

# NOMADS NEWS

SUMMER 2020

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Opening times: Tues-Sat 10-5, Sun 12-4

## Thank you!

On the 17th March, as the gates of lockdown banged shut, we received a wonderful email from two customers wishing us well. It was the first of very many messages of encouragement. We were really touched and energised by everyone's support which helped to carry us through those months. We will not forget this or the fact that many, many others are in a far more difficult plight. It is fortunate that there's plenty of space for social distancing at The Nomads Tent, for those who would like to visit. We've provided sanitiser around the shop and masks for those who don't have one. Some people have commented on the fact that we seem to be brimming over with goods and this includes a 'Clearance Room' with some very good bargains.



## Website

During lockdown we put a lot of stock on to the website which was welcomed by many customers old and new. Besides over 250 rugs and kilims, many of which are offered at low prices and all including carriage, there is furniture, textiles, tribal artefacts and of course the ever useful moth traps and spray.

## Events & Plans

The main Fringe may have been cancelled but we're thrilled to announce that we're still going ahead with a superb exhibition of quilting art which is being set up as I write:

### *Nomadic Inspirations - a quilting journey*

Pat Archibald, quilting artist and teacher brings the work of her students, and her own work, to our exhibition room for the whole of August. Some of these works and Pat's quilter's sewing kits will be for sale. There'll be talks (for limited numbers of well spaced out groups), an online virtual exhibition and videos.

In November Basia Mindewicz will give an Icon making workshop. We may host other talks, exhibitions and music. As the covid fog lifts, these will be added to our web diary.



# A Treasure in Transcaucasia

Rufus Reade

In June 2019, a group of 9 of us were lucky enough to travel from Baku on the Caspian Sea to Batumi on the Black Sea, crossing the borders between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia by overnight train. As the organiser, it was a little hair-raising since the train companies involved only issued their tickets 10 days before the particular train journey. But we were blessed by whatever gods had looked after Jason and the Argonauts when they had also visited this extraordinarily beautiful part of the world!

When we were in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, we drove out to Etchmiadzin, the 'Vatican City' of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which can rightfully claim to be the oldest state religion in the Christian world. Within perhaps 5 square miles are some of the oldest church buildings in the world. Close to the cathedral in Etchmiadzin there is a newly created museum of church treasures which is spacious, well-lit and full of very beautiful objects.

One in particular struck me and I took four photographs of this particular cloth, and then on my return home, I stitched the images together to reconstruct this long 'kalemkari'. The picture you see shows the reconstruction (and you might want to look for the seams in my stitching!): The cloth was perhaps a metre wide and four and half metres long. As soon as I saw it I thought it was drawn using kalemkari (literally the 'work of pens'), a technique used in both southern India and Iran. I guessed that since there is a long established Armenian community around Isfahan that there was a strong likelihood that the cloth came from the Armenian area of New Julfa, in the suburbs, but I think I was proved wrong!

During the Covid-19 lockdown I assembled my image, and sent it off to experts for their opinions which they were very generous in sharing. And I tell this story to rejoice in the process of enquiry, and the generous manner of everyone's sharing.

But let me go back a stage or two and look at the image! I'm going to start with the first panel at the left-hand end. Within what looks like an Islamic arch, flanked by angels, we see the scene as narrated by Luke of the returning prodigal son, being welcomed by his father, whilst in the background on an upper floor the son who has stayed at home continues to work. Below him, a 'fatted' calf is brought in to be slaughtered. In the second panel, the Prodigal son is being fed. In the third panel, the scene is also round a table, but here Christ is being anointed by an alabaster jar of spikenard (or 'nard') which is being poured over his head by a woman (Mary in John's Gospel). Judas Iscariot protests at the waste of something "very costly". In the fourth panel, the Good Samaritan rescues a traveller who had "fell among thieves" (Luke 10). The next panel has me puzzled: can you do better? Two women stand on Christ's right, two men are apparently on the ground and a figure (of a child?) springs up in a great animation. Behind Christ is what appears to be an open doorway, with the door flying off its hinges. The penultimate scene shows Christ just after the deposition from the cross: perhaps one of the figures is Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27). In the final panel, a woman greets Christ, perhaps mistaking him for the gardener, and he raises his left hand to her: if there were a caption it might read "Noli me tangere".



These are my suggestions, and you may feel you've got a better handle on the narrative of each of the scenes. I wrote off to Rosemary Crill who has not long retired from the V&A as their curator of Indian textiles, to ask her where such a cloth might have been made. She wrote back straight away suggesting: "I think it is probably Indian rather than Persian as the trees and flowers look very like Indian export chintzes". She went on to add "The blue colour is puzzling though as it doesn't seem to be resist-dyed indigo but something brushed on to the surface, perhaps later". The Nomads Tent was lucky enough to have Rosemary come to speak at a symposium organised by Andrew Houghton. Those who heard her will recognise her quiet authority.

Meanwhile I also wrote to Tom Sinclair, assistant professor at the University of Cyprus whose wide knowledge covers the Armenians, and in an interesting correspondence (during this Covid-19 lock-down) from Cyprus he drew my attention to the inscription along the bottom of the cloth which is not only dated 1790 but also mentions the Catholicos Ghukas I Karnetsi (1780-1799). In one of those delicious side-swipes of history, Tom pointed out that the name in the inscription 'Karnetsi' means 'of Erzurum' a city in north-eastern modern Turkey which would once have been within 'western Armenia'. The world was a much more integrated place with trade over vast distances connecting people over many thousands of miles than we might imagine.

I shared the image with Andrew at The Nomads Tent, to share the pleasure of the cloth, and he forwarded the image to an Armenian dealer in Canada who suggested that the cloth was "Made in Madras, India probably by the Armenian artists. Made for Etchmiadzin cathedral." So the accumulated evidence is that the cloth was made in southern India, using the technique whereby the design is printed on with the mordant, and then dipped into the dye bath, with the result that the colour adheres to the mordanted surface only. I'm not sure if I am getting this quite right but I understand from Andrew's Canadian colleague that one man (also described as a donor in the inscription) Yeprem Vardaret, was in Madras in 1790, where perhaps Harutyun Harutyun (the second donor?) from Jugha donated this hanging to Echmiadzin. Apparently one of the donors was from New Julfa. We know that Armenians did migrate from New Julfa to India.

So in the end both Iran and the sub-continent come into the story of the origin of this cloth, but it was probably made in or near Madras in southern India!

During 2021, Rufus hopes to lead tours to Eritrea in January, Bhutan in March, and Jordan (painting) in October. See his website for more details: [www.rufusreadetours.com](http://www.rufusreadetours.com) or email him at [rufusreade@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:rufusreade@blueyonder.co.uk)



# Floor Coverings in Georgian Houses

Andrew Houghton



Dumfries House Axminster carpet  
(thanks to The Architectural Digest)



Sir Lawrence Dundas (1710 – 1781),  
Zoffany, A large Ushak carpet

This article grew from a talk I gave to The Georgian Group in Fitzroy Square as part of a symposium in 2019 to explore refurbishing George Frederic Handel's home, now a museum, in Brook Street, London. (See drawing above).

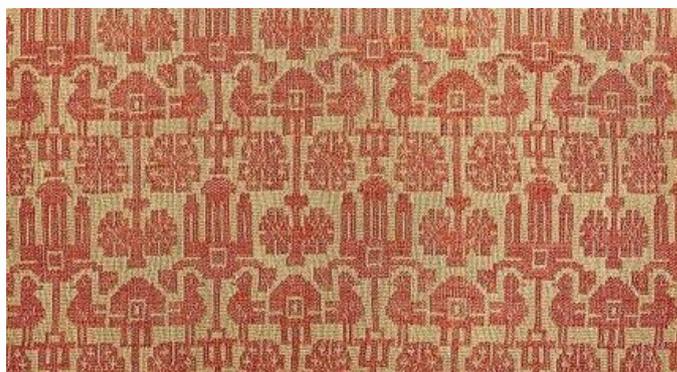
Initially I thought it would mainly be a grand tour of fabulous Turkish and Persian rugs from the 17th and 18th century. How wrong could I be? The Georgian era was from 1714 to 1830, though building of Edinburgh's Georgian New Town lasted up to 1850. The wealth and sophistication of the time did indeed, for some people, allow the purchase of exotic and extremely expensive imported goods, often supplied by Venetian traders via Constantinople. These included all kinds of rugs and carpets from Turkey, often simply referred to as 'Turkey' carpets. From paintings we can see examples in some of the grand houses of the period. Being trod underfoot, most woven floor coverings had a short life. They were oddly disregarded or poorly described in estate records. We have only glimpses in some paintings that suggest great varieties were available. Such luxuries inevitably set the fashion for others to follow and some chose to explore options of less ruinous expense.

Ingenious weavers from both England and Scotland established workshops producing hand knotted carpets in designs which emulated Eastern designs and French court carpets of the Savonnerie workshops, among others. These French imperial statements of power and grandeur were copied by Thomas Whitty and others, an example being early hand knotted Axminster carpets from around 1750. The techniques were used for more 'English' designs too, notably by Robert Adam in Syon House and Osterley Park, to mention a few.

While the rich and richer might afford such luxuries, the need for warmth under foot had long ensured many other solutions existed which were often obscured by the tendency of history to record only the grandest things. One of these floor coverings was a once very common form of loom woven wool rug known as Scotch carpets. These were made in various places but notably in SW Scotland and were sold by the hundreds of thousands to Europe and America where they were called 'ingrain' carpets. The more famous Kidderminster workshops produced them from the 18th through to the early 20th century.

On the Grand Tour, inquisitive travellers who envied the marble and stone inlaid floors in Italian palaces would have been happy to purchase a clever alternative: 'Floorcloth'. This was a flax based canvas, painted in the chosen design with oil paints by ordinary house painters and sealed with linseed. They were immensely popular and were essentially a precursor of linoleum. There seems to be a progression to the somewhat Italianate ceramic 'terrazzo' of many 19th century British entrance halls and certainly there is a direct link to the environmentally.

Cheaper still was 'matting', usually woven reeds, rushes or other grasses. The finer ones often came from Portugal and Africa and would not last any great length of time. But they were soft under foot, cheap and were as commonly mentioned as floorcloth in contemporary probate documents. For an idea of this flooring material we need look no further than our contemporary covering known as 'seagrass'.



The Storrar Coverlet, uniquely preserved for nearly 300 years, an example of a 'Scotch' carpet (thanks to Lyon & Turnbull)



Attingham House, a recent faithful reproduction of the 18th century flax and oil painted original 'floorcloth', by Sophie Sarin.