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Beauty and Horror

Identity and Conflict in the War Carpets of Afghanistan

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The map of Afghanistan appeared as an emblem of conflicting identities in the period that began with the Soviet occupation of 1979–89. The various uses of this emblem provides us with a focus for the analysis of the 'war carpet', and a window into the complexity of its many categories and styles.

Since the late 1970s, the social and political context of enforced modernisation through revolution, warfare and invasion, and the consequent social translocations to the East and West, have seen growing instances of the use of the map of this much-contested and fragmented nation-state, which becomes evident in all visual media from postage stamps to propaganda posters, to murals, banners and carpets. To trace the usage of the map of Afghanistan provides a visual means by which the political and historical narratives have been promoted, recorded and enacted by the various political players in this scenario.

Throughout the decades of political turmoil in this part of the world, and the various attempts at reconstructing and reunifying Afghanistan in particular since the late 1970s, the motif of the map of Afghanistan has commonly been used as a framing device through which multiple political positions, contexts and events are represented within the visual culture. Of interest to this study is that these forms and devices cross over into the production of war carpets almost immediately following the Soviet invasion.

The war carpet is the genre of carpets and rugs produced in Afghanistan since the early 1980s by nomadic, town- and city-dwelling Afghans, and later in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. Ethnically, these people have been loosely identified by the trade as 'Baluch' people, but effectively the many variations on war carpets were made by almost every ethnic grouping within this complex country, and are more accurately identified by their makers' place of origin when that is known. The realities of such attribution (following Spooner) is that the origins of carpets are systematically obscured (or invented), and meaning and interpretation mystified, by the trade, which is intent on protecting its competitive commercial interests, and/or obscuring its lack of specific knowledge.[1]

This particular subset of the war carpet tradition (that is, the use of the map motif) also cross-references a number of other questions that are common to the genre—questions addressing the political discourse in visual media, the assertion of identity, and the effects of modernity, notwithstanding the problems of the absent author and the erasure of most of the evidence of makers or origins.

In this paper I will summarise a historical account of the usage of the map as a motif, and tell of its integration into carpet designs and its use in other media. In the process, I will address the nature of innovation which becomes evident in this case study of the war carpet genre, through interactions between the tendencies towards figuration and abstraction, and relative to an account of the specifics of the process of production of this kind of textile.[2] In conclusion, I will seek to develop an application of *the emblem* as an interpretative frame through which the integration of image, motif and text are given their cross-cultural narrative potential.

On 9 September 2007, two weeks before I arrived in Kabul, I saw an incident broadcast on al-Jazeera on Iranian television.[3] It showed the disruption of the Ahmad Shah Massoud memorial ceremony at the Ghazi Stadium, which was first reported as an assassination attempt. Ahmad Shah Massoud was the leader of the Northern Alliance, and his assassination two days before the events of 11 September is attributed to al-Qaeda, acting in support of the Taliban regime to destabilise northern Afghanistan and take out a charismatic leader who was widely tipped to become the leader of a post-Taliban state. As I watched the broadcast, both the commemorative event and the president's speech were interrupted by the sound of gunfire, and the president's bodyguards ushered him off the stage for his own safety. Apparently the gunfire was a crowd control measure as people surged to get in, but, as the video coverage revealed, the event broke up in disarray.

What was of particular interest to me in the video account was the ritualistic unveiling of the billboard image as it revealed a montaged portrait of Massoud with the dove of peace, a commemorative poem in Dari, and the map of Afghanistan. The poem speaks about the loss of yet another charismatic figure in the political spectrum of Afghanistan. While its revelatory mode of exposure indicates the veneration still accorded to Massoud, what captured my attention was the motif of the map, embedded in its contemporary graphic style.

The map of Afghanistan is itself an image of the modern era; that is, when Afghanistan was a kingdom, there was no need for such symbols of national unity—the figure of the king himself served that purpose.[4] Following the Saur socialist revolution of 1978, and the Soviet invasion twenty months later, the political currency of this symbol of nationhood has served many causes.

For example, shortly after the events of 11 September 2001, small-scale carpets (or rather, mats) appeared which depicted the events of that day, and the subsequent retributions against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, in a contemporary montage style. These mats were mass-reproduced, and rapidly found their way into the bazaars and onto the internet. Shortly afterwards, in 2002, a mat with the headline motto 'War against Terror' appeared, with the map as the central motif, along with the armaments of the US-led forces and inscriptions aimed to appeal to the new influx of 'tourists', such as 'Long live US soldiers' and 'Afghans liberated from terrorists'. One of these mats quickly appeared on the internet market with the claim that 100 had been commissioned by General Tommy Franks, the leader of the US forces, as commemorative gifts.

In many such contemporary carpets, the montaged visual structure is entirely consistent with the way in which the contemporary Massoud billboard was designed, exemplified by the ubiquitous 11 September mat where the map of Afghanistan is inserted behind the all-too-familiar image of aircraft smashing into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. In the middle foreground is a motif derived from a US PsyOps (Psychological Operations) propaganda leaflet, showing the flags of the United States and Afghanistan linked by a white dove. In the lower foreground is an aircraft carrier and other elements which relate to the subsequent intervention by US-led forces. These mats are still being mass-reproduced for the non-existent tourists of Chicken Street, in Kabul, and contemporary war carpets are prime examples of the dissemination of 'tourist art': Chicken Street in 2007 was a rather bleak remnant of a once-vibrant marketplace.

Another common mass-reproduced image in small-scale mats produced for the tourist-oriented end of the market is one which graphically represents the defeat of the forces of the USSR in 1989 and (literally) their return home on roads to the north of Afghanistan. In an emblematic mode, these 'victory' rugs make use of the map as the central motif, together with armaments and other secondary motifs, with accompanying texts in Dari and/or English. For example, variations on texts reading 'Exit of the Soviet Forces from Afghanistan in 1367 (1989)' and 'Made in (by) Afghan refugee (camp)' are commonly found, together with other sometimes scrambled texts and placenames in various languages. Millions of Afghan refugees took shelter in refugee camps across the border in Pakistan, and it is from these locations that some of the most overtly propagandistic carpets derive.

In the 1990s, the two Afghan presidents installed by the Soviet invaders, Babrak Karmal and (subsequently) Mohammad Najibullah, were commonly represented as puppets held by a giant Soviet hand surmounted by the hammer and sickle, hanging over the topographical representation of the map of the country (see figure 1). Modern armaments reinforce the manipulative influence of the north, while the puppet dictator is the target for the various mujaheddin groups scattered across the map. Whereas the regions to the north of Afghanistan are filled with helicopters, tanks and bombs, in Baluchistan, to the south, we find representations of an idealised nomadic lifestyle, in a before-and-after characterisation of the historical circumstances most audiences would recognise. A characteristic of what is referred to as the 'Peshawar style' is that the once-decorative borders of the carpet are now replaced by lines of bombs …

Peshawar was the site of most of the production of anti-Soviet propaganda: posters and other print media stylistically consistent with these carpets were produced by a group signing themselves as the Internal Islamic Fronts of Afghanistan. This group is said to have had its origins in the Kabul Art Academy, the staff of which evacuated en masse to Peshawar in the early 1980s.[5]

Propaganda images produced by this group commonly featured the motif of the map. In one notable example is the literal representation of the

Figure 1   Unknown artist
Peshawar-style carpet, late 1980s or early 1990s
157 × 101 cm
knotted wool, wool on cotton warp
private collection, Canberra
© Photograph Nigel Lendon
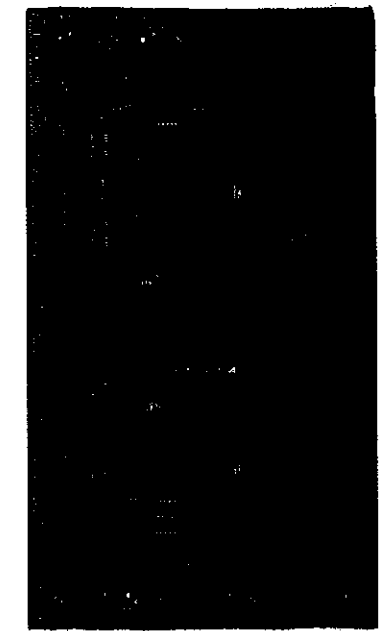The carpet depicts President Babrak Karmal as a Soviet puppet.

Figure 2   Unknown artist
Carpet, late 1980s or early 1990s
212 × 117 cm
knotted wool, wool on woollen warp
Collection of Josephine Jasperse, Groningen
© Photograph René Post
The central medallion depicts the map of Afghanistan.

map as a body, gushing blood from a wound inflicted by the hammer-and-sickle-clad figure of Babrak, who bayonets it with an expression of evil intent. Thus, by the mid 1980s, as a symbol of the nation-state, the map itself can be represented as a unified yet vulnerable figure. In other examples, we find the origin of the motif of a Soviet hand (sometimes labelled 'Gorbachev') which manipulates the narrative of the subject matter of the image.

When translated into textile media, such images raise the question of intention: for which audience are such carpets made? Whether they are made for external or internal audiences, or both, clearly they are simultaneously concerned with historical consciousness, political process and propagandistic intervention. In the sense that they are made for internal audiences, one could assume that they are effective as a celebratory mode of political parody—even in circumstances where different levels of visual literacy might apply. In addition, the translation from medium to medium suggests a culturally specific effect when the insertion of

innovative and disruptive subject matter into traditional forms has potentially disturbing and unsettling consequences, as evidenced by the uneasiness expressed by carpet dealers when faced by such disquieting artefacts.[6]

The multiple categories of the war carpet tradition are characterised by the intersection of both literal and emblematic imagery, with its decorative and aniconic (see below) antecedents. The example provided by the carpet in figure 2 evokes traditional carpet structures, with pictorial/topographic references such as the linear (road) form which meanders from right to left and back again as it moves from the bottom to the top of the image. The image is structured symmetrically around a horizontal mid-line, with the exception of the central medallion, which frames a tank with the word 'Kabul' written in Dari. On closer examination, we discover that the medallion is in fact a highly abstracted map figure, identifiable as such, but mirror-reversed and made recognisable by the asymmetrical element which is the Palmir Valley, the panhandle land bridge to China, plus surrounding placenames, which are highly degraded and difficult to read.

Faced with such growing iconographic complexity, another way of interrogating the genre is

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to look at the question of figure and ground, and to ask how form and space operate within the range of images we have been seeing. Traditionally, the design of the constituent forms of a carpet do not prioritise spatial relationships in the (Western) pictorial sense, but rather a structural relationship which derives from the process and order of its construction. The antecedents for these works are made from the bottom up, line by line, with complex symmetrical structures holding the image together and determining its overall schema. Islamic art is famous for its cosmic abstract geometries, the source of Oleg Grabar's term 'aniconism', where the doctrinal exclusion of representation was most recently translated into iconoclastic dogma by the Taliban fundamentalists.[7]

However, in instances such as the carpets under discussion, the multiple modes of narrative representation are hybridised and inserted into imported spatial schema: vertical planar, pictorialist and topographical spaces, plus the introduction of other alien conventions, such as instances of isometric perspective and montaged modern emblems, all integrated with non-figurative patterning.

To further complicate the way we read a war carpet, figuration and the representation of other living things abound, revealing the breadth of interpretation of ancient creeds, and the distinctions made in contemporary life between sacred and secular spaces in everyday life. In *The Formation of Islamic Art*, Oleg Grabar references

a considerable body of authentic information about the presence of beautiful objects with figures—mostly textiles and metalwork—in the Prophet's immediate surroundings. Explanations had to be provided, and thus grew a whole additional body of Traditions that sought to show there were variations in the ways in which images could be used. Permissable in hallways, floors, or baths, [such images] were forbidden elsewhere.[8]

Add to this growing complexity the question of the viewer's spatial orientation, or rather (dis)orientation in the way these images are addressed. While pictorial carpets such as these have a unique form which requires engaging with the pictorial effects of simultaneity (that is, the multiple forms and spatial devices which provide different points of access), they are also a particularly mobile form of imagery. Thus, the outside viewer must learn the necessity of engaging with the orientation of the image in space, through its utility, either as a carpet on the floor (particularly when used as a prayer rug) or as a treasured artefact hanging on the wall, or rolled and transported like nomadic furniture

Figure 3   Unknown artist (Sarkilimdar or Qal-i-Naw region)
Carpet, c. 1984
160 × 62 cm
knotted wool, wool on woollen warp
Collection of Luca Brancati, Turin
© Photograph Luca Brancati
The carpet depicts a landscape with conflict narrative, plus two maps of Afghanistan in the upper register.

on the move. To engage with such novel aspects of a visual artefact is a trip into new territory for the outside viewer, and requires some unfamiliar tools of interpretation.

Close to the beginning of the war carpet tradition (c. 1984), we find an example which includes all of the above possibilities (see figure 3), including the motif of the map, here reproduced twice and floating in the sky above a conflict narrative. This instance reveals how the motif of the map works as an emblem, yet with different potentiality for both internal and external audiences. At first the two maps look strangely abstracted until the

viewer realises they are mirror-reversed, which is confirmed when the carpet is turned over, whereupon the emblem becomes legible. At this point, the viewer discovers that one of the maps includes the word 'Kabul' (reversed when viewed from the front) in English text, which signals the expectation of an external audience. Viewed as an 'emblem', as both image and text, for an outside viewer it demands a certain expectation of visual literacy—so why is the emblem of the map here mirror-reversed? The answer to this apparent riddle lies in the process of reproduction of the carpets, where a second or subsequent carpet is reproduced by reading the back of the original, where the pixellated 'cartoon' of the original design is more legible, but reversed.

In relation to the original audience—that is, the makers of the carpet—this raises the question of political literacy, visual literacy and the role ambiguity plays in reading the meaning of an image.[9] Despite the difficulties an outside viewer may have with such conventions, it is possible to read such mirroring as a powerful metaphor: where such figures can be seen and understood from both sides (literally or metaphorically) without needing to be 'read' as a legible text.

In conclusion, the genre we call war carpets demonstrates a capacity to hybridise and reconcile antagonistic traditions in new forms of visual representation. The capacity of a visual culture such as this to produce new forms, by which the experience of conflict is represented, seems particularly germane to our understanding of this specific cultural context.

A crucial factor in understanding this context is that it was not only the military apparatus of the Soviets and others which disrupted and modernised these peoples' lives; it was also the cultural invasion, via the various visual representations of modernity, that enabled these new hybrid modes to emerge.

But what is their motivation? Was this mere economic opportunism or was it a mode of self-expression, which we may now interpret as social history? Neither, or both, is possible. Carpets have always been made for sale to the outside world. However, there are too many categories of war rugs from too many regions for this development to be motivated solely by economic opportunism. In addition, there are too many instances of separate insertions of individual narratives (notwithstanding the characteristics of collective agency which apply to their production) for us to doubt the authenticity of their motivation to produce them as a form of art. For example, one carpet includes an epigram written in Dari, the common language, which reads 'Life without art is death'. Another script (also in

a war carpet), praying for the good health of the future owners of the carpet, concludes with the maker's name and the inscription 'My wish is on my loom'.

Evidence of historical sequences in other subsets of this genre suggests that both image evolution and progressive abstraction are processes that are intrinsic to this medium and the visual culture from which it derives. Thus, I argue, individual makers have the capacity to evolve their traditions towards representation, or towards abstraction. In this usage, both options are the result of the particular indigenous characteristic which enables the makers to work against the mere repetition of aniconic traditions, or against the merely manual reproduction of patterns, in the realisation of their intentions, with the capacity to invent the forms to reflect their experience of modernity.

However, I do not propose that this potential relates to the question of abstraction as we might understand it in the West; that is, the process of abstraction employed in this instance is neither a perceptual nor a conceptual distancing of the self from reality—and neither is it a distancing from the naturalistic representation of a subject. In this medium, rather, it is the specific processes of production and reproduction—the consequence of the nature of carpet forms and their pictorial structures—that enables their makers to progressively evolve their forms from representation to abstraction, or vice versa.[10]

And thus, in this instance, the resultant forms have the capacity to be read as a multivalent figure—for one audience, a motif may be a literal representation of the map of Afghanistan; for another, a non-representational figure, or both—as evidenced by the incidence of inverted emblems. Neither exclusively figurative nor symbolic, such representations allow meaning to be rendered ambiguously—as neither literal in a semiotic sense of sign plus text, nor as a naturalistic representation. Yet even within the character of the medium, which is at once digital and geometrical, with intrinsic tendencies towards symmetry and patterning, naturalism and abstraction may be seen to coexist.

However, the articulation of such forms may or may not be easily recognisable for one or other of their many audiences as they find their way to the West. Hence our need for a third term to describe this particular effect of multivalent reading, which admits the capacity of different audiences to see different meanings in such imagery.

In these carpets I propose a new application of *the emblematic* as a symbolic code which encompasses both figuration and abstraction, with

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A crucial factor in understanding this context is that it was not only the military apparatus of the Soviets and others which disrupted and modernised these peoples' lives; it was also the cultural invasion, via the various visual representations of modernity, that enabled these new hybrid modes to emerge.

But what is their motivation? Was this mere economic opportunism or was it a mode of self-expression, which we may now interpret as social history? Neither, or both, is possible. Carpets have always been made for sale to the outside world. However, there are too many categories of war rugs from too many regions for this development to be motivated solely by economic opportunism. In addition, there are too many instances of separate insertions of individual narratives (notwithstanding the characteristics of collective agency which apply to their production) for us to doubt the authenticity of their motivation to produce them as a form of art. For example, one carpet includes an epigram written in Dari, the common language, which reads 'Life without art is death'. Another script (also in

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the capacity to accommodate both representation and aniconism, as well as the integration of image and text.[11] *The emblem* is primarily an artefact of Renaissance and post-Renaissance art historical studies, with few instances of applications to the field of contemporary art or cross-cultural studies. This usage admits a cultural polysemy, the possibility that different audiences see such emblems differently, with different levels of visual and verbal literacy, especially when it comes to the question of representation.

As evidenced in the examples I have discussed, the application of the emblem provides a conceptual frame with the capacity to reconcile (say) the extremes of propaganda and allegory (including the use of text) with the antecedent traditions of aniconism and iconophobia—while still referencing the historical experience and creative motivation of the makers, living and producing in the contemporary moment.

In both their relative and their culturally specific modes of abstraction, such emblematic representations may be both evocative and affective. An emblem of a map may evoke a sense of identity, optimism and the promise of social and historical continuity. Or an emblem of a tank may evoke memory, fear and horror. Yet, remarkably, each response may coexist within the one pictorial field. Thus, the very fact of the existence of such works demonstrates an affirmation of survival and continuity—of human agency in the face of circumstances that are truly horrific.

NOTES

1   Brian Spooner, 'Weavers and Dealers: The Authenticity of an Oriental Carpet', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.

2   See the later discussion for our use of 'abstraction'. 'Progressive abstraction' is a term explored by Oleg Grabar in his discussion of architecture and decorative arts, which is particularly relevant to discussions of carpet-making; see Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1987, p. 209.

3   YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQp1nGufeJk, viewed September 2008.

4   A minor sub-category of the war rugs genre takes the portrait of the king as its primary motif.

5   See Anthony Hyman, 'Propaganda Posters of the Afghan Resistance', in *Central Asian Survey*, Incidental Papers Series No. 3, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985; Jurgen W Frembgen & Hans Werrner Mohm, *Lebensbaum und Kalaschnikow: Kreig und Freiden im Spiegel afghanischer Bildteppiche*, Blieskastel, 2000; and Martha Vogel, *Roter Teufel—machtiger mugahid: Widerstandsbilder im sowjetisch-afghanischen Krieg 1979–89*, Wein, 2008.

6   Carpet dealers commonly react to war carpets dismissively, either motivated by overt dislike or insecurity: 'They are funny' is a common response. Anecdotal evidence shows that when this genre first appeared in shipments to a major carpet importer in Sydney, the importer's first reaction was to dispose of them as quickly as possible.

7   Grabar, p. 209.

8   ibid., p. 83.

9   This is complicated by the insertion of placenames in both English and Dari, which suggests it is people like us whom the image is addressing.

10   Here we concentrate on progressive abstraction as an intentional design process, rather than as a process of image decay caused by the progressive decay of quality of production and image detail as a result of economic and other pressures experienced by makers.

11   Emblemists argue over the limits of the term, defined conventionally by the presence of three elements: motto, image and epigram. Ronald Paulson, *Emblem and Expression: Meaning in English Art of the Eighteenth Century*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1975, p. 14, defines the emblem as

a visual-verbal art form derived from Alciati's *Emblemata* (1531) ... In the emblem the meaning emerges only through an interplay of a title, a motto, and a visual image, to which has often been added a prose commentary or verbalisation of all three. If there is a text prior to the emblem, it is known only to the artist, and the reader's duty is to reconstruct it by inference. In other words, the emblem is not merely illustrating a device (motto), a known adage, or a apothegm; it may use one or more of these topoi as its raw material, both visual and verbal, in order to produce a total image that is more than the sum of its parts, that is independent, problematical, to be deciphered.

See also Michael Bath, *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture*, Longman, London and New York, 1994, pp. 4–10. However, we would argue that if the term is applied cross-culturally, in circumstances where visual and verbal literacy cannot be assumed, where texts are minor elements, or absent, or scrambled, they may be replaced by passages which either separately or in conjunction relay their narrative content. Equally, semiology would argue that 'image' and 'text' are interchangeable in the pursuit of the function of the sign; see Mieke Bal & Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 73, no. 2, June 1991, pp. 174–208.

Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence

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