

# The First Turkish Carpet Exhibition in the West

FERENC BATARI

Ninety years ago, just before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the Hungarian National Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest organised a huge exhibition of Ottoman Turkish carpets with no less than 352 exhibits. The majority of the rugs shown belonged to Saxon, Hungarian Lutheran, and Calvinist Protestant churches in the then Hungarian province of Transylvania, complemented by pieces from museum and private collections. To mark the anniversary, the current curator of carpets assesses the history of rug collecting in Hungary and its former Transylvanian domains, now part of Romania, and the work of his predecessors in staging the ground-breaking show.

The 1914 Budapest exhibition was the fourth great oriental carpet-only exhibition,<sup>1</sup> following those held in Vienna (1891),<sup>2</sup> Stuttgart (1909),<sup>3</sup> and New York (1910).<sup>4</sup> Of the four it was the first to focus on a single theme, and the very first Ottoman Turkish carpet exhibition in the Western world.

It is no mere coincidence that this extraordinary event took place in Budapest. Hungary had played an important part in the continental transit trade of oriental goods, including carpets, from the 15th to the 17th century. The earliest carpet documentation focused on their importation through the Saxon-inhabited southeastern border town of Braşov,<sup>5</sup> where customs registers for January to November 1503 show at least five hundred commercially



Above: The Hungarian Museum of Applied Arts (Iparművészeti Múzeum), Budapest. Water-colour by J. Bischof, 1896

Left: Kula prayer rug, west Anatolia, 18th century. 1.29 x 1.69m (4'3" x 5'7"). Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest, 7-959

traded carpets entering Transylvania through a single town.<sup>6</sup> Of course, such imports were not restricted to one town, nor even to the eastern territory of Hungary.<sup>7</sup>

As early as 1483, a peace treaty between King Matthias Corvinus and Sultan Beyazıt II regularised commercial relations between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire: "...the merchants of the said Hungarian King...shall come and go in my victorious lands, shall do business, their persons and riches shall not suffer damage by the inhabitants of my lands. My merchants shall

likewise come and go and shall not suffer ill-treatment and damage from anybody."<sup>8</sup> After the defeat at Mohács in 1526 and the fall of the capital Buda in 1541, the central region of Hungary became subject to Ottoman rule and would remain so for 150 years. The Turkish Empire thus penetrated far into Central Europe, bringing the oriental carpet market closer to the heart of the Western world.

Hans Dernschwamm (1494-1567), who was in charge of the Fugger-Thurzó Society's Hungarian depots, travelled to Istanbul between 1553

and 1555 and reported that in the Ottoman Empire: "...foreign merchants from Poland, from Hungary and from the land of the Wallachs may freely travel in and out to ply their trade...only the customs duties are to be paid by them to the Sultan...".<sup>9</sup> After 1568, the Sublime Porte established a Levantine monopoly of trade within the Ottoman Empire, but there are records of rugs imported by local merchants. They show that trade in carpets, carried out both in the Kingdom of Hungary and in Transylvania, mainly by Turkish, Greek and Jewish merchants, intensified during the 17th century.

The large number of incoming merchants and the great volume of imported goods can be appreciated from two surviving 17th century price lists for Turkish and Persian carpets. In 1627 Gabriel Bethlen (1580-1629), King of Hungary and Prince of Transylvania, dispatched a document to every region setting down *The Limitation of Goods to be Imported by Turkish, Greek and Jewish Merchants*. In this list the price of a fairly large carpet was fixed at 16 forints, a smaller "common table cover carpet" at 9 forints, while other items "of lesser value" were 8 forints.<sup>10</sup> Another list, *The True Price of Turkish Merchandise*, dated 15 January 1651, fixed the following prices: "a Persian carpet, good, 50 forints; a Turkish rug, 10 forints; a multi-coloured 'keche', good, 20 forints; a camel's hair 'keche' bedspread, 6 forints; a camel's hair 'keche' horse-rug, 6 forints."<sup>11</sup>

We know from archival evidence as well as from inscriptions that carpets were used in many more ways than they are today. These ranged from enhancing the pomp of state occasions to adorning and increasing the comfort of homes or palaces. The royal chaplain George Szerémy (1484-1453) describes in his memoirs the meeting between the victorious Sultan Süleyman II and the new Hungarian King John at Mohács: "Along the short mile the King traversed to go to the Emperor, Turkish and various fine carpets were laid on the earth as far as the tent of the Emperor".<sup>12</sup>

A 1629 inventory of one of Gabriel Bethlen's palaces lists 155 European tapestries, 154 Persian and 105 Turkish carpets among the furnishings. A further 39 pieces are men-



Small-pattern Hol-bein rug, Ushak, west Anatolia, mid-16th century. 1.54 x 2.20m (5'1" x 7'3"). HMAA 14-785

tioned without any indication of provenance, but most are likely to have been Turkish carpets.<sup>13</sup> Bethlen had other similarly furnished palaces.

Of the large numbers of carpets imported into Transylvania between the 16th and 18th centuries, some beautiful examples passed into

church ownership as a result of pious donations. Several examples carry added inscriptions recording details of their donation, ranging in date from the mid-17th to the end of the 18th centuries. For instance, a Hungarian inscription added to a 17th century double-niche





Left: Five fragments of an Ottoman Court prayer rug, Istanbul or Cairo, mid-16th century. Originally 1.15 x 1.60m (3'7" x 5'3"). HMAA 15.691

Right: Gördes prayer rug, west Anatolia, late 17th century. 1.25 x 1.77m (4'1" x 5'10"). HMAA 7.951

Below left: 'Transylvanian' prayer rug, Ushak, west Anatolia, first half 17th century. 1.17 x 1.92m (3'10" x 6'4"). HMAA 14.911

Below right: Count and Countess Domokos Teleki. Photo courtesy Count Kalman Teleki, Budapest



'Transylvanian' rug from the Teleki Collection reads "This carpet was donated to the Adámos Unitarian Congregation by Lady Mártonné Fóris, born Kata Gáspár, 1800".

In the churches of the German-speaking Protestant minority in Transylvania, where carpets were treated as valuable assets, they ser-

ved for the embellishment of otherwise stark interiors. Here, spared the wear and tear of everyday use, their chances of survival were more favourable than elsewhere and early oriental carpets survived in large numbers in this environment.

Contrary to conventional belief, oriental rugs were not exclusively used to decorate Protestant churches, and their widespread use was not restricted to Transylvania.<sup>14</sup> Archival material suggests that oriental carpets were also to be found in some numbers in Roman Catholic churches. Within the territory of modern-day Hungary, a survey of the carpets of the Calvinist churches in County Borsod, based upon inventories compiled in 1735 and 1757, shows that the 147 churches in the county had 247 carpets in their possession.

In Europe, the popularity of oriental carpets declined between 1750-1850, the period of rococo and neoclassicism, but then revived when romanticism brought a general renaissance of interest in oriental

art, including carpets. Public and private collections were formed in the second half of the 19th century and the science of 'owners tapetology' was born too at that time.

A relatively large number of oriental carpets, mostly made in Ottoman Turkey, survived in Transylvania. In the early 20th century news of this wealth of oriental carpets brought agents and collectors into the remote villages of the region, where they bought up many of the old carpets that had been preserved there. Many of these goods left the country.

Count Domokos Teleki (1880-1955), a Transylvanian landowner who was also a carpet collector and scholar, drew public attention to this threat to the rugs of Transylvania, which primarily endangered the more impoverished Calvinist and Unitarian church collections. He proposed sponsoring a publication on Turkish carpets in Transylvania, hoping that the interest it would arouse would contribute to the conservation of the carpets and

help to prevent further sales abroad.

Jenő Radisics de Kutas (1856-1917), the then director of the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts, supported Teleki's initiative and acted on his suggestion to solicit the loan of carpets to the museum with a view to a public presentation. As well as bringing closer the realisation of the book Teleki had been planning, this opened up the possibility of organising a major pioneering exhibition that would advance scholarship in the field as well as providing aesthetic enjoyment and contributing to the general culture. Károly Csányi (1873-1955), Chief Curator at the museum, was put in charge of collecting and preparing the carpets and organising the exhibition.

His task was made easier by pre-existing information about Turkish carpets in Transylvanian museum and church holdings, and in private collections in Budapest. In addition, to pull in more material for the exhibition, Csányi and Teleki travelled throughout Transylvania by carriage, motor car and train, focusing chiefly on the more remote northern region. In gathering the exhibits Csányi made a first trip of six weeks (1912) and a second of three weeks (1913). With the assistance of Béla Kenessey, Bishop of the Transylvanian Calvinist Church District, Friedrich Teutsch, Bishop of the Transylvanian Lutheran Church District, and Victor Roth, Lutheran minister and art historian in Sibiu, they managed to record about six hundred carpets.<sup>15</sup> This survey can-

Right: West Anatolian prayer rug, Gördes or Kula, mid-17th century. 1.28 x 1.76m (4'2" x 5'9"). HMAA 7.952

Below left: 'Transylvanian' double-niche or opposed-arch rug, Ushak, west Anatolia, mid-17th century. 1.20 x 1.70m (3'11" x 5'7"). HMAA 7.961



not be taken as comprehensive, as there were certainly more Turkish carpets in circulation at the time.

Of the carpets chosen for the exhibition, half came from Protestant churches, thirty per cent were private loans and twenty per cent came from museum collections. The most important examples were among the latter group, with those of the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts itself heading the list with 31 rugs.<sup>16</sup> Next came the Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu with 25 carpets.

The material borrowed from private collections was also substantial. Teleki himself lent 18 items from the rugs kept in his castle at Gornesti, near Târgu Mures in Transylvania.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately the Teleki Collection was never published, although its richness can be guessed at from a few pieces now in the Hungarian National Museum and in the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts, among them a 17th century

Ushak medallion carpet fragment (numbered 1292 in the Teleki Collection inventory!).<sup>18</sup>

At the beginning of the 20th century the finest Hungarian private carpet collections were to be found in Budapest. The exhibition featured eleven rugs from the collection of Mrs József Keszler, eight from that of Lajos Beer, and six each from those of Count Gyula Andrássy, Dr Károly Bakonyi and Gejza Kiszely. Among provincial collections, after that of Domokos Teleki the richest was probably that of Baron Károly Kuffner, who loaned five rugs.

Most of the carpets borrowed from Transylvanian churches were the property of Lutheran Congregations, who accounted in all for 157 items.<sup>19</sup> The Calvinist churches loaned a further 27 carpets and one was borrowed from the Unitarian College in Cluj-Napoca.

The exhibition opened to the public early in 1914. Csányi divided







Left: Coupled-column prayer rug, Ladik (?), central Anatolia (?), first half 17th century. 1.35 x 1.86m (4'5" x 6'1"). HMAA 51.114.1

Right: Coupled-column prayer rug, Ladik, central Anatolia, second half 17th century. 1.17 x 1.68m (3'10" x 5'6"). HMAA 7.947

Below right: Small-medallion or double-niche Ushak rug, west Anatolia, ca. 1600. 1.11 x 1.57m (3'8" x 5'2"). HMAA 24.459



accepted to this day.<sup>20</sup> He tended to use the term 'Transylvanian' exclusively to refer to Group VI and its variants, the most numerous type with 106 examples. Most of these have a double-niche field design with a small medallion or rosette at the centre, symmetrical arabesque vines in the field, and a border with octagonal cartouches.

The exhibition showed thirteen examples of 15th-16th century Turkish carpet art, but the greater part of the material in the catalogue, some

230 carpets, were 17th century rugs. To these could be added several more from among the 31 items dated 17th-18th century. The catalogue also included thirty pieces dated to the 18th century and seven to the 19th century.

Among Csányi's discoveries while preparing the exhibition were handwritten inscriptions dating from the 17th-19th centuries, connecting rugs either to their original owner or marking their donation to the church (28 examples). The earliest of these, going back to 1605, is on a small-medallion Ushak carpet (cat.62) from the collection of Baron Imre Szalay de Kéménd in Budapest. Such inscriptions proved of immense use to Csányi in refining the dating of Ottoman Turkish carpets generally.

The research project planned for the carpets was halted by the outbreak of World War I. Evan Radisics died in 1917, and Csányi was appointed to a post at Budapest's Franz Josef University. Although Teleki brought some of his collection from Gornesti to Budapest, a major part of his Transylvanian possessions was lost when the province became part of Romania at the end of the war.

The 1914 exhibition had proved such a success that in 1925 the new director of the Budapest museum, Gyula de Végh, returned to the subject with the classic publication *Tapis turcs provenant des églises et collections de Transylvanie*, an album containing thirty excellent colour reproductions.<sup>21</sup> While this publication, prepared in collaboration with Károly Layer, who had worked with Csányi on the 1914 exhibition, did not realise the original vision of a work of solid research and scholarship on Turkish carpets, it had the merit of recording previously lesser known but still art historically

Triple-arch prayer rug, Ladik (?), central Anatolia (?), first half 17th century. 1.24 x 1.84m (4'1" x 6'0"). HMAA 7.945



significant material. In 1975 the Crosby Press published an English edition, *Turkish Rugs in Transylvania*, based on preparatory work by Marino and Clara Dall'Oglio.<sup>22</sup>

Today most of the carpets borrowed from the museum and Lutheran church collections at the time of the exhibition are still safely

preserved in their original locations. The material that came from Calvinist churches has been depleted as a result of economic difficulties between the two World Wars. Rugs belonging to private collections were for the most part lost without trace during World War II and the huge political changes that followed.

NOTES

**1** | Károly Csányi, Sándor Csermelyi and Károly Layer, *Az erdélyi török szőnyegek kiállításának leíró lajstroma* (Descriptive Catalogue of the Exhibition of Turkish Carpets of Transylvania), Budapest 1914.  
**2** | *Orientalische Teppiche – Mit Unterstützung des K. K. Handels-Ministeriums und des K.K. Ministeriums für Cultus und Unterricht – Herausgegeben vom K. K. Österreichischen Handels Museum, I-III*. Vienna, London, Paris 1892-1896.

**3** | C. Hopf, *Die Teppiche des Orients*. Kgl. Landesgewerbemuseum, Stuttgart 1909.  
**4** | W.R. Valentiner, *Catalogue of Loan Exhibition of Early Oriental Rugs*, New York 1910.  
**5** | The Romanian place names used here came into official use in 1920. Prior to that Hungarian names were used, and where applicable German names as well.  
**6** | L. Fejérpataki, 'Brassó városának régi számadáskönyvei 1503-1526' (Old Account Books of the town Braşov), in *Arceológiai értesít* (Archaeological Bul-

letin), Budapest 1888, pp.150-172.  
**7** | Ferenc Batári, *Ottoman Turkish Carpets*, Budapest-Keszthely 1994, pp.29-30.  
**8** | Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi, Istanbul. Archive, E.5861.  
**9** | Hans Dernschwam, *Erdély-Besztercebánya-Törökországi utinapló* (Transylvania-Besztercebánya – Diary of Travels in Turkey). Edited and translated by Lajos Tardy, Budapest 1984, after Franz Babinger, 'H. Dernschwams Tagebuch einer Reise nach Konstan-

tinopole und Klein Asien (1553-55)', in Jakob Strieder, *Studien zur Fugger Geschichte*. Vol.VII. Munich & Leipzig 1923.  
**10** | *Magyar Történelmi Tár* (Repository of Hungarian Historical Documents). Vol.18. Budapest 1871, p.216.  
**11** | *Magyar Történelmi Tár* Budapest 1878, p.359.  
**12** | Manuscript, National Library, Vienna, 8649 (Rec 988).  
**13** | Inventory of Furnishings in Gyulafehérvár Palace (now Alba Iulia, Romania) of Gábor Bethlen on the

16th August 1629, Országos Levéltár, Budapest (National Archives, Budapest). Urbaria & Conscriptiones. Fasc.118. No.2.  
**14** | Batári, op. cit., p.33.  
**15** | Károly Csányi, 'Erdélyi török szőnyegek' (Turkish carpets of Transylvania), in *Magyar Iparművészet* (Hungarian Applied Arts) XVII/2, pp.63-64, Budapest 1914.  
**16** | These included rugs of the following design types: Holbein, 'scorpion', triple arch, Ladik, çintamani, Armen-

ian, one each; two Lottos; four Gördes prayer rugs; five coupled-column prayer rugs; six two-column Kulas, eight double-niche Transylvanians.  
**17** | Including one Lotto rug, one white 'Bird' pattern rug, two small-medallion Ushaks, two Gördes prayer rugs, eight opposed-arch Transylvanians.  
**18** | Batári op. cit., no.38, p.54.  
**19** | These included 38 rugs loaned by the Black Church in Braşov, 30 from the Friar's Church, Sighişoara, 17 from Sebes, and 13 from Mediaş,

**20** | Csányi's classifications are as follows: I. 'Holbein' (four items); II. 'Lotto' (31 items); III. 'Bird' pattern (23 items); IV. Large-medallion Ushak (seven items, including six with star-medallions and one with a round medallion); V. Small-medallion Ushak (seven items); VI. Transylvanian, or opposed-arch (double-niche) Ushak (106 items); VII. Two-column prayer rug (37 items); VIII. Non-column prayer rug (53 items); IX. Six-column prayer rug (18 items, including one

four-column, one eight-column); X. Late type Ladik (two items); XI. Late type Kula (four items); XII. Triple disc or çintamani (five items); XIII. Diverse (five items, including three large-pattern Holbein, two Armenian).  
**21** | Jules de Végh, Charles Layer, *Tapis turcs provenant des églises et collections de Transylvanie*, Paris 1925.  
**22** | Gyula Végh and Károly Layer, *Turkish Rugs in Transylvania*, new edition edited by Marino & Clara Dall'Oglio, Crosby Press, Fishguard 1977.