



Sissi Farassat – Untitled (detail; courtesy the artist)

## Rug of War

### **Or, *Guns and Roses* – the war rugs of Afghanistan**

By Elnaz Bokharachi

Rug weaving amongst the Iranian peoples dates back thousands of years. Although the exact provenance is unknown, The Pazyryk Carpet, woven in the fourth century B.C., and excavated from the grave of a Scythian nobleman in the Altai Mountains of Siberia in 1949, is widely recognised as the earliest known pile-woven carpet. The Iranian peoples have long been amongst the pioneers of carpet weaving, and today, hand-woven rugs from the Persianate world are still renowned for their uniqueness in design, colour, size, and weave, with each culture having its own particular patterns and styles. The representation of Persian gardens, some of the most recurring and sophisticated designs in Persian carpets and rugs, celebrated for their combination of rich colours, singular border motifs, and floral patterns, are but one example. Striving to symbolise heaven on earth – paradise (derived from the Avestan *pairi-daeza*) – the Persian garden is depicted in the *chahar bagh* (lit. ‘four gardens’) style. Although numerous examples of such

carpets have been exhibited in museums around the world, one of the most famous, namely that of the Sassanian Emperor Khosrow I (r. 531 – 571 A.D.), described in detail by the Persian historian Tabari, did not survive the Arab conquest of Iran. That is not to say, though, that all carpets from the region deal with the divine; there are indeed some that portray much more worldly images.



The Pazyryk Carpet, currently housed in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia

Claire C. Carter, curator of the Scotsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, recently exhibited 41 rugs from Afghanistan featuring images of tanks, grenades, helicopters, and soldiers, amongst others, in a variety of colourful rugs differing in style and scale. Originally organised and curated by Enrico Mascelloni and Annemarie Sawkins, *Afghan War Rugs: The Modern Art of Central Asia* – previously on view at the Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum in Milwaukee and Florida’s Boca Raton Museum of Art – was a narration of the story of a people who did away with traditional patterns and motifs to instead unfold a story of violence and conflict.

Located at the centre of the famed Silk Road, Afghanistan has been a locus of trade for millennia. The tradition of rug weaving there, in the heart of Central Asia, has mainly

been practiced for economic reasons. The foundation of each rug are warp threads, usually made of cotton, silk, or wool. Many different peoples are involved in the creation of rugs in Afghanistan, but the primary producers have most often been Baluchs, Zakinis, Taimanis, Hazaras, and Turkmens, amongst whom weaving rugs and carpets has largely been a professional trade passed on from one generation to the next. The first step, before deciding on the design of a carpet, is to construct a large or portable loom. Next, weavers collect, clean, and dye wool, weave designs, and frame them in a border. Symmetrical patterns are a cornerstone of Afghan rug weaving, and are particularly emphasised in war rugs, where traditional elements are replaced by those pertaining to war.



The Persian poet Sa'di (far right) conversing with a friend in a scene from his *Golestan* (Rose Garden) in a 1427 miniature from Herat, Afghanistan (courtesy the Chester Beatty Library)

Various invasions in Afghanistan, beginning with the Soviet occupation of 1979, contributed to the creation of war rugs. The impact of the occupation on the lives of Afghans – even those far from the front lines – was inevitable. Commuting Soviet tanks and armed personnel carriers, along with helicopters flying overhead became a part of everyday Afghan life for nearly a decade. In 1996, seven years after the Soviets

withdrew, the Taliban took control in Afghanistan, and soon afterwards, the country was again invaded, this time by American and coalition forces. Such conflicts were well-reflected in the war rugs on display at the museum. According to the labels, where the rugs were weaved was not exactly clear. The Taliban's rise to power added to the numbers of the Afghan diaspora, which experienced a surge after the Soviet invasion; large numbers of Afghans were displaced, and many refugees – rug weavers included – migrated to nearby Iran and northeast Pakistan. The rugs on display in the museum were therefore made either in Afghanistan, or in Iranian and Pakistani refugee camps. Dates, as well, posed other questions. While acquisition dates were noted on the labels, the dates of the majority of those exhibited were not known.



L-R: a 1998 war rug from Baghlan showing a map of Afghanistan (acquired in Peshawar), a 1994 rug from western Afghanistan (also acquired in Peshawar), and a 2004 rug (acquired in Kabul)

*Afghan War Rugs* consisted of five sections. Geographic rugs depicting maps of Afghan provinces, neighbouring countries, and the world at large were amongst the first viewers saw. Entering the gallery rooms, one was greeted by a fairly large piece, *World Map Rug*, on low plinths, suggesting the function of carpets and rugs in Central Asian societies. The rug had two borders: the outside was filled with floral patterns, while the inside showed the flags of various countries. In Afghanistan, the use of the world map as a motif dates back to the 70s and 80s. The late Italian conceptual artist, Alighiero Boetti, once collaborated with Afghan weavers by bringing them world maps from Italy to serve as visual aids.

The second part of the exhibition featured ten rugs portraying cityscapes and major monuments, such as the Minaret of Djam and the Naghlu Dam, as well as foreign cities and engineering projects, the latter two having arguably been sourced from postcards and photographs, as the weavers could not have travelled outside their countries or camps. In spite of the inclusion of less-overt military elements in this section, helicopters and tanks were present on two of the rugs. On the Naghlu Dam rug, for example, throngs of land and air vehicles encircled the dam, reminding audiences that military presence in

Afghanistan has become a part of the country's landscape.



The Naghlu Dam in a war rug from the late 1970s (acquired in Kabul)

Hinting at an awareness of Western pop art by showing a hundred-dollar bill, as well as portrait rugs featuring heroic political leaders such as the sovereign Amanullah Khan (who ruled Afghanistan between 1919 and 1929 after gaining independence from the British) comprised another part of the show. The collective identity of Afghans and their appreciation of the past were best reflected in the portraits. In fact, such rugs became so popular that weavers continued to produce them even after the Taliban – whose members oppose pictorial representation – came to power. The final section of the exhibition was dedicated solely to war rugs featuring advanced tanks and assault rifles. There, elements of war were conspicuous in most of the rugs; however, there was one particular rug that challenged audiences and required further investigation. At first glance, *War Rug with Helicopters* did not reveal any sign of war; on closer inspection, however, one could see

grenades and helicopters, which have seemingly become proverbial elements in Afghan rug weaving.

The walls of the gallery rooms were painted either white or blue, which was not done for purely aesthetic reasons. Blue is dominant in traditional Afghan architecture (e.g. from the Timurid era), and also brings to mind the colour of the *burqa*, making reference to the fact that the majority of the weavers of the rugs on display were women. In a way, the rugs featured in *Afghan War Rugs* could have been seen as social commentaries by Afghan women narrating history through their art, connecting tradition with a brutal history.



A 1985 rug depicting Amanullah Khan (acquired in Peshawar)

The reflection of leaders, wars, and the 1972 coup d'état by Mohammed Daud Khan

could be seen in the war rugs. Although war motifs have also been used in rugs from Sistan and Khorasan in Iran, they have never become dominant design elements amongst Iranian weavers in the same way as in Afghanistan. Neighbouring Afghanistan in the east, Iran's reactions to its conflicts have been somewhat different. Throughout history, the Iranian expression of objection has been largely echoed through poetry and literature, murals, music, and visual art. The paradox of depicting such bitter subjects as war through a medium that has been long considered a sublime art in Iranian culture has been confronted in the work of contemporary Iranian artists such as Sissi Farassat. Residing in Austria, Farassat hand-stiches hundreds of Swarovski crystals onto canvases to depict helicopters and other vehicles of war. The dazzling appearance of Farassat's 'rugs' contradicts their intense inspiration, and serves as an example of Iranian visual art expressing objection. Similar to Afghan weavers and their clashing use of colourful tanks and flower-shaped grenades, Farassat draws attention to historical trauma and veils the horror of war, instead pointing to the ornamental aesthetic of her heritage and the Iranian carpet weaving tradition. Unlike with Farassat's works, however, the presence of childlike patterns in the Afghan war rugs may serve as a testament to the existence of child labour. In the industry, children are often exploited through forced labour due to their nimble fingers and superior eyesight.



Sissi Farassat – Kriegsteppich (courtesy Kashya Hildebrand)

*Afghan War Rugs* was enlightening and challenging, raising questions and encouraging audiences to delve deeper into particular incidents in modern Afghan history. Although war rugs are well-understood within their historical context, there is still a dispute between scholars in the art historical construction of this art form. The difficulty of tracing these rugs from the market back to their weavers, the purpose of these designs, and the targeted consumers constitute the most important parts of this debate. It is still unclear whether this art form is intended primarily for the consumption of foreigners, or not, but regardless, war rugs remain a significant form of art and expression in Afghanistan.