

A Foreshadowing of 21st Century Art

A book review by Murray L. Eiland Jr.

Considering that Christopher Alexander is purporting to have solved at least one of mankind's eternal mysteries — by defining those qualities which allow good art, the deepest and most consistently satisfying kind, to be objectively distinguished from lesser art — it is little wonder that his book, originally scheduled to coincide with the 6th ICOC in 1990, is slightly over three years late. And yet the title would suggest that, indeed, he may be six years ahead of his time.

To deal first with the part of this work that could legitimately be called a rug book, I would describe the color throughout as of excellent quality, and the rugs illustrated as being, for the most part, of great importance to anyone interested in Turkish art. Despite the long delay in production of the book, however, there are no technical analyses of the rugs, a major omission, but one which would appear to carry with it a deliberate message from the author. The usual rug book text material dealing with structure, provenance, and ethnography are given scant attention in the long and at times rambling text, as they are unnecessary for the points Alexander wishes to make.

Instead, the main thrust of the book appears to concern the formulation of an objective means of identifying those rugs which are most successful as works of art, and the author begins with a number of assumptions presented as if they were nothing short of revealed truth. Many of these statements defy paraphrase and must be quoted verbatim to transmit their flavor. "A carpet is a picture of God. That is the essential fact, fundamental to the people who produced the carpets, and fundamental to any proper understanding of these carpets" (p. 21).

So begins Chapter 1, paragraph one, and by the next paragraph the author has informed us casually that,

The Sufis, who wove most of these carpets, tried to reach union with God. And, in doing it, in contemplating this God, the carpet actually tries, itself, to be a picture of the all seeing everlasting stuff. We may also call it the infinite domain or pearl-stuff.

By paragraph 5 we are being told that this artistic tradition in Anatolia extends back as long ago as 5000 B.C., although these earlier carpets represented a "picture of animal essence — the being nature which exists in things...." All this is explicated on the first page, and, on the second page, the prose shows no signs of becoming less cosmic, as Alexander describes a good carpet as resonating with some primitive, almost animistic "soul of the world."

Obviously this is not going to be just another rug book, but one that intends to explain what makes some rugs better than others. It is to Alexander's credit that he does not hesitate to take on this ambitious task, and his attempt to fathom the "unknowable" presents the reader with a blend of charm and hubris that I suspect some will find entertaining and worth the effort, although it will not be to the taste of everyone. The prose is lively but repetitive, and I believe that a judicious editing, leaving behind perhaps 20% of the verbiage, would have given its message sharper focus.

Some of the phrases, however, while evoking pleasant associations, seem, on closer inspection, to surrender little meaning. I am intrigued by Alexander's use of the term "spiritually blinding color," but what does he mean when he describes various painters as producing "color, as light, in which the pure geometry of the color, made the wild light" (p. 11)? His comment referring to "the overall creation of light through geometric unity" (p. 15) remains impervious to my understanding.

Page after page of this kind of material makes for slow going, but when we reach Chapter 3, "Objective Wholeness: the Mirror of the Self," we are given what I perceive to be the book's major message: "...the quality of wholeness is not merely a matter of preference or taste for different observers, but instead a definite, tangible, and objective quality, which really does exist to a greater or lesser degree in any given carpet" (p. 26). This quality depends upon a "structure of centers," which we have "an empirical way of distinguishing ... from preference." At this point Alexander appears to fall back, for

an empirical method, upon a question he often asks people contemplating two carpets: "If you had to choose one of these two carpets, as a picture of your own self, then which of the two carpets would you choose?" (p. 28). One of the criteria he quotes for determining superiority is the feeling of calmness one experiences in looking at the carpet (p. 29), but the main point is that, through such inner processes, one can reach an "objective judgment."

Alexander's subsequent explanation of "centers" and the "multiplicity of centers" borrows a great deal from art criticism of the last century, and my complaint is not so much that his account is unclear, but that he fails to recognize the subjective nature of this methodology. As if to borrow Humpty Dumpty's comment to Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less," Alexander defines the concept of centers not as constructs that can be applied by observers with vastly differing points of view, but as a matter of absolutes.

To Alexander there is no question as to just what constitutes a center and the number of centers to be found in the given carpet. It is, however, a matter that even the art critics who formulate this methodology saw as more subject to differences in opinion. What appears as a center to one observer may not be seen as such to another. The identity of centers, the location, their number, and relationship are in themselves not matters admitting to any kind of objective proofs. Yet Alexander's discussion of "local symmetries," positive space, and "the creation of a complex center" similarly proceeds as though the author is merely stating matters of fact. At the end of this section, moreover, Alexander returns to the metaphysical. In describing the work of Sufi weavers, whose workshops he now indicates were attached to mosques, he describes weavers working "with ultimate seriousness, trying to make a gift to God" (p. 73). Under these circumstances, the author continues, "occasionally a work appears that approaches the nature of a being, or a human soul."

Not only is there a certain kind of oneness in such writing — as if to say that his perceptions are deeper than ours because he phrases his feeling in more cosmic terms — but there is an implicit assertion that Turkish carpets, particularly these alleged Sufi carpets, are deeper (better) than the work of the Persians, Turkomans, Indians, and Chinese. Obviously Alexander's taste does not run to the great Moghul and Safavid court productions. Yet the same concepts of centers and local symmetries could be used by others to show that Safavid or Moghul carpets represent the purest expressions of "wholeness." After all, much of the Sufi tradition developed in Persia, Egypt, and other parts of the Islamic world. To see it as primarily Anatolian is a distortion of religious history.

To "Know thyself," as the Delphic oracle advised, requires that one learn to distinguish his objective from his subjective thoughts. While it may be comforting to think of one's own opinions as fact, it involves more self-deception than is healthy. I am not here criticizing Alexander's taste in carpets, as I find most rugs in his collection to be extremely appealing, and some are historically important, but, in my opinion, his efforts to find objective measures of artistic quality — which begin his book — are hollow and ultimately unconvincing.

Part Two, one of Alexander's most intriguing and disappointing sections, concerns the "Dating and Progression of Early Carpets." While Alexander notes that age in itself is not important, he is firmly committed to the belief that carpets of earlier periods are superior because during those periods people had a very concrete and realistic idea of unity and how to produce it. But the further we came from the high religious periods, the more distorted and watered-down the real understanding of unity became (p. 92).

Thus, "the earlier carpets have more complex, more powerful, and more profound symmetry structures contained within them."

This assumption, I believe, is misleading in that it involves a dubious reading of religious history and also becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophesy. A carpet that Alexander considers of superior quality is thus labeled by him as being older than one he does not like, and he speaks of developing a "gut feel" for age

(p. 93). He goes so far as to speak of determining date "on aesthetic grounds alone" (p. 111).

What makes this disappointing to me is that Alexander gets off to a good start in his discussion of the traditional dating of Turkish rugs. He perceptively identifies a number of widely accepted dubious assumptions, and I believe he is quite right to doubt many of the traditional dating schemes. His questions about what happened to the 500 Turkish carpets imported into Brasov in 1503 are pertinent (p. 96), as are his comments on the carpet recently purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is labeled by the museum as 14th century, although carbon dating suggests a range from the 11th century to the second half of the 13th century.

Unfortunately, Alexander replaces earlier dubious assumptions with some even more flagrantly improbable assumption of his own. Instead of dating various types of Anatolian rugs as slightly preceding their first appearance in Italian paintings, he makes a leap in logic by assuming that, "it is quite possible that the carpets shown in these paintings were 300 to 500 years old at the time they were painted" (p. 99). This assumption, that antique Turkish rugs were identified, preferred, and collected in the early Italian Renaissance period, is not only implausible but is supported by not a shred of evidence. Alexander's dating on "gut feel" and aesthetics blends into a kind of wishful thinking in which he allows his theories to dictate age and this concept of age to influence his theories. It becomes a kind of circular reasoning.

Another corollary of the Alexander assumption, that would place many of these Anatolian carpets "in the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries" (p. 99), is that they are

Turkish works, mostly the work of Sufis, and closely connected to profound religious feelings. A brief review of the Turkish migrations into Anatolia, however, suggests that Anatolian carpets of this age would have been Christian Byzantine work, either Greek or Armenian, if they had dated from these centuries.


After all, the Seljuks did not enter Anatolia in force until after the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. In the 9th century, they still inhabited parts of Transoxania and points east, and they did not convert to Islam until the mid-10th century. Presumably a 9th century Turkish rug would not even be Islamic and certainly not woven by Sufis. An Anatolian rug from this period, perhaps the earliest of the animal rugs, would most appropriately be classified as a form of Byzantine folk art, perhaps even Armenian work. After all, when Marco Polo described the province containing the cities of Konya, Kaiseri, and Sivas, he described the Turkomans and then the other two ethnic groups.¹

The other classes are Greeks and Armenians, who reside in the cities and fortified places, and gain their living by commerce and manufacture. The best and handsomest carpets in the world are wrought here, and also silks of crimson and other rich colors.

These were not the words of a mystic but of a merchant, and I read his comments as casting serious question upon the common assumption in the rug field that the early carpet pieces found in the Ala-ad-Din Mosque in Konya were Seljuk work. An honest review of the evidence sharpens our awareness that the Konya carpets could have been made by Armenians, Greeks, or Turks, and that they may not have been placed in the mosque just after it was built, as has long been assumed. Why, indeed, should they have been?

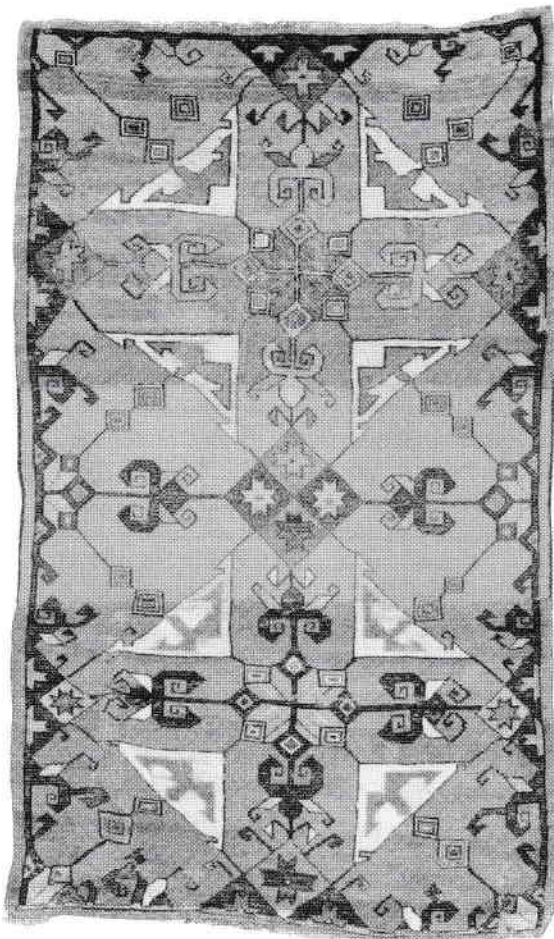
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1. When Alexander acquired this carpet (p. 133), there was a join in the middle, and obviously some design material missing. About the middle quarter of this carpet was subsequently reconstructed according to Alexander's concept of what the design would presumably have been. While there is certainly a high plausibility to this reconstruction, Alexander goes on to construct an endless repeat design based on the reconstructed carpet, eventually producing a "painting" in which the field takes on two colors. This painting is then compared to Timurid material from Briggs and presumed Seljuk carpets.

They could have been given to the mosque 300 to 500 years later, to paraphrase Alexander, and they could be Armenian work.

The point I am trying to make is that one skates upon ever thinner ice in placing guess upon guess upon guess. When Alexander labels two of his rugs as Seljuk, he is making a wild guess, as there is not a single surviving rug known to have been made by the Seljuks, assuming they wove rugs at all. When Alexander suggests a 9th century date for a Turkish rug, he is either tampering with history or geography. He talks about Sufis and religious ideas relating to rugs that may have been woven by Byzantine Christians, whose pictures of God would surely have been radically at variance with those of the Sufis. Surely this can be nothing more than a guess unsupported by any kind of evidence.

Yet perhaps the most extravagant guess around dating is Alexander's chart on page 110 concerning "Carpet Attrition for 10th Century Anatolian Carpets." In a feat of inductive logic that must be read in detail to be fully appreciated, he begins with a figure of 1,000,000 Anatolian carpets "originally manufactured" in the 10th

century, which, according to an arbitrary formula by which one third of the carpets of a given century will survive to the next century, he posits should result in 10 survivors of 10th century carpets in the 20th century.

This is truly a guess upon a guess upon a guess, although Alexander calls it a "statistical distribution." One could pick any figure between zero and many millions as the carpet output of 10th century Anatolia. We don't know for certain that there was any carpet weaving in Anatolia at that time (Kurt Erdmann did not think so), although we know there were virtually no Turks there except a small number of mercenaries working for the Byzantines. But we have no reason to believe that there was then a carpet industry or to imagine that carpets were woven for other than local consumption. We also have no real idea how rapidly these would have worn to the point where they would be discarded. This is not an application of the scientific method but wild speculation.

As to the dating Alexander actually assigns to his carpets, I find that, in terms of the figures that would conventionally be placed upon these pieces, he is consistently a few centuries early. The early date

("10th or 11th century and certainly no later than 12th") he applies to his "Hispano-Moresque" fragment (p. 119) appears unlikely when we compare the endless knots on this carpet with the equally graceful forms, apparently not known to Alexander, found in the decor of the so-called Queen's Room in the Alhambra.² The "crude" endless knots from this same building Alexander depicts, from the Hall of Abencerrajes, provide an inept comparison.

The 17th century date (p. 332) he applies to his "Purplish Red Carpet with Black, White, and Yellow Shields" is wildly optimistic. It is a type of Kirsehir with cochineal red and (usually) indigo-sulfonic acid that can be confidently dated to the very late 19th or early 20th century. This genre of Kirsehir is thought to reflect the European tastes of the late 19th century Ottoman Court and is often named after one of the Sultans of this period.

The same kind of erratic logic is carried into Part Three, dealing with the carpets themselves. The carpet on p. 127, which he describes as a "Seljuk Prayer Carpet," appears to my eyes as more likely to be an interesting late 18th century village carpet, a late descendant of the design seen in earlier form on a saph in the Turk ve Islam Eserleri Muzesi.³ Even more extraordinary is his discussion of the fragment on p. 133 (Illustration 1), in which part of the design is a reconstruction that, however plausible, must still be accepted with some skepticism. The author then constructs an endless repeat design based on this reconstruction and then produces a painted version in which parts of field appear in contrasting colors, although the original showed only a pale red field.

This theoretical carpet design is then compared with carpet designs in Timurid miniatures, after Briggs, and again to some Seljuk architectural details, with a digression along the way to a drawing from a Byzantine miniature with an "almost identical" design. (Look closely at designs Alexander describes as "almost identical," "very similar" (p. 149) and other such comparative terms.) By grafting a plausible first guess onto another and another, along with some dubious "almost identical" comparisons, the author arrives at the conclusion that the small fragment "has the qualities of both Seljuk and Timurid carpets," and suggests a "common origin, or connections for the two groups, and may therefore change our picture of

early carpet production in a fundamental way” (p. 135).

All this from a fragment that most of us would place no earlier than the 18th century with a design that the author has “reconstructed.” Much the same technique is used to derive a “goddess and deer” from the latch hooks of another carpet (pp. 150-153), and here some distortion in one of the drawings shows Alexander’s vision of a latch hook as the head of a deer. In the “Flaming Animal Spirit Carpet with Vultures” (a carpet I see as floral with vases), the author uses several of the Mellaart drawing which have previously been questioned in these pages, apparently in total acceptance of their veracity (pp. 172-175).

Alexander’s drawings, in general, are poorly drafted and at times seem to bend toward whatever end the author intends to prove at the moment. The “turtles” in the border of the rug on p. 155 are unconvincing as animals, but perhaps the least convincing drawing — oddly enough, printed on the same page as its source — is of a Chinese silk (p. 103) of a type that seems to have been the design source of one of the “Seljuk” carpets found at Konya. Here Alexander assumes that the simplified, stylized form is earlier than the more elaborately drawn and more representation form (Illustration 2). This conclusion he bases on his concept of the “structure of symmetries,” and he draws the same conclusion from the Dragon Rug designs, namely that the coarser renditions are earlier than the more curvilinear versions appearing on rugs thought by others to be dragon rug prototypes. He advocates an eastern Anatolian origin for the Dragon Rugs, choosing to argue against the Kuba-origin theory (p. 256), which has had few adherents in the last 40 years, and ignoring other published evidence.

A similarly divergent view of dating is expressed around the “Coupled Column Prayer Rug with Eight Columns” (p. 241) (Illustration 3). He compares this to a

2. The top two figures are the originals on which the bottom sketches are based. Alexander’s drawing (lower right) of the Chinese silk damask is so distorted as to raise a question as to his perception of it. He considers, on aesthetic ground, the alleged Seljuk example to be older than the Chinese silk.

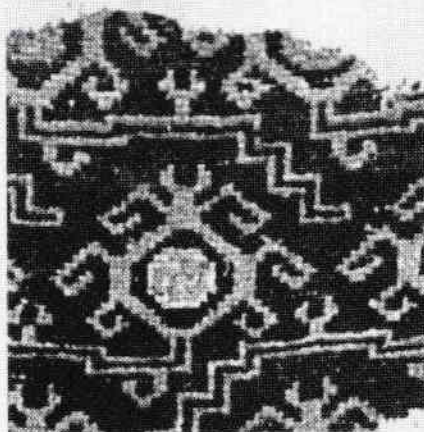
“Coupled Column Ladik,” with much more curvilinear features, which he describes as 17th century (p. 101). While Alexander concedes that most people would date the first piece to the late 18th century and describe it as a village rug, he concludes that it is a piece of “far greater age, greater importance, and greater artistic depth” and dates from the 16th century. He believes this can be “verified” by examination of the “structure of centers and local symmetries” (p. 102).

This is the same issue we encounter around Alexander’s views on the Dragon Rugs and the question of the “Seljuk” carpet and Chinese silk described above. The dating of the rugs has often been based upon the belief that complex designs originate in such court workshops as those operating under the lavish patronage of Ottomans, Safavids, and Moghuls. In these cases the carpets are often finely knotted and display design elements, both animal and floral, in the most realistic detail. As the great courts decline, however, and these same designs spread into the village design vocabulary, they become simplified, at times to unrecognizability, and the even obvious floral and animal figures become less

realistic and more stylized.

This has been widely accepted in the rug field for decades, and many coherent, plausible series of rugs have been assembled showing this simplification in design from one decade to the next. Indeed, one of May Beattie’s early papers⁴ focused upon these same column rugs that concern Alexander, and she constructed a plausible order of descent, based upon many details of design. This methodology, using a substantial series of rugs, is more convincing to me than Alexander’s comparison of the two column rugs.

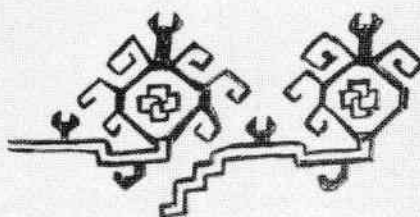
The basis of his dating clearly centers around a preference for the village simplification of the three-niche design as it appears in the rug he attributes to Konya, and there is no reason why it should not be more aesthetically pleasing. But his preference for it does not make it older. Nor does his belief in “the power of abstract forms to represent the soul...” (p. 100) make it deeper. I have seen a number of simplified, village renditions of designs that I prefer to their more finely-rendered city prototypes. Often the Herati, Harshang, and Afshan designs are more powerfully rendered, in my opinion, in coarse rural versions rather than the more



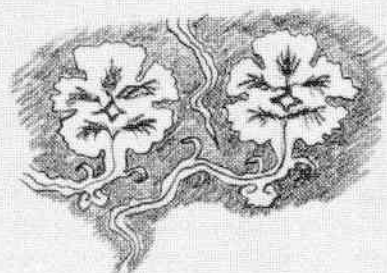
13th century Seljuk carpet



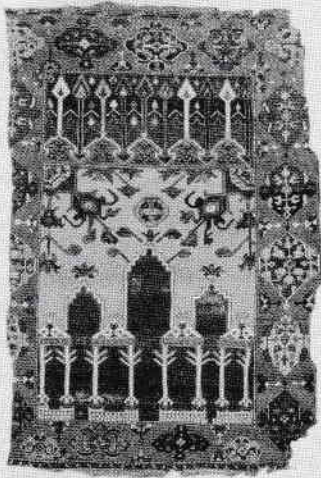
14th century Chinese silk damask



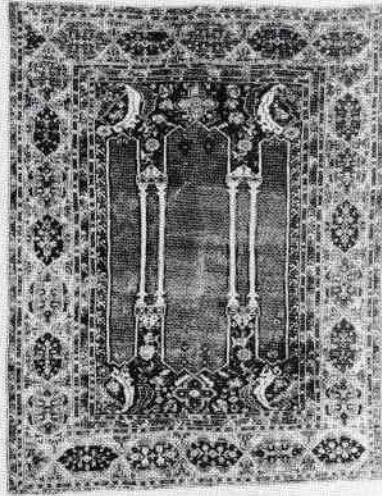
Seljuk motif



Chinese motif



Konya prayer rug with eight columns, 16th century



Coupled column Ladik, 17th century

polished city examples. I am not altogether certain that I would prefer the dragon rug prototypes to the 17th and 18th century Caucasian rugs we know by this label.

Perhaps one problem is the value-laden words so often used to describe a design that has become simplified and more rectilinear. Often this process is described as “corrupted,” “degenerate,” or “decayed,” but this is misleading when the more rectilinear form may have more power and visual appeal.

Another problem is that, until recently, analysis of how one design type evolves from another has been studied in insufficient depth. A recent Marla Mallett article⁵, however, has pointed the way toward a promising methodology. She provides, for example, a cogently reasoned account of why the embroideries with designs similar to those of the large Caucasian blossom carpets of the 18th century must be based upon the carpets rather vice versa. Although she is illustrating that one technique (embroidery) must have followed the original technique (pile carpet), the same type of reasoning could be used to generate evidence that one form of the design must have preceded another. As Alexander unintentionally demonstrates, dating carpets on aesthetic grounds alone does not work.

There is so much of this kind of poorly reasoned material in Alexander’s text, however, as to greatly limit the book’s usefulness. I have always felt little respect for works on rugs that were primarily picture books, without any substantial text.

But here we have an example where the text may detract more than it adds. Along with plates of some splendid rugs, the reader is provided highly personal commentary that gives information primarily as to how the carpet fits into the author’s world view.

Part Four, “The Degeneration of the Art,” apparently represents a sort of summing up, in which Alexander’s ideas about artistic (or spiritual?) quality are given a final demonstration. The format, however, is something of a set-up, as he chooses for his inferior example a 19th century Yuntdag rug about which I find myself in agreement with the author. While charming enough on a superficial level, there is something about this rug — at least in my opinion — that does, as he insists, lack depth. His method of proving this “fact,” however, tells us little. As he says, “The answer is simple. In a word the carpet has no spirit in it.”

Now I have no objection to simple assertions of this type, arbitrary or not. We all make such judgments, and collectors make thousands of such decisions throughout their careers. What I find objectionable is that Alexander speaks as though he had defined the issue not just for himself but for everybody, as if he has uttered an objective truth that bears no second opinion. His proof consists of a complex protocol in which he compares the major border to one carpet, the minor borders to another, and the endless knots, the octagons, and “four-armed figures” to yet other carpets. I do not doubt his sincerity as he makes his observations, but

3. The two coupled column rugs, a Konya village rug and a more floral type often attributed to Ladik, would ordinarily be dated as late 18th and 17th century respectively. Alexander, however, expresses his belief, based on aesthetic considerations, that the Konya was woven in the 16th century.

— like many of us — he simply fails to recognize when he slips from objective to subjective mode. He fails to perceive that he is sliding from a realm of reason into a process of rationalization, where he is not merely content to make authoritative pronouncements of his opinion, but he must also insist that it is not opinion with which he deals but fact. All his talk about centers, local symmetries, wholeness, portraits of God, (etc.) does not hide the fact that this too is a highly complex, jesuitical and subjective game that still leaves the issue of artistic quality unresolved.

Thus the book, in my opinion, fails in its stated intention of explaining why some rugs are better than others. The whole argument comes down to a variant on the old assertion that “I can’t explain the difference between good art and bad, but I know what I like.” Alexander has convinced himself that he can explain the difference, implying that, if we were as perceptive as he, we would agree.

NOTES

1. Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian*, translated by William Marsden, New York, 1948, Doubleday and Co., p. 21. Marco Polo’s comments have been interpreted by some as confirming the Seljuk manufacture of the Konya carpets, but no responsible reading of either the original Italian or various English translations should leave this impression.
2. Carel J. DuRy, *Art of Islam*, New York, 1970, Abrams, p. 134.
3. Alexander shows a picture of this carpet, but expresses the belief that it is later than his example.
4. May Beattie, “Coupled Column Prayer Rugs,” *Oriental Art*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 1969, pp. 243-58.
5. Marla Mallett, “Tracking the Archetype: Technique Generated Designs and their Mutant Offspring,” *Oriental Rug Review*, December/January 1994, pp. 10-25.