

Best Seen in Sunshine

The fifth in the Minasian Rug Company's series of special thematic exhibitions, on Baluch weavings, is built around rugs acquired from the Fell Collection as well as loans from other local holdings. **Joseph Fell** reviews the material.

Baluch Heaven

Collecting in the Heartland

Minasian Rug Co., 1244 Chicago Avenue,
Evanston, Illinois, USA

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Not so many years ago, the classification of Baluch rugs was quite simple: if it looked like a Baluch, it was a Baluch. Although in recent decades more-or-less scholarly research has provided a bewildering catalogue of labels for the weavings of Baluch tribes and sub-tribes and reattributed many rugs previously described as Baluch, there is still perhaps something to be said for the old practice, largely because a majority of these pieces do share a common aesthetic sensibility.

In other words a 'Baluch' rug is a regional product. This doubtless controversial attitude becomes understandable when you find yourself in the position of spending months organising an exhibition of Baluches, all needing at least minimal attribution. Fortunately, misattributing a rug is not yet a crime. When in doubt, I found a simple "Baluch, Northeast Persia or West Afghanistan" worked perfectly well.



1. Above: Timuri flatwoven cover (detail), Khorasan, northeast Persia, late 19th or early 20th century. 1.57 x 2.84m (5'2" x 9'4")

2. 'Baluch Heaven' at the Minasian Rug Co. in Evanston includes a well known early 19th century *mina khani* design rug from the Roger Hilpp Collection

When Minasian Rug Co. decided to stage this show, the word was sent out to Chicago area collectors in the hope that a modest number of pieces could be found to supplement an equally modest number of items already in hand. After a minimal culling of unattractive specimens, a task that in retrospect could have been even more rigorous, we ended up with seventy pieces. During my thirty years as a dealer, I used regularly to joke that the US heartland was Baluch Heaven for the collector. The legendary frugality of the early settlers, and their descendants, meant that a Baluch was considerably easier for a dealer to sell than, say, a Tabriz or a Kashan. The result was an abundance of Baluches in the marketplace. Ergo, Baluch Heaven. Maybe they say the same thing in New England, or even in California.

A majority of the pieces in the show are decent textbook examples of Baluch work. I was nevertheless pleasantly surprised both by the variety and the unique or at least unexpected pieces, such as a small rug with the field design of a 'Samarkand' vase carpet, or the *ru-korssi* (5) that is a faithful copy of an Afshar





conservator a case of the hives, but the Baluches like it just fine.

As usual with tribal weavings, the bag faces at their best have a jewel-like quality. They communicate a pride of workmanship that reminds the viewer of Islamic miniatures, which in a sense they are. The exhibition has nearly twenty examples, at least half of which would form a decent collection by themselves. A small *khorjin* from the Kashmar area with stylised flowers and vines has a greater visual presence than most *dozar*-sized rugs. Another example with a diamond-shaped grid containing deeply serrated floral motifs has the warm burnished glow of a fine piece of furniture. There are also three Timuri bag faces with either octagonal or rectilinear central medallions enclosing small octagons with stars. Of different age, perhaps even different generations — they nicely illustrate the evolution (read degeneration) of a single design.

The first rug I acquired as a novice collector was a Baluch, a relatively large early example with a *mina khani* field and a Turkmen-line meander border that I rescued from an elderly dealer's stack of patching rugs, which is what we used to call anything that needed significant work back in the Dark Ages of the 1960s.



I still own the rug, and it's in the show. A well-known collector tried for years to purchase it from me, even making a special trip to Chicago for that purpose. I'm happy to say that the price I reluctantly quoted was too high. I sometimes wonder if perhaps it was meant that the first rug to enter my collection should be the last to leave. If it turns out to be so, it makes me happier still that it's a Baluch.

flatweave, one of several weavings showing strong Afshar influence. Then there was the early (for a Baluch) rug with the format and look of a Holbein variant that somehow had acquired a traditional Baluch border, or even the small Timuri rug with a main carpet design and a warmly colourful palette (for the genre) worked in beautifully silky wool, or a fine Torbat-e-Haidari piece with an octagonal leaf-form gridwork in a truly striking yellow.

By far the most popular piece in the show is an exuberant and appealingly primitive rug with a version of the well-known *mina-khani* pattern (2). From the collection of Roger Hilpp, a longtime Chicago collector, it was previously exhibited at the Chicago Cultural Center in conjunction with ACOR 2 in 1994 (HALI 74, p.103). It could easily be early 19th century, an impressive age for a Baluch.

One of the more interesting examples on display is significantly later (circa 1900) and markedly more subdued, but worthy of study by the Baluch connoisseur. This large flatweave (1) is probably Timuri work, and is noteworthy for having a virtually complete vocabulary of Baluch kilim designs. If we needed a Baluch Rosetta Stone, this could be it.

Another remarkable and easily overlooked piece in the exhibition is a Timuri prayer rug, by far the finest-woven prayer rug in the show. It's so muted and lacking in contrast that the average viewer will undoubtedly give it no more than a passing glance. The skillful weaving, the well-executed design, the unusual and marvellously detailed flatwoven ends, add up to something close to Best of Breed status. This rug also lends strong support to the truism that Baluches are best viewed in sunlight. While indoors, the exhibition fortunately is well-lit, which is to say that it would give a museum



3. Top left: Baluch rug, northeast Persia or west Afghanistan, ca. 1900. 0.94 x 1.68m (3'1" x 5'6")

4. Left: Baluch rug, northeast Persia or west Afghanistan, early 20th century. 1.12 x 1.80m (3'8" x 5'11")

5. Above: Baluch *ru-korssi*, northeast Persia or west Afghanistan, late 19th century. 1.24 x 1.42m (4'1" x 4'8")