

ISLAMIC PRAYER RUGS



Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago

Cover: Turkish, Koula Prayer Rug,
18th century, lent by
Lewis Manilow, Chicago,
Catalogue number 6

ISLAMIC PRAYER RUGS

February 27 through April 7, 1973

Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago
Goodspeed Hall, Room 108
1010 East 59th Street Chicago, Illinois 60637

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The Renaissance Society is particularly grateful to the lenders for their generous contributions to the exhibition. Our special thanks are due to Donald Jenkins, Associate Curator of Oriental Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, and to B. C. Holland for their advice and help. We are indebted to John Vinci for the installation of the exhibition.

Katharine L. Keefe
Director of Exhibitions

INTRODUCTION

For most people the visual approach to the subject of prayer rugs will seem to be most logical, but the visual questions which they generate are inextricably related to the historical and liturgical implications. The Moslem civilization evolved, over a long period of time, certain characteristic design elements which form a common link among all prayer rugs. The principal diagnostic is the **mihrab**, the prayer arch of the mosque translated into the weaver's design terms — a concept which will be seen to vary widely from area to area. Turkish and Caucasian varieties often incorporate the **ibrik**, or water pitcher, to permit the symbolic washing of hands by the faithful. Many other design features indicate the widely different ethnic experience and levels of sophistication to be found in Islam.

All the rug producing areas of the Middle East and Central Asia gave us prayer rugs, but their employment as religious artifacts varied considerably with the level of local orthodoxy.

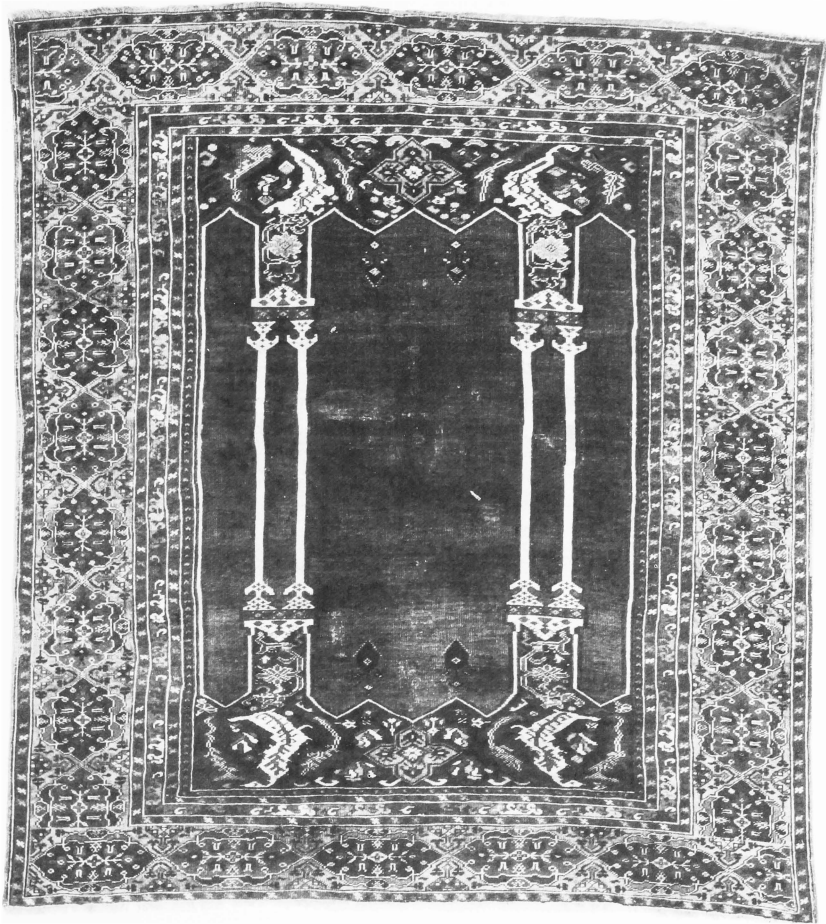
There is no doubt that for many Moslems there was an element of homeopathic magic in the daily act of pointing the mihrab towards Mecca, and that by so doing the suppliant established a kind of magical ligature, a reviving and purifying contact with the source of belief. Yet other Moslems of less rigorous faith saw the mihrab largely as a decorative motif. Volumes have been written on the symbolism contained in these weavings, but there is abundant evidence that the sheer popularity of the design may have been a more forceful factor than devoutness, and such scholastic saws as "each knot tied is a prayer" may well be more romance than fact. It is true that a certain moss green, being the color of Mohammed's banner, only uncommonly appears in the weavings of the relatively orthodox Sunnite Moslems of Turkey, and representations of human or animal forms are prohibited to them as well. The more relaxed Shiite Moslems of the Caucasus, on the other hand, often felt no such inhibition.

Though prayer rugs as a specie were circumscribed by religious strictures and function, they were made over a vast area and thus displayed a variety of ethnic, social and personal expression. This redounds to the credit of the anonymous craftsman. The rigid tribal design purity of the Turkoman rugs, the voluptuous intricacy of the Persians, the rhythmic, mosaic-like rectilinearity of the Caucasians, and the range of design in Turkish pieces from the delicate and austere Koulas to the primitive and expressive Konias, taken together, eloquently illustrate the great range of invention and expression apparent in this exhibition.

As to history, rugs of prayer conformation must have been made in the very early days of Islam; but of the examples which survive, none appear to greatly pre-date the early 17th century. Most of the best known and popular types are of the 18th and 19th centuries, and those rugs are characterized by the ascendancy of design over what may be called theological function. As the theological imperative receded, the mihrab decayed into an element of design sometimes so perfunctory as to be almost unrecognizable.

It was not until the last quarter of the 19th century that these and similar oriental weavings found an audience of scholars and collectors in the western world; and nearly a century of scholarship has left a residue of countless unanswered questions concerning the precise provenance of many types, the manner in which design systems developed and decayed, among other impenetrable difficulties. The list is endless, as is the speculation and available misinformation.

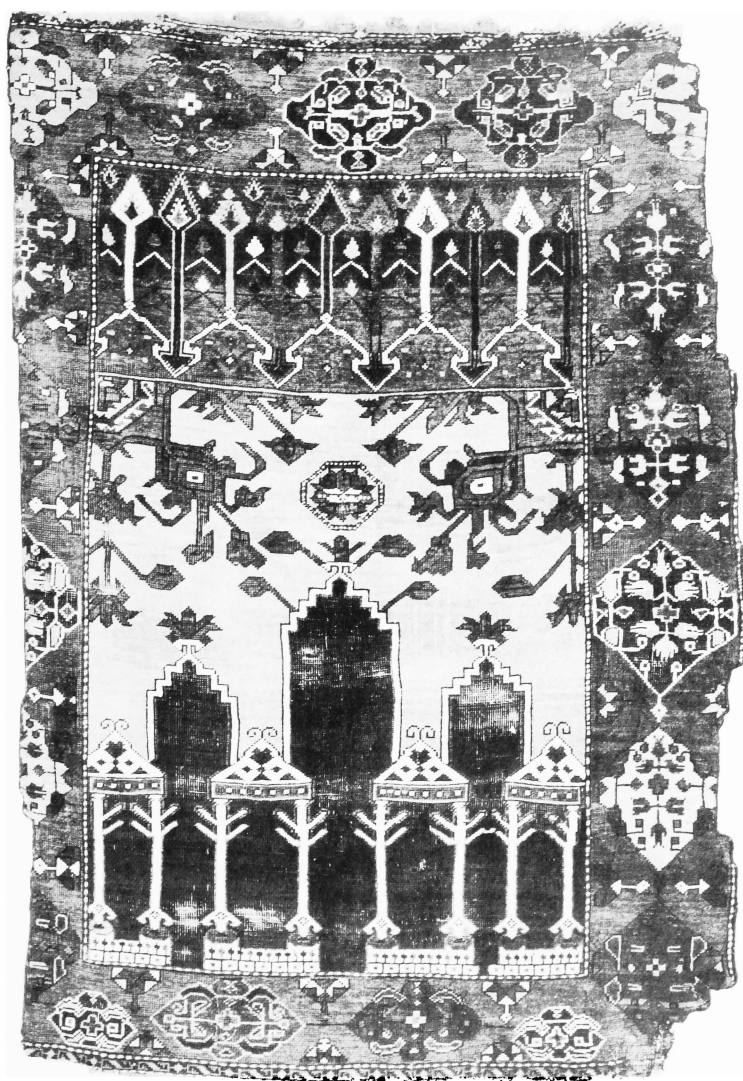
Social and political upheavals in the earlier years of the 20th century largely ended this cultural phenomenon. Relics are all that remain.



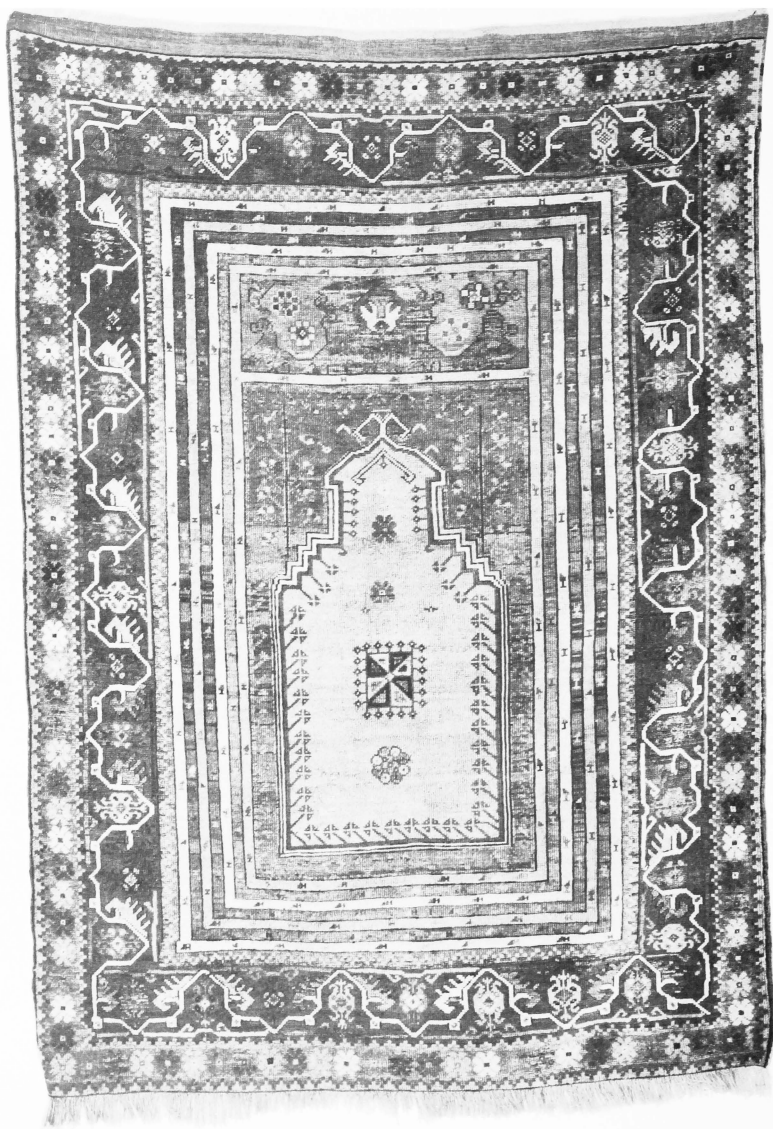
1. Ladik, 17th-18th century — 71 x 54 inches



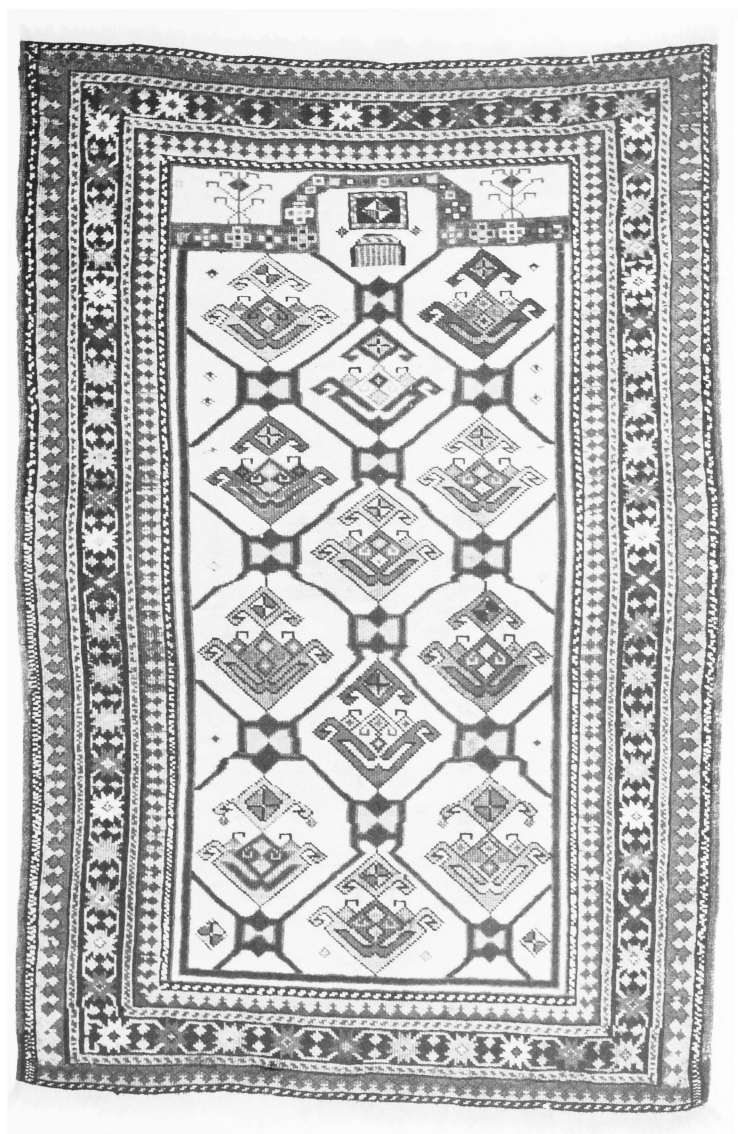
3. Konia, 18th century — 58 x 45 inches



4. Konia (fragment), 18th century — 70 x 48 inches



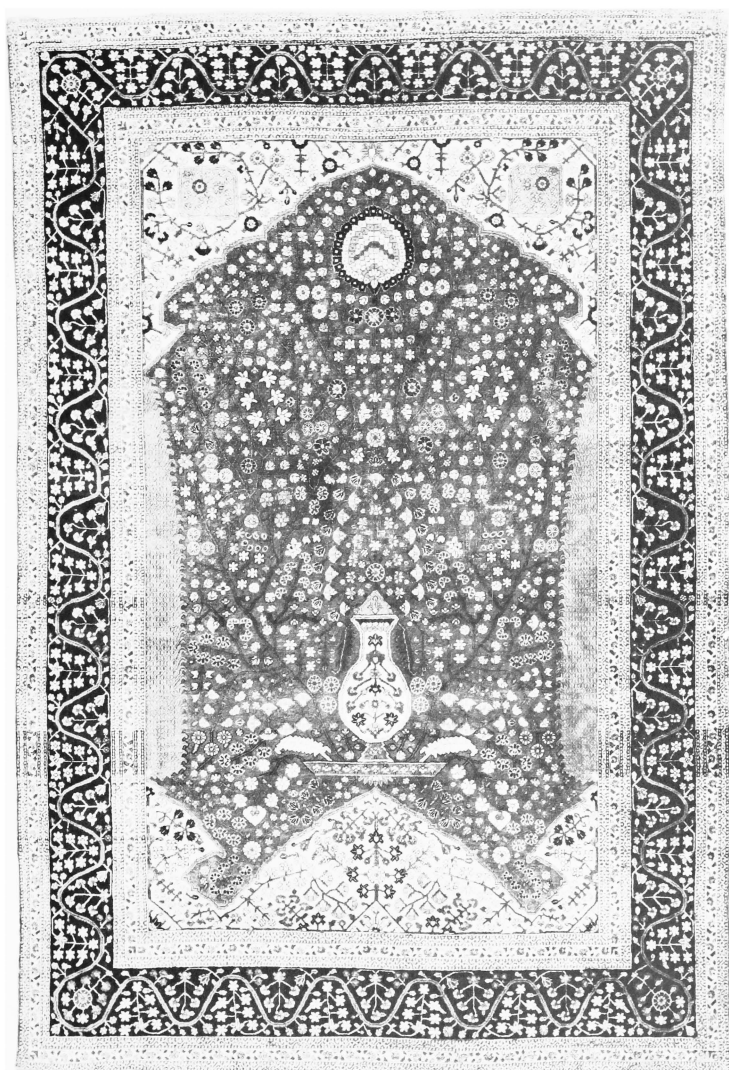
8. Melas, 18th century — 68 x 48 inches



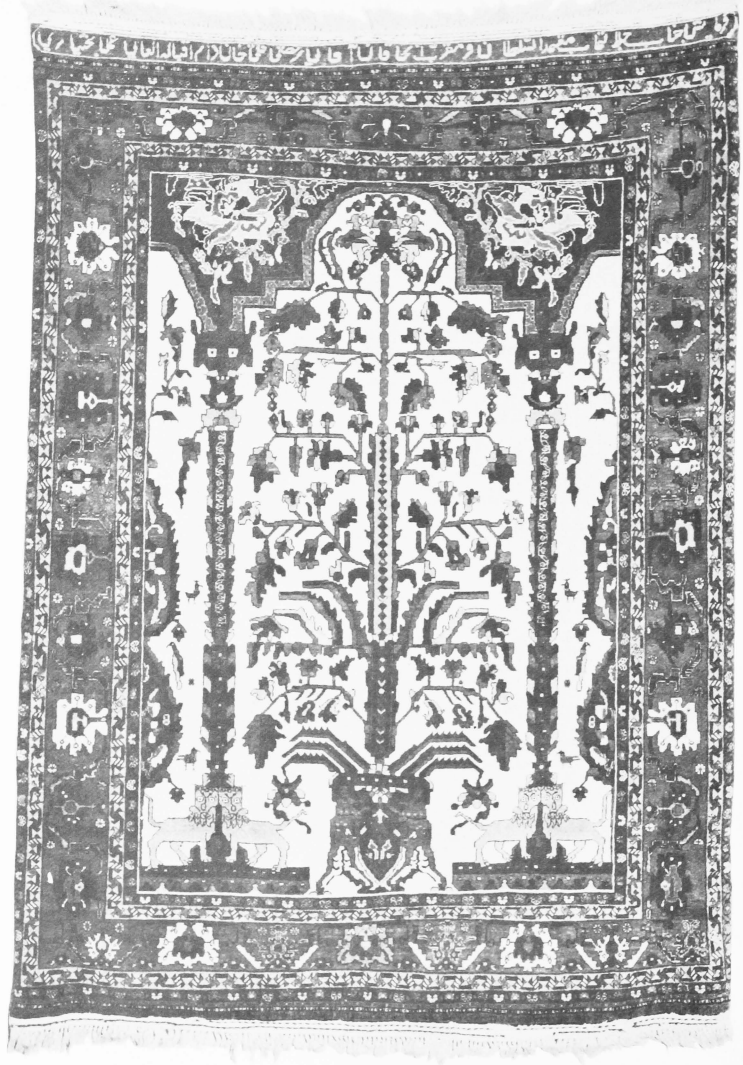
11. Kazak, 19th century — 54 x 38 inches



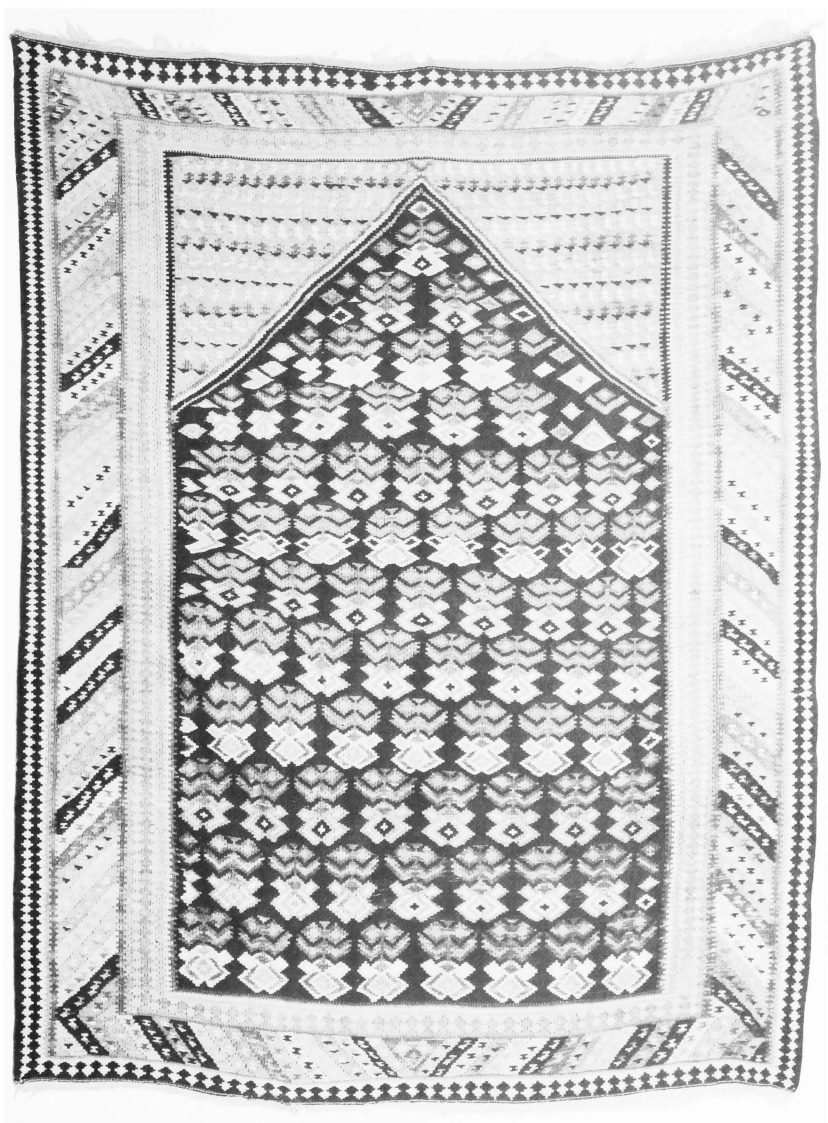
14. Chi-Chi, dated: 1892 — 61 x 51 inches



15. South Persian, 18th century — 64 x 50 inches



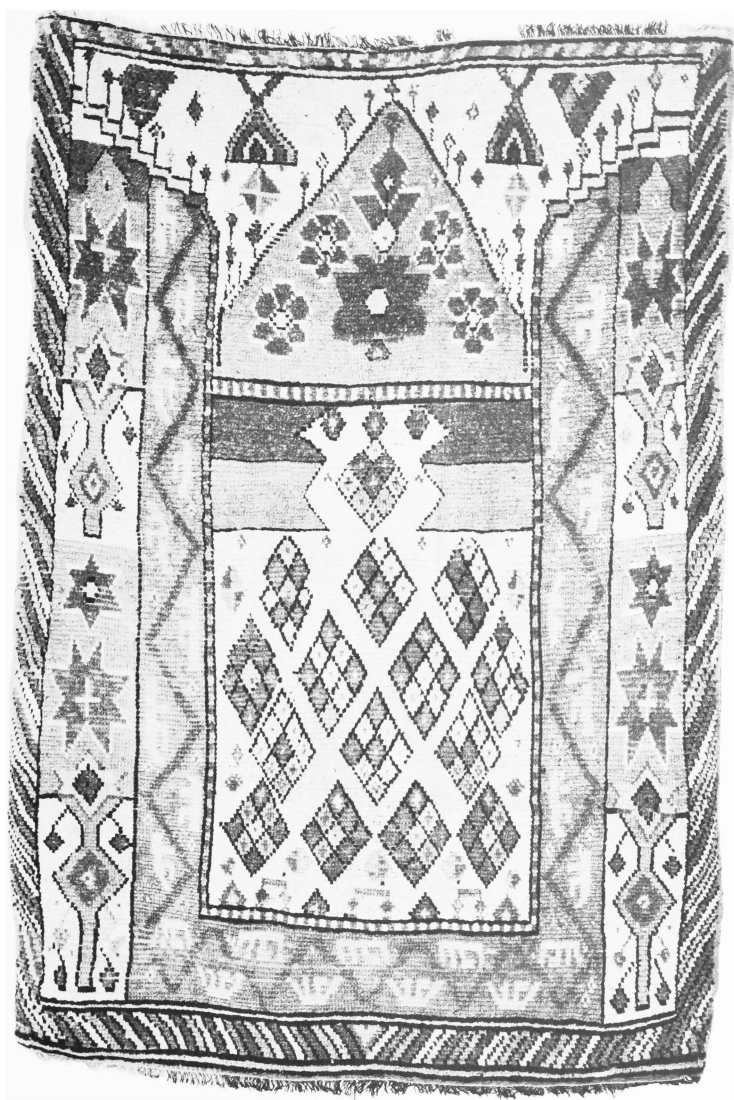
16. Bakhtiari, — 82 x 57 inches



17. Senna kilim, — 63 x 48 inches



19. Ersari, 19th century — 73 x 39 inches



22. Karouan, Berber, 19th century — 64 x 44 inches

ISLAMIC PRAYER RUGS

TURKISH PRAYER RUGS

1. Ladik, 17th-18th century — 71 x 54 inches
Lent anonymously
2. Ladik, 18th century — 69 x 44 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. James McDonald, Chicago
3. Konia, 18th century — 58 x 45 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Dave Chapman, Chicago
4. Konia (fragment), 18th century — 70 x 48 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. B. C. Holland, Chicago
5. Ushak, 18th century — 79 x 48 inches
Lent by Mr. Lewis Manilow, Chicago
6. Koula, 18th century — 66 x 48 inches
Lent by Mr. Lewis Manilow, Chicago
7. Koula, 18th century — 72 x 48 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Dave Chapman, Chicago
8. Melas, 18th century — 68 x 48 inches
Lent by Mr. Lewis Manilow, Chicago
9. Anatolian kilim, 19th century — 58 x 40 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Lee Schooler, Chicago

CAUCASIAN PRAYER RUGS

10. Karabagh, dated: 1808 — 53 x 36 inches
Lent by Berdj Abadjian — Rugs as Art, New York
11. Kazak, 19th century — 54 x 38 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Gene Summers, Chicago
12. Kazak, 19th century — 54 x 46 inches
Lent by Mr. Charles Brooks, Chicago
13. Shirvan, 19th century — 54 x 38 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. James Perlman, Chicago
14. Chi-Chi, dated: 1892 — 61 x 51 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Grover Schiltz, Half Day, Illinois

PERSIAN PRAYER RUGS

15. South Persian, 18th century — 64 x 50 inches
Lent by the Art Institute of Chicago
16. Bakhtiari, — 82 x 57 inches
Lent anonymously
17. Senna kilim, — 63 x 48 inches
Lent anonymously
18. Feraghan, 19th century — 76 x 49 inches
Lent by Mr. Ralph S. Yohe, Racine, Wisconsin

TURKOMAN PRAYER RUGS

19. Ersari, 19th century — 73 x 39 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph W. Fell, Chicago
20. Tekke Hatchli, 19th century — 65 x 48 inches
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph W. Fell, Chicago
21. Beluchi, 19th century — 60 x 46 inches
Lent by Mr. Ronald Sokolec, Chicago

OTHER

22. Karouan, Berber, 19th century — 64 x 44 inches
Lent anonymously

