DISCOVERING TIBETAN CARPETS

The Mariani Collection

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Notes appear at the end of the article

“You know that you can discover something new, definitely unknown, so Tibetan carpets are perfect for collectors. Each time is an accident, a happy accident, let’s say...It’s been a continuous discovery, the more you think you understand, the more you find the differences. And the discovery is the interest!”

Claudio Mariani

A PASSION for beautiful handmade things has inspired Claudio Mariani all his life. When he moved from Rome to Asia years ago, Claudio immediately fell in love with antique Chinese furniture. The beauty of the fine wood used inspired him to learn how to restore the original lustre of tables, chairs and, later, wooden canisters for holding writing brushes. His eye turned to Buddhist sculpture—and then one day, he stumbled on a Tibetan saddle rug. For twenty years since then, Claudio and his wife, Eranee, have been collecting Tibetan carpets. He says his pleasure in this quest is purely in discovering.

“My mother always said I was good at finding things: strawberries, mushrooms, fish—and this is the same, with carpets. Discovery becomes an obsession: it is sometimes an asset and sometimes a burden!” The carpets Claudio has assembled certainly reflect his love of discovery: the 350-some rugs provide a bird’s-eye view of the colour, design, function and abundant individualistic artistry that define Tibetan carpets of the past 150 years. The Mariani Collection also reflects what we know, and have still to understand better, about these distinctive carpets.

History

Mariani speaks eloquently about Tibetan carpets as an ancient folk art, and systematically learns whatever he can about them. While Himalayan archaeology is still in its infancy, there is evidence that the Tibetan plateau and adjacent regions have been populated for 5000 or more years—and the cold climate and abundant wool available from indigenous sheep and yak provided the impetus and ready materials for weaving. The loop-pile textiles excavated in nearby Qinghai (1700 BC), in Karo, near Chamdo, and more recently at Shampula in Xinjiang, just north of today’s Tibetan border, show that pile weaving with cut-loop techniques such as the one in most Tibetan carpets has been practised in the region for close to 4000 years.¹

Skipping forward to historical times, south-central Tibet, the “cradle” of Tibetan civilisation and home to its early kings, was the centre of Tibetan pile rug production. The village of Wangden is cited as a rug weaving centre as early as the 11th century; local rugs were traded in Gyangze’s market in the 15th century; and in the 1800s Western visitors documented widespread production of carpets in these and other settlements in Ü and Tsang provinces.²

Recent publications, including Chodrak and Tashi (2000), have added some very good detail to our knowledge of this 19th and 20th century carpet production. Weaving was a necessary skill, most families owned some kind of loom, and many produced rugs for their own homes. Rug weaving flourished in villages such as Khampa Dzong and Wangden. At the same time, large weaving workshops on noble estates were true commercial operations that supplied the marketplace and monasteries. These workshops evidently continued an age-old custom of engaging weavers to produce rugs for noble households, tax payments, and barter, and may have been organised as early as the 17th century, when Ningshia began producing carpets for the Tibetan market.³

Against this backdrop, it is no wonder that Tibetan rugs vary so much in their materials, intricacy, dyes and quality. Skilled men and women wove whatever their household could afford. If they plied their trade as local or itinerant weavers, they produced what the market required: a client specified a rug’s function, chose the design and materials, and dictated the budget. Estate weavers produced rugs of different qualities—some for use in the family quarters, finer carpets for important guests, humbler ones for household retainers, and some to present as gifts or for sale to local or distant monasteries. Thus, few Tibetan rugs, even with the same design, are truly the same—as the Mariani Collection richly illustrates.
Generically known as _drumtse_, Tibetan rugs had myriad practical and decorative uses, which reflect what an integral part of traditional life they were. The most common rug is a _khaden_, roughly 3 by 5 or 6 feet, which in homes covered low wooden platforms used for sitting by day and sleeping at night; _khaden_ were easily rolled up and so were carried to picnics, and used by pastoralists who lived either seasonally or all year round in tents. The Mariani Collection has a comprehensive array of these sitting or sleeping carpets, from loosely woven rugs with simple palettes and informal patterns (1) to fine examples of 20th century workshop production (2).

Tibetans also wove sitting rugs that were used in monasteries and well-to-do homes or subsequently cut into individual mats. One especially lovely example (3) with an early feel and palette, is decorated with cloud-head medallions that can also be read as crossed _dorje_ (thunderbolt symbols). A fringed runner (4), one of several in the collection, features simple medallions with cloud motifs demarcating individual sitting spaces.

Pile textiles to cushion saddles and decorate horses were essentials in Tibetan life. Saddle rugs were customarily made in sets, one for underneath the saddle, the other to be draped on top, which are now hard to find. Mariani’s first purchase was a saddle carpet that struck him as a “surprise” in a Singapore gallery that specialised in Indian arts, and his collection includes several dozen today. Most are the “butterfly” style that developed in the early 20th century: it mimics the shape of British army saddle cloths and lacks holes for traditional Tibetan saddle girth straps. A charming Tibetan menagerie shows up on these little gems: dragons, cranes (5), and the fanciful snow lions (6, 7) that became Tibet’s national symbol in the 20th century. Mariani’s notched saddle carpets include attractive medallion and floral patterns (8, 9), as well as one example with an unusual checkered field (10).

Larger pile rugs were woven to cover horses or drape on top of bundles they carried. The most typical examples in the Mariani Collection show lattice patterns and the paired dragons and phoenixes so characteristic of Tibetan
5 Saddle rug (gyagar makden, “Indian [British] saddle rug”)  
Cotton warp, wool weft, 70 knots per square inch  
26 x 42 inches, 20th century

8 Saddle rug (pöge makden, “Tibetan saddle rug”)  
Wool warp and weft, leather, 45–56 knots per square inch  
25 x 42 inches, 19th-20th century

6 Saddle rug (gyagar makden)  
Cotton warp, wool weft, 77–88 knots per square inch  
27 x 38 inches, 20th century

9 Saddle rug (pöge makden)  
Wool warp and weft, leather, 48 knots per square inch  
23 x 47 inches, 19th–20th century

7 Saddle rug (gyagar makden)  
Wool warp and weft, 56 knots per square inch  
33 x 42 inches, 20th century

10 Saddle rug (pöge makden)  
Cotton warp, wool weft, leather, 45 knots per square inch  
23 x 41 inches, 20th century
carpets (11, 12). One (13) with a simple repeat design was woven, most unusually, with the warps running from side to side (rather than top to bottom), suggesting it was made on a large loom of the kind some estate workshops had. Still, it is simply patterned and loosely knotted.

Other specialised rugs covered sitting cushions, back pillows, and doorways (and in the 20th century, Tibetans even wove bicycle seat covers). One visually striking door rug in the Mariani Collection (14) has an indigo cross centred on a tan field scattered with floral emblems. Several others imitate cloth door curtains; (15) has the relatively high knot count, graphic sophistication, and use of bicoloured pile yarns characteristic of high-quality post-1930 weaving. In contrast, (16) is decorated with cloud motifs, and the clouds in the lower corners invoke the bats that sometimes hover within a Tibetan rug as in (17). Other noteworthy special-use rugs include what may have been a window cover, woven on an unusually large loom, and a back rest cover with a boldly drawn snow lion mother and baby, flanked by male and female dragons signified by their different colours (18). No collection of this size would be complete without “tiger rugs”—the two most charming carpets depict realistic animal pelts in very different styles, one almost hieroglyphic (19).
16 Door rug (goyo)
Wool warp and weft, 40 knots per square inch
56 x 32 inches, 20th century

17 Sitting or sleeping rug (khaden) with 5 bats, 5 lotus, clouds
Cotton warp and wool weft, 40 knots per square inch
67 x 33 inches, 20th century

18 Tiger rug
Wool warp and weft, 40 knots per square inch
60 x 31 inches, 19th century

19 Tiger rug
Cotton warp, wool weft, 63 knots per square inch
58 x 31 inches, 19th–20th century
**Design**

Mariani says what appeals to him about Tibetan carpets is the individuality of the artistry with which the weavers interpreted patterns—often as tigers or arranged design elements, and the skill with which they combined natural and synthetic dyes. Living on an arid plateau, the Tibetans loved color and always incorporated vivid hues into their painted furniture, clothing, and carpets. Mariani likens Tibetan rugs to other forms of art: “It’s like when you appreciate a painting. I’m attracted by the material, the colors, the harmony of design. A good rug is like a nice pair of shoes: it has a good proportion.” That first small saddle rug spurred him to buy for published information and to travel to Kathmandu and Beijing in search of Tibetan carpets, eventually trading early purchases for later ones. In his words, “Once you see a lot of them, you can immediately approach them.”

The design variety of Mariani’s collection illustrates the many ways Tibet’s indigenous rug making was enriched by centuries of vibrant cultural exchange. Central Asia and western China had robust political and cultural links from at least around 2500 years ago, and early Chinese annals refer to “colored rugs and decorated carpets” as articles of tribute from Tibetan tribes (206 BC–AD 220).

Textiles of around this date excavated at Shapula in Xinjiang show butterflies, birds, and mythological animals that signal links with “distant Iranian artistic elements” and contact with China. Later, richly detailed textiles in Dunhuang wall paintings (circa AD 900) show what sorts of luxuries from other cultures wealthy Tibetans enjoyed. Tibetans freely incorporated pleasing decorative aspects of prestige goods into their own arts, including pile rugs.

The earliest photographs of Tibetan rugs, from the late 19th century, generally show medallion patterns, which were immensely popular and link Tibet with the aesthetic traditions of both East Turkestan and China. The Mariani Collection includes a wonderful spectrum of medallion styles: one particularly graceful example incorporates trefoil elements reminiscent of the ram’s horn motifs on Central Asian tents and rugs (20); it can also be read as a pair of crossed thunderbolt symbols (shab). Another popular pattern shows three medallions, where the central medallion is unique, recalling the lotus “pedestals” on Khotanese altar rugs. In (21), the weaver has, in typically eclectic Tibetan fashion, placed a stylized Chinese character (shab, long life) in the centre of each medallion—and sprinkled the rug’s field with two distinctly Tibetan motifs. One is the so-called “frog’s foot” and the other a multicoloured cross like the pattern that decorates Tibetan tie-dyed batikweaves.

Other medallions and meander borders in Tibetan rugs echo geometric motifs that appear in 2500 years old Chinese caudrons, mirrors and other bronze work (22–24). Equally pleasing, if entirely different, results were achieved by Tibetan weavers working with the same design elements. One notable aspect of (23) is the woven outer red border, which emulates the cloth often stitched to a Tibetan rug’s selvedges. This cloth edging protected the rug’s vulnerable edges and ends from wear, and could extend its dimensions to cover a wooden sleeping or sitting platform. The yogdup and samkar (24 to 27) seen in several of these rugs is in secular contexts, an emblem of good luck for Tibetans and other Himalayan Buddhists. Thus, yogdups might be painted on either side of a doorway and appear often in the main medallions, corner fretwork, field or border of a carpet. In a handful of known Tibetan wedding carpets, facing yogdup—one here the sole motif—were auspicious seats for the bride and groom (25).

Chinese textiles were very popular luxury goods, and Tibetan weavers found great inspiration in their patterns (26). Floral brocades were often recreated in carpets, with or without a border. (27) is a strong, refined example in lustrous wool, whose colours suggest it was used by a lama or in a monastery, while (28) is a more relaxed, lively interpretation. Floral medallion rugs were often styled *garam*...
27 Sitting or sleeping rug (*khaden*)
Wool warp and weft, 60 knots per square inch
35 x 65 inches, 20th century

28 Sitting or sleeping rug (*khaden*)
Wool warp and weft, 32-36 knots per square inch
34 x 63 inches, after 1930

29 Sitting or sleeping rug (*khaden*)
Wool warp and weft, 28 knots per square inch
61 x 29 inches, 19th–20th century

30 Sitting or sleeping rug (*khaden*)
Wool warp and weft, 40 knots per square inch
59 x 29 inches, 20th century

31 Sitting or sleeping rug (*khaden*)
Cotton warp, wool weft, 54 knots per square inch
63 x 34 inches, 19th–20th century

32 Sitting or sleeping rug (*khaden*)
Cotton warp, wool weft, 54 knots per square inch
57 x 32 inches, 20th century
(Chinese carpet), and the finest of these are quite elegant (29).

One quintessentially Tibetan floral pattern is *pena chenden* (twelve lotus), whose variants have big blossoms, not always twelve, arranged on vines in a repeat pattern. The classic version, on a blue field, has an axis of symmetry in the middle of the warp and the weft. (30) is unusual because it has a visual “top” and “bottom” and uses abundant half-and-quarter-knots to execute the curving foliage. (31) is notable for its shimmering, unusual yellow ground, as well as blossoms that some Western writers have suggested are “orchids” (would Tibetans agree?), framed by very delicate greenery. The characteristic outlining of the flowers also draws attention to small “clouds” within the petals. In contrast, (32) is a more angular “Central Asian” interpretation of this favourite pattern.

Geometric Tibetan rugs have appealed greatly to collectors, and the Mariani Collection has some nice examples. These are likely early patterns, and seem to relate to patchwork textiles that cover the seats of deities in 7th century wall paintings. Checkerboard patterns (33, 34) are popularly associated with patchwork fabrics still used by monks and with the silk patchwork cloths that decorate Buddhist altars. Tibetan rugs of this general kind are said to have been used for picnics and weddings. (35) is a bold and uncommon combination of two geometric elements. The “fish scales” in (26) are a Chinese-inspired diaper pattern, much like the meander or “T” border.

 Carpets from the mid-19th century onward show that weavers continued incorporating new design elements and workshops helped create new tastes in carpet fashion. The Mariani Collection has several rugs, for example, with European-inspired floral designs: one shows two circular “wreaths” of flowers arranged against a black lattice—the pattern is altogether Art Deco. (2) is a fine example of post-1930 design, having a white field and using only two colours for the clean, strong “three fruits” pattern. According to Chodrak and Tashi, some Chinese floral medallion and cloud-mountain-wave patterns also became popular around this time, thanks to a cabinet minister’s weaving workshop.

Noting this fluid design context, Mariani is sensibly cautious about dating his rugs, focusing on dyes that *might indicate* pre-1900 or post-1930 production—and he rightly avoids generalising about “early patterns” or “village weaving”. His approach is supported by evidence that pile carpets were woven simultaneously in village and noble homes, for family use, for clients and for the market, and that weavers had access to different qualities of local wool and imported dyes. While a very finely knotted carpet was most likely made for a wealthy client or in a noble home, loosely knotted rugs with simpler patterns would have been appropriate furnishings for rooms where household retainers lived on noble estates and cannot be assumed to be “village production”. Thick or thin yarns and natural or synthetic dyes simply do not help us draw conclusions about age or origin in most Tibetan rugs. For centuries, there was market space for a wide range of products that drew on a rich, regional design tradition that stretched from Persia to Beijing. And, as carpets were neither art nor sacred, most were simply used until there was nothing left of them: what would their materials and designs have told us?
Sitting or sleeping rug (Wangden drumtse)
Wool warp and weft, 4–6 knots per square inch
33 x 66 inches, 19th–20th century

Structure

The one feature that the carpets above (and most that we call “Tibetan rugs”) share is a cut-loop Sennah knot structure. Excavated textile fragments from the region show that other types of looped pile weaving existed, and some continue today. However, we know relatively little about specific regional variations inside south-central Tibet, or in other parts of Tibet.

One local pile weaving technique is practised in the Wangden valley, not far from Gyantse in south-central Tibet. Wangden was noted for its rugs in the 11th century, and again by visitors in the 19th century. Woven on vertical looms, like the carpets above, Wangden rugs are easily recognised by their dark grounds and bold designs in just a few colours (36, 37). Their thick pile yarns are looped only under front-facing warps and held secure by the warps that show on the back face of the textile, making for a characteristically loose, flexible weave. The warps may be wool or, like two examples in the Mariani Collection, spun of yak or goat hair. Seen in monasteries in Tibet and neighbouring regions, Wangden rugs are heavy and often finished with a thick woollen fringe—characteristics that work well for fixed use in monasteries or homes—and square sitting mats, 3 by 6 feet sitting and sleeping rugs, and long runners are the only known Wangden rug types.9

Other pile textiles are produced on backstrap looms—but probably not on Tibetan horizontal frame looms, where the insertion of looped pile would be quite awkward. Both looms are ideal for making a variety of plain-weave and twill textiles (nambu), often decorated with stripes or tie-dyed, that were widely traded and important as gifts and tax payments. Neither can accommodate as wide a warp as a vertical loom, so two or more loom lengths must be joined to make a finished textile. Thus, pile panels woven on a backstrap loom are stitched together to make a sitting or sleeping rug (tsukdruk; 38–41). Portable backstrap looms are used by villagers, pastoralists and nomads throughout the Himalayas—and simple pile carpets of this sort can be found from Ladakh to Bhutan.9

The Mariani Collection includes a dozen looped pile sitting or sleeping rugs. Compared to knotted carpets, tsukdruk have sparse patterning, a looser weave and a rougher surface. Many have a solid colour or intermittently striped field, but several that Mariani owns show how carefully some weavers planned patterns. The simple cross designs in (38, 39) line up perfectly, and the composition of (40, 41) also resembles that of a conventionally knotted carpet, again with woven edge stripes like cloth borders. Most tsukdruk are 3 by 6 feet, but Mariani also has an unusual 2 by 3 feet example made of three narrow panels.

True “one of a kind” Tibetan rugs occasionally still turn up—and spark the delight of continuing discovery. One type, not made on a loom, utilises a looped-pile backstitching technique whose reverse face (the surface of the carpet) resembles embroidery; only two examples are known (no. 4, Myers [1984]) and (pl. 158, Kuloy [1982]). Were these made under the tutelage of a foreign missionary just across Tibet’s border? Or an experiment by a weaver on an estate? Another type that I have not seen before is a lovely rug in the Mariani Collection (42–44). Made of five panels, it has a “centre field” (three panels), decorated with crosses that imitate the tie-dyed flatweaves for which Tibet was once famous. The weaver again planned for the finished rug to resemble a knotted carpet: the rug has two guard stripes, then a pearl border, and finally a yungdrung border. Mariani has invested in repairing many of his rugs and removing their cloth edgings (which typically show a lot of wear), but this carpet retains a red broadcloth edge and is backed with striped Bhutanese cotton fabric. Unusually, while some surface areas are worn, the looped, inserted pile appears to have been trimmed very short to create a surface like that of a knotted carpet. Does this rug reflect a local tradition? The requirements of a particular client? Or was it simply one weaver’s creative use of local materials and equipment?

As informative as recent publications are, there is definitely room for more serious study of Tibetan pile weav-
Sitting or sleeping rug (tsukdruk)
3 weft-looped panels, cotton warp, wool weft
32 x 63 inches, 20th century

Selected Bibliography


40 Sitting or sleeping rug (*tsukdruk*)
3 weft-looped panels, wool warp and weft
59 x 28 inches, 20th century

42 Sitting or sleeping rug (*khaden*)
5 weft-looped panels, twill ground
Wool warp and weft, woolen broadcloth and cotton edging, Bhutanese cotton fabric backing
62 x 32 inches, 19th–20th century

41 Front detail of (40)

43 Front detail of (42)
Notes

1 My thanks to Arthur Leeper for information on Shanpula. Leeper’s chapters in Myers (1984) and Worcester and Miller (1996) are still must-reads on excavated loop-pile textiles. While the archaeological record from south-central Tibet itself is thin, recent geological analyses show that the Lunana area of northwestern Bhutan on Tibet’s southern border was seasonally visited, probably by people from the north [Tibet], around 4750 BC and settled from around 2550 BC. “Austrian scientists discover evidence . . . ”, July 7th, 2009, Kuenzil (Bhutan).

2 Members of the British Younghusband Expedition to Tibet in 1904 recognised the market potential of Tibetan carpets. Somewhat later, Marco Pallis, an Italian mountaineer who developed a deep affinity for Tibetan arts and crafts in the 1930s and became a Buddhist, was the first Westerner to appreciate that these carpets were a truly distinctive local art form. His partner in a rug-weaving enterprise in Kalimpong in the 1940s, Aristide Messinesi, wrote the first description of Tibetan pile weaving in 1956.

3 For a good discussion of this evolution, see Chodrak and Tashi, pp. 27–48. Interestingly, weaving under patronage in Tibet is very similar to that in neighbouring Bhutan, which had extensive religious and political relationships and robust trade with Tibet, including in textiles and dye plants. In Bhutan, most ordinary people likewise owed service to a local lord in the form of labour; noble households also had resident weavers in the 19th century and supported “weaving workshops” well into the 20th century. Resident weavers wove to their patron’s specifications, making a host of textiles (although not pile rugs) whose quality was dictated by whether the product was for special or everyday use, for a tax payment, or for presenting as a gift.

4 For a short time, Claudio shared his passion for Tibetan carpets through talks and with clients when he and Ernee operated a business called Colonial Bungalow from 1997–2000.

5 Bunker (2001), pp. 16, 24 and 89.

6 Bhutanese say this pattern in woven textiles invokes wishes for a long life, because stitching together old scraps of cloth into new textiles gives them “new life”.

7 Almost a mate to the rug in Kuloy (1989), pl. 40.

8 See Denwood (1974), pp. 56–61, Kuloy (1989), pls 58 and 59, and Chodrak and Tashi (2000). Local legend has it that the colours, structure and designs of Wangden carpets were introduced by a Gelukpa lama; this is probably apocryphal, because the Gelukpa became politically dominant only in the 16th century. According to Rupert Smith, who is trying to preserve this local tradition through contemporary production, Wangden-type rugs have also been produced in recent memory in Nyima Shang.

9 Denwood (1974) described several looped pile structures showing yarns that are inserted into rather than knotted onto the ground—but these pile weavings have not been much studied. Chodrak and Tashi (2000) have made the case that looped pile weaving is very ancient in Tibet, and long coexisted with cut-loop Sennah knot carpet weaving.