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Afghan War Rugs: Villa Terrace's Exhibit of Conflict from the Loom

Curtis Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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By Curtis L. Carter

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Despite daily media reports of war and other forms of social and political strife in Afghanistan and the Middle East, contemporary arts from this region are largely unknown to American audiences. The exhibition “Afghan War Rugs: The Modern Art of Central Asia” at the Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum (through Jan. 6) offers contemporary representations of a centuries-old tradition of woven rugs in the Middle East. The 40 some rugs by Afghan weavers are on loan from the collection of Italy’s Enrico Mascelloni, author of *War Rugs: The Nightmare of Modernism* and a leading expert in the field.

The images prominent in this exhibit reflect conditions that have often dominated Afghanistan, including the 1839 war between the Afghans and the British and the Soviet invasion in 1979. Images of conflict persist today as Western forces attempt to impose their version of societal order on the diverse tribal, religious and political divisions of this vast land.

Unlike the non-figurative patterns found in rugs made by their ancestors, mainly women artists, the current generation introduces motifs featuring portraits of heroic political leaders (Amanullah

Khan, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and Burhanuddin Rabbani), maps, tanks, helicopters, guns, grenades and other weaponry alongside traditional pictorial elements such as flowers. *Twin Towers Rug* references international concerns. And at least two of the rugs on display, *Hundred Dollar Bill Rug* and *Dollar Bill Rug*, hint at an awareness of Western Pop Art.

Mascelloni assembled the collection during extensive travels through the bazaars of Kabul as well as additional sites in Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. Bazaars are places to buy and sell, but they are also places for meeting people and exchanging experiences. Common to conversations likely to take place in a bazaar is the assumption that, “A rug consists of motifs, colors and materials, and everyone knows these can be appreciated.” Hence it is not important to try to focus on a particular iconic or cultural meaning when viewing the rugs in this context.

Still, when viewing the Afghan War Rugs in a Western culture, the question of how such works relate to familiar Western pictorial images necessarily arises. For example, should we view the African War Rugs as we do figurative or non-figurative paintings in Western art? Or are they best understood as a form craft or design art of interest mainly or solely for their color and design?

From a Western perspective, the rugs may appear closer to abstract modern art than to traditional figurative art, despite their discernible elements recognizable as tanks, guns and human figures. But the rugs are seen as unable to deliver some of the important features deemed essential to modern art in the West. Their surfaces consist of richly textured textile created from the loom, and thus not flat painted surfaces as the Modernist canon called for in its paintings. Moreover, their color derives from dyes, not from pigment. Perhaps they would fare better under the rubric of post-modern art where there are no such constraints.

Taking another approach, these seemingly “untranslatable” images found in the Afghan rugs are, as a French anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss once suggested, best understood as being more like the experiences of hearing a symphony or exploring a myth than as either figurative or abstract Western painting. For the Afghans, “Basically they are rugs like any other.”