



A NEW WAY OF LOOKING

Christopher Alexander

The author has been Professor of Architecture at the University of California at Berkeley since 1963 and is known and admired internationally as a prize-winning architect and a prolific writer on his subject, with hundreds of buildings, books, articles and works of art to his credit. He has been the subject of a biography, Christopher Alexander: the Evolution of a New Paradigm in Architecture by Stephen Grabow, published in 1983. Recently he was commissioned to build the Mary Rose Museum in Portsmouth, England, to display King Henry VIII's great ship which sank in 1546.

Alexander's involvement with early carpets, however, is much less well-known, and the exhibition of his collection at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum was one of the revelations of last November's ICOC. The rugs were displayed in a space and an ambience which aroused considerable controversy. Many visitors seem not to have realised that Alexander was responsible for all aspects of his exhibition, including the architecture and construction of the gallery space, which he re-built completely, the colour of its walls, and, most immediately obvious to visitors, the lighting. The exhibition was conceived as a work of architecture, in which the carpets constituted the focal centre. It was, in other words, a gesamtkunstwerk, a work of art which is the sum of all its parts; a totality that included the philosophy behind the formation of the collection and which in turn dictated the way it was displayed.

This essay contains two interwoven strands. First, an assertion about the extraordinary importance of certain early Anatolian carpets which I have

found during the past twenty years. They are among the earliest and the greatest of all carpets. I seek to establish these carpets – of course with their counterparts which still exist in various Turkish museums – as a core of focus and comparison for all carpet studies.

Second, a question: What makes these carpets great? I hope to establish ultimately that the issue of quality is objective, that what we call a great carpet has an objective and definable structure, and that knowledge and acceptance of this fact must become part of carpet studies. This task, too big for an essay, is fully undertaken in my forthcoming book. The essay contains only a hint of these soon-to-be-published discussions. From what I have been told, the impact of the early Turkish pile carpets exhibited at the De Young Museum



was tremendous. The day he first visited the exhibition, Ian Bennett said to me: "Everyone can tell that something is going on in these carpets. There is something there. They are knocked out. They see the something there." But what is that something?

I think it was generally accepted by all who saw them that something is indeed "going on" in this collection. There are a few classical carpets of well-known types: Lottos, bird rugs, small-pattern Holbeins and so on. But it is not these carpets which make the impression. It is the fact that there are carpets here, utterly unlike any known types, and possessed of an almost unknown kind of beauty. Informed visitors at the De Young Museum realised that very few of the 82 carpets on display corresponded to anything they had seen before. It was this that created the tremendous impression, and the phenomenon which might be described as a penetration of awareness.

How did this come about? This is the simple and fundamental question that I wish to address. In the process, I also want to emphasise the fact that quality as an objective and definable criterion must be an essential part of carpet studies.

The Carpet Exhibition Designed by Christopher Alexander at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum. One of the Transepts.



WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

What is spirituality in textile art? Is it something to do with religion? Not really. It certainly has nothing to do with any particular organised religion, Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism.

When I look at a carpet, I can ask myself to what extent it has its own life. I can also compare this life with the life that other carpets have, and ask which one is the most intense.

If I get confused about the extent to which a given carpet has life, I can ask a more practical and empirical question: to what extent does the carpet make me feel my own life?

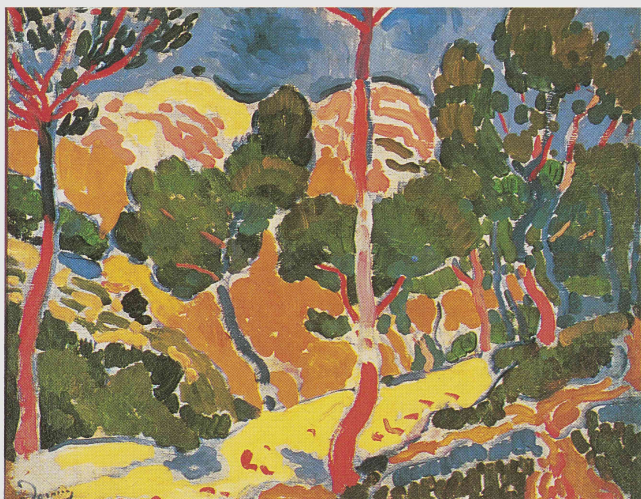
A great carpet – when I stand in front of it – makes me feel the force of my own life. That is the subject of this essay.

WHAT WAS I LOOKING FOR WHEN I BUILT THE COLLECTION?

To explain more concretely just what I mean by spirituality, I have to explain what I was doing while I collected these carpets. It was a very conscious process. Each time I came across a new carpet I asked myself if it had in it that archaic something which is, and goes to the heart of being, human. Sometimes a carpet is pretty. Many carpets are pretty. But as you look at more and more of them, you rise beyond prettiness and see that occasionally, it has this tremendous force in it: a depth of feeling which comes about because it contains, quite literally, the essence of what it means to be human. This takes the form of actual colour and shape – mainly colour. It is a composition which knowingly pulls out and presents you with something that makes you think you are looking at the heart of darkness.

Of all the carpets I have acquired, this force is perhaps present most vividly in the small red carpet with animals and a tree of life.

This very unusual and vivid quality comes about only when the maker is consciously trying to create it. It does not happen in the normal course of business, for instance when a weaver makes a workshop carpet, or a carpet of a known type which is being duplicated. This thing happens only with the greatest devotion and purposeful effort, during which the maker strives, at



Landscape.
André Derain, ca. 1905-06.
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Bequest of Harriet Lane Levy, inv.no. 50.5075.

Red Carpet with Animals and Tree of Life, Karapinar (left).



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The Last Gallery of the Carpet Exhibition.

each moment, to achieve just this perfection to the exclusion of all else.

So it happens mainly in highly unusual carpets of great spirituality which were consciously made as acts of devotion, carpets in which the weaver tried to achieve a picture of the human self, an actual representation that holds itself up, in colour and in form, as something which, frighteningly, startlingly, reflects our human force, our fears, our angers, our affection for the universe – that archaic heart which lies at the bottom of us all.

I know this because as a maker of things, I also try to



“A great carpet – when I stand in front of it – makes me feel the force of my own life.”



achieve it. And, in the world of buildings, as in the world of carpets, it is extremely hard. Once in a while you succeed, just as these men and women, once in a while, succeeded.

So it is *that* thing that I was looking for. To a reasonable extent, I can say that I looked and looked and looked – and whenever I found a carpet which shone with this glowing heart of darkness which illuminated me, and in which I recognised myself – then I bought it if I could.

I was alone in those early days. When I started, in the 1970s, carpets with this kind of force were very rare and they were hardly being bought by anyone. I remem-

ber that when my Spanish carpet fragment came up at Lefèvre's in London, no one even bid against me.

Other things of even greater rarity were just not understood. This was before Şerare Yetkin's book, *Historical Turkish Carpets*, came out and long before the holdings of the Türk ve Islam Museum were well-known. But I saw the force of life clearly in these great early Turkish carpets. Such things were seldom exported. Most of them remained in the mosques and in the Dervish *tekkes* associated with certain mosques.

Once in a while one of these carpets did find its way to the West. The small red carpet with animals turned up in an English country auction. Who knows when it came to England? Perhaps as long ago as the time of Henry VIII. The great 'star' Karapinar with flowers was found in Chicago by the art dealer Bud Holland when a woman brought it to him from her garage.

But for the large part it was the commercial carpets – even in the 16th and 17th centuries – which were exported to the West. These more authentic things, in which this glowing heart of darkness can be seen – were kept hidden, kept for the Turks themselves.



“... archaic in substance, unusual in content, and unprecedented in design.”



I want to try and explain more deeply what it means to find “one of these carpets”.

As I have said, when I look at a carpet I ask myself if I can detect in it that personal quality which makes me think that I am confronting a human soul, or another human person, or a human personality stripped naked.

An ordinary Bergama or Kazak, no matter how beautiful, just doesn't work at that level. What I am seeking is very rarified. I see it as a condensation of what it means to be human – more powerful, and more deep, than in an actual person. It is something like a distillation of personality – a highly concentrated compression of feeling – in a single thing which exudes this feeling and moves it towards me.

And it is exactly this which I am trying to do myself when I make something – a building, an artefact, or part of a building. It is achieved as part of a conscious effort, intelligent and keenly directed, to unify oneself with all things.

In about 1975, as a result of having made this effort, I began to recognise certain carpets; that is, I began to notice that once in a very long while, in perhaps every thousandth carpet, there was some glimmering of this quality. At that moment, I started to realise that there were indeed carpets in existence which attained an unusually high level, hidden among the enormous piles one sees as a matter of daily experience in the world of museums, auctions, dealers and collectors.

This profound quality which certain carpets have, is, I believe, directly related to the Sufi tradition. I have written in my book, *A Foreshadowing of 21st Century Art*, that a carpet is a picture of God, since that is the manner in which this quality was experienced by the makers of the carpets, and it is also a helpful way of understanding what we are talking about. But I find it more accurate, or at least more practical, to think about the fact that this quality is directly personal. It is



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something we can all recognise from our own experience.

Since this quality requires such hard work and cannot result from blindly following patterns, designs, or types, it is not surprising that all the best carpets appear unique. They are the result of an intense concentration on the actual design and colour, from the weaver willing the primitive life force out into the open. And in the process of this labour, each detail has its own place. It cannot follow rules or traditions. It has to follow the inner thing that becomes visible – the person-thing which is coming forth and which the artist glimmers at, sees glimmering in there.