

Title:

Weaving in the 19th and 20th Centuries & Chelaberd Rugs

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Summary:

Caucasian weaving of the last 180 years is a complicated affair. There is an extraordinary multiplicity of influences in the area; culture, ethnography, politics, religion, geography and climate have all influenced rug weaving in the region. In recent years, the fine quality of rugs has caused much study of weaving in this area and there is now a well-organized body of scholarship.

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Article Body:

Caucasian weaving of the last 180 years is a complicated affair. There is an extraordinary multiplicity of influences in the area; culture, ethnography, politics, religion, geography and climate have all influenced rug weaving in the region. In recent years, the fine quality of rugs has caused much study of weaving in this area and there is now a well-organized body of scholarship.

In general, the designs and colors of Caucasian rugs are not in themselves sufficient to determine the place of origin with absolute certainty. There are, of course, some particularly well-documented designs which have been traced to source, but they represent only a small part of the exceptionally wide range of designs found in Caucasian weavings. The one important factor in determining the regions from which specific carpets originate is the type of wool used, and the length of pile. Heavy wool rugs are good insulators and the sheep reared in the mountainous districts grow heavier, shaggier and have longer fleece than those reared in the lowland areas. The rugs woven in the mountain villages have a richer, longer and heavier pile, and their colors tend to be hotter. Thus the areas which produce long-piled rugs are Kazak, Gendje, Lesghi, and several varieties of Karabagh; medium piles are found on Talish, Lenkoran and Daghestan weavings, and fine low pile on Shirvan, Kuba and Baku rugs.

As to the proliferation of designs, there are some 350 different tribes in the area, speaking approximately 150 different dialects. The south-west, in the Armenia-kazak area, is peopled by Christian Armenians; in the south-east are Tartars of the Mongol descent, and Persians; to the north, the principal tribes

are the Shirvans, Dagestans, Chechens and Lesghis, and to the north-west are Cherkesses (Circassians).

There are, of course, cultural and ethnic overlaps in all these areas. To give some indication of the difficulty in ascribing particular designs to specific locations, the Russian scholar S. Zerminov, in his study *Azerbaijan Carpets*, gave the names of 123 villages in the southern and mid-Caucasus which produced carpets of distinctive design. For the whole of the Caucasus, we would probably have to multiply this figure by a factor of at least four. Many of the schematic animal motifs found in Caucasian weavings can be traced back centuries, and are probably of Scythian origin.

For convenience, it is possible to divide the Caucasus into ten weaving areas : Kazak, Karabagh, Gendje, Talish, Moghan, Shirvan, Baku, Kuba, Daghestan and Derbend. It should be noted, however, that the generic name Kazak is often applied to a wide variety of Caucasian rugs, which have not necessarily been woven in the Kazak district.

Chelaberd rugs are often referred to as Eagle Kazaks. Although the design of these rugs shows an affinity to Kazak rugs, structurally, they are undisputedly Karabagh. The thick yarn used by weavers in these two areas creates a superficial similarity to the weave patterns of the two types. The products of this area have one of the few distinctive Caucasian weaves, consisting of two weft threads after every two rows of knots. The Kazaks, on the other hand, all appear to have an irregular number of wefts, from two to four, after every row of knots.

Chelaberd rugs were made in the southeast Caucasus, bordering northern Persia. The Caucasus mountain range stretches from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea in the area of modern-day Azerbaijan and southern Russia, and it is in the villages of these mountains that some of the most highly collectible rugs originated.

The most collectable rugs and carpets from this area are those woven between 1800 and 1900. The late nineteenth century is the last hurrah for village and nomadic rugs. By the early twentieth century, they no longer used natural dyes, and the designs and weaving were much less appealing. Chelaberd rugs were predominantly made in traditional sizes such as 4' x 6' and 5' x 7'...runners of this size were seldom woven in this tribal village. As a result, Chelaberd runners are very desirable and highly sought out by collectors.

The best nineteenth-century Caucasian village rugs exhibit the inventiveness of the cottage-industry weavers who created stylized versions of traditional design elements and used local materials to their best advantage. During this time, the

use of natural dyes was still a practiced art, resulting in vivid colors. Design motifs such as sunburst medallions, dragons, and temple arches appear in many of the best village rugs.

The origin of the name "Eagle Kazak" has several explanations. The medallion design in the center of the carpet is referred to as an Eagle design. There is some resemblance between these medallions and the Russian double-headed eagle. The other (less accepted) theory comes from the definition of Chelaberd itself. Some claim that Chelaberd means Eagle in the local dialect, a blend of Armenian, Russian and Arabic.