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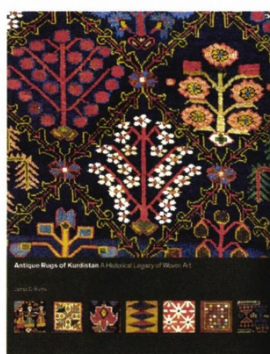


ISSUE 131 NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2003 | KURDISH RUGS – THE BURNS COLLECTION
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TIBETAN RUGS & MONGOL FELTS | AN EARLY KHAMSEH RUG AT THE TM

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The Kurdish Syndrome

Given the vast number of books available on tribal rugs and textiles from Anatolia to Tibet, it is surprising that so little has been written on Kurdish rugs, especially since they represent a bridge between a number of different weaving cultures. Thus **Alberto Levi** declares that *Antique Rugs of Kurdistan* by James D. Burns is long overdue, and should be regarded as just the first step of a journey into the complex history and culture of Kurdish woven art.



Antique Rugs of Kurdistan A Historical Legacy of Woven Art

James D. Burns

James D. Burns, London 2002
320pp., 100 colour plates & 45 b/w
illustrations, maps, appendix,
structure tables, notes, index
ISBN 1898406405
Hardbound \$265

Known to the oriental carpet world as a high-flying collector with a taste for the rare and the unusual, James D. Burns first gave us an idea of his approach to rug art in his 1987 monograph *The Caucasus: Traditions in Weaving*. In this he tackled many of the conventional attributions of Caucasian rugs and proposed a framework for dating them, succeeding admirably in steering a path between the imaginative theories of the so-called 'pre-academic' era and the highly conservative approach of later writers, who placed everything in the late 19th century.

To apply this approach to Kurdish rugs is a monumental task, especially since they often elude the sort of categorisation that works for most rug families. In *Antique Rugs of Kurdistan*, Burns has chosen as his main objective to represent the essential unity in diversity of Kurdish weavings. This he achieves by defining an 'imaginary' Kurdistan composed of five cardinal

points plus two exclaves in central Anatolia and Khorasan, a solution that enables him to group all the major Kurdish rug typologies, introducing some virtually unknown types and, in some cases, subverting established rug scholarship. (A minor criticism here: as some of his clusters are based on structural considerations, it would have been helpful to see close-up images of the backs of the rugs.)

I applaud Burns' account, even if I do not agree with all his attributions, since it provides solid ground for discussion and development as well as furthering our understanding about this little known family of carpets.

Beginning in the southernmost region, southern Kurdistan, we see grouped a number of long rugs and *kellehs* in the *mina khani* design as well as other infinite repeat floral patterns on a blue ground. We have always associated these rugs with the Plains of Varamin, located further northeast, or to Karaja, in the Heriz area of northwest Iran, since the single-welvet structure is characteristic of the latter. Burns however proposes attributing the entire blue-ground floral group to the environs of Hamadan, where this peculiar structure is also used, and in particular to the town of Kolya'i. Although no mention of welting is made, I assume that this was the basis for his attribution.

Moving northwest we enter central Kurdistan, the land of the Jaf, Diza'i and Herki tribes. The Jaf are mainly known for *khorjins* with a honeycomb arrangement of polychrome diamonds containing hooked lozenges, typically woven using

1. Long rug, southeast of Lake Van, northern Kurdistan, second half 18th century. 0.99 x 2.51m (3'3" x 8'3"). All rugs James D. Burns Collection, Seattle, Washington



All photographs Don Tuttle