

## ***Antique Peasant Rugs from Sardinia, Abruzzi and other Areas of Southern Italy***

The term **peasant rugs** generally refers to textiles produced by Italian folk tradition, primarily from the peninsula's central-southern zones as well as Sicily and Sardinia.

Today, the greatest part of this production is in Sardinia, but until the last century, there were many other famous, active centres. These included Sicilian weavings (Caltagirone and Sciacca), Calabrian blankets, made of waste silk and called *bavelle* (silk floss) or *capisciole* (Longobucco and San Giovanni in Fiore). Rugs and *bancali* (bench cloths) were produced in Abruzzi (the weavings from Pescocostanzo, Scanno and Castel di Sangro in southern Abruzzo being particular famous).

These Italian rural rugs have always been unfairly considered farther away and more alien than those of the Near East. Sometimes they were not even considered as genuine native folk weavings, but related to Oriental production and inspired by it. This does not mean that Italian folk weaving was born as an imitation of the more famous Oriental crafts, putting a seal of approval, as it were, on the legends of Turkish or Cypriot slaves who supposedly taught the women of Abruzzi or Calabria the art of carpet weaving. There is however no doubt that there is a striking affinity in techniques and even patterns, both in individual decorative motifs and entire compositions, between the textile products of Sardinia, Abruzzi and Calabria and the tribal weavings of Anatolia, Persia and the Caucasus. This affinity can be perfectly explained if we consider that the Oriental rug is not completely exotic and extraneous to our own so-called Western culture. It is the result of a long process of encounters and fusion between the ancient textile traditions of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and the equally ancient Mediterranean tradition, whose roots sink deep into the Greek-Roman and Byzantine worlds, not to mention the region's other native cultures. When successive waves of Turkic hordes, already converted to Islam, moved West from Turkestan and Central Asia to reach the shore of the Mediterranean where they founded powerful kingdoms and empires, such as the Seljuk, the Mamluk, or the Ottoman, they certainly did not find the desert. What they did find was an established world and one of the most advanced civilisations in existence. They drew from this civilisation, giving new life to their traditional art and culture. What we call Near Eastern Islamic Art was born of this encounter and weaving is of course a basic component.

It is therefore no surprise that similar forms of artistic crafts were born of the same cultural roots in other areas of the Mediterranean. These forms were later enriched by the contribution of Arabic and Spanish-Arabic culture. On the other hand, the influence of Spanish domination on the culture of southern Italy, and particularly on Sardinia, is well known. The Oriental carpet as we know it was born out of this Mediterranean melting pot. Italian rural weaving arose out of the same ethnic-cultural substratum, so we can clearly see the similarities and analogies between weaving in the East and West.

As far as techniques are concerned, it is commonly known that both Sardinian and Calabria weavings make recurrent use of structures that seem to imitate embroidery. We call this technique weft brocading, where supplementary decorative wefts inserted in a balanced plain weave

foundation produce the pattern. Similar techniques have been observed in Anatolia and the Caucasus for those rural or tribal weavings known variously as *ci-cim*, *zili*, *sileh* or *verneh*.

In Sardinia, where the variety of technique is at its greatest, we also find genuine tapestry or *kilim* weaves that are spread throughout the East, with their characteristic slits parallel to the warps. More often however, plain woven Sardinian rugs, have what is known as dovetailing instead of the slits. These are created by using the same warp thread between two different-coloured wefts.

The use of knotted or pile is not found in Italy, but Italian folk textiles obtain the pile effect with a looped technique, common mostly in Sardinia (*a pibionis*) and Sicily but also used in other parts of Italy. A similar technique is found in Spanish folk weaving (*alpujarras*) and it is also scattered throughout the Orient, see, for example, the *tülü* blankets in Central Anatolia.

A comparison of decorative designs and motifs is even more stimulating. This reveals astonishing affinities and demonstrates how some symbols and ornaments obviously have a universal nature. Some Sardinian bench covers contain a motif consisting of an eight-lobed rosettes arranged in offset lines, alternating with small lozenges. This is identical to the field pattern of some Caucasian pile rugs. In Abruzzi rugs, particularly in those from Pescocostanzo, we often find diamonds with hooked outline, stylised birds with long tails and even swastikas, often found in traditional Caucasian carpets. Two-headed eagles, peacocks and other birds in various shapes, dragons and griffins are the traditional population of Sardinian and Abruzzi textiles. The Calabria *bavelle*, the traditional blankets in waste silk, are rich in stylisations of flowers and human figures, all familiar to any connoisseur of tribal rugs of South and North-West Persia. The same stylisation also appears in Sardinia where perhaps the most amazing similarities to Oriental carpets can be seen in the rarest *tapinu de mortu* (funeral rug) from Orgosolo that could be easily mistaken for a kilim from Southern Persia, due to the characteristic striped design at both ends and the zigzag motif in the field, even if with rather unusual colours.

The Sartirana Exhibition will present about 40 antique examples of peasant weavings, including a group of 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries Sardinian bench covers from the Collection of Sartirana Castle. Few classical bed spreads with looped pile from Northern Sardinia, a silk cover in the looped technique, formerly in the Bernheimer Collection, as well as a smaller group of Abruzzi carpets from Pescocostanzo and other areas. The two real gems of the show, both formerly in the Wher Collection, will be the earliest signed and dated bench cover known (1582), all woven in silk on linen and an extremely beautiful Tapinu de Mortu (funeral rug) from Orgosolo.

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