 31 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*Cityscape Rug with Malabar Mosque, Victoria Street, Singapore*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1998, 36 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 57 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Rug with the Minaret of Jam*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1991, 72 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 50 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*Rug with the Minaret of Jam and Portraits (Ahmad Shah Massoud and Ismail Khan)*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), 2006, 53 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 32 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Abstract Cityscape Rug*, knotted wool, Herat or Kabul (Afghanistan), acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), 1998, 35 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 56 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*War Rug with Military Base*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1994, 82 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 44 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*Cityscape Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, Acquired in Zurich (Switzerland), 1990s, 50 x 78 inches

### Portrait Rugs

*Rug with Geisha*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan or Southeastern Iran (Sistan), acquired in Herat (Afghanistan), 1998 86 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 43 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Rug with Geisha*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1994, 75 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 44 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*Portrait Rug (Amanullah Khan)*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Zurich (Switzerland), 1980s, 63 x 30 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Portrait Rug (Amanullah Khan)*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1985, 53 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*Portrait Rug (Prof. Buranuddin Rabbanî)*, knotted wool, Herat (Afghanistan), acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1998, 34 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 18 inches

*Portrait Rug (Ahmad Shah Massoud)*, knotted wool, Afghanistan (dated 2000), acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), 2006, 57 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 34 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

## War Rugs

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2012, 34 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 157 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Herat (Afghanistan) 1993, 15 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 25 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan (Sistan), acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1985, 62 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 41 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), early 1990s, 73 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 44 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan) 1990, 73 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 40 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Quetta (Pakistan), 1994, 72 x 45 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Herat (Afghanistan), acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1996, 57 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 34 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*War Rug with Peacocks*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1994, 57 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 33 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*War Rug (bag)*, knotted wool, South-western Afghanistan, acquired in Herat (Afghanistan), 1993, 35 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Western Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2007, 76 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 41 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

## War Rugs from Refugee Camps

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Pakistan refugee camp, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2012, 42 x 47 inches

*War Rug with Map of Afghanistan*, knotted wool, Afghanistan or Pakistan refugee camp after 2001, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2002, 41 x 26 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Afghanistan or Pakistan refugee camp, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2000, 78 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 47 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Pakistan refugee camp, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 2004, 78 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 45 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*War Rug*, knotted wool, Pakistan refugee camp, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1998, 72 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 42 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

## War Rugs from Refugee Camps

*Hundred Dollar Bill Rug*, knotted wool, Afghanistan after 2001, acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), 2004, 42 x 16 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches

*Dollar Bill Rug*, knotted wool, Afghanistan after 2001, acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), 2004, 16 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 28 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches

*Twin Towers Rug*, knotted wool, Afghanistan after 2001, acquired in Kabul (Afghanistan), 2004, 32 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 22 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches



501 Plaza Real, Boca Raton, FL 33432

### **Museum Hours**

#### **Tuesday through Friday**

10:00 AM - 5:00 PM

#### **Saturday and Sunday**

12:00 PM - 5:00 PM

#### **First Wednesday of the month**

10:00 AM - 8:00 PM

**Galleries closed Monday  
and holidays**

### **Admission**

**Museum Members: FREE**

**Children (12 and under): FREE**

**Adults: \$8**

**Seniors (65 and older): \$6**

**Groups (15 or more): \$5**

**Students (with ID): \$5**

### **Group Tours**

The Museum is delighted to arrange reserved tours for adult groups and schools. Reservations must be made in advance. For school tours, call 561.392.2500, ext. 106. For adult tours, call ext. 208. All Museum exhibitions, event schedules, and pricing are subject to change.

*Afghan Rugs: The Contemporary Art of Central Asia*, curated by Enrico Mascelloni and Annemarie Sawkins, PhD.

**FRONT COVER:** *Portrait Rug (Amanullah Khan)*, knotted wool, Afghanistan, acquired in Peshawar (Pakistan), 1985, 53 1/4 x 33 1/2 inches, Private collection

**E-mail:** [info@bocamuseum.org](mailto:info@bocamuseum.org)  
**Phone:** 561.392.2500  
**Website:** [www.bocamuseum.org](http://www.bocamuseum.org)

[www.facebook.com/bocamuseum](http://www.facebook.com/bocamuseum)  
[www.twitter.com/bocamuseum](http://www.twitter.com/bocamuseum)  
[www.instagram.com/bocamuseum](http://www.instagram.com/bocamuseum)