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Tibetan Carpets



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In 1959 and 1960 many thousands of Tibetans fled to India and Nepal, where charitable organizations provided them with food and clothing, as far as was possible, and arranged for their reception in refugee camps. At first the International Committee of the Red Cross looked after the welfare of the refugees, of whom a considerable number found their way to Nepal. In 1963 the Office of Swiss Technical Co-operation assumed the responsibility for a part of them, with the aim of helping the Tibetans to attain economic independence. An agricultural settlement was founded and three handicraft centres for carpet making were built. Early in 1966 these centres were given the status of independent producing companies with a Tibetan management, in order to promote individual responsibility and enthusiasm for the work, while the export and retail distribution of the carpets was placed in the hands of a trading company under Swiss management. This venture has good prospects of permanent success. Over a period of four years the production of carpets has grown from 60 to 400 square yards a month, and in skill and quality alike great progress has been made. But the full material and social independence of the Tibetan community in Nepal will be assured only when their products find a steady and sufficient sale on the world market. The excellent quality of the wool, the brilliant colours and the distinction of the ancient designs awakened to new life in these carpets have already won them a good reputation and have enabled the Tibetans in Nepal to strengthen their economic and social roots in their new homeland.

*The Delegate
of the Swiss Federal Council
for Technical Co-operation*

Figure 1

This saddle carpet measures approximately 27 by 22 inches, with the red felt border 30 by 24½ inches. It shows the 'White Snow Lioness with the Turquoise Mane' of the epic, together with the 'Fire Lion'. This mythological motif is surrounded by a protective serpentine band of T-shaped meanders, beyond which the 'Dragon and Phoenix' motif appears on the four sides of the broad margin.



Figure 2

A saddle cloth, about 56 by 26 inches in size, with openings for the saddle girth. It is strapped under the saddle, and with it goes a pair of matching saddle carpets. Old saddle cloths such as this are lined and bordered with red felt.

Although the art of making pile carpets was taken up by the Tibetans at a rather late date—some 150 or 200 years ago—it can be assumed that carpets were known to them much earlier. The first carpets of this kind they saw must have belonged to the Indo-Scythian nomads who traversed the vast region of northern Central Asia in the first millennium BC. This was the age in which successive waves of Huns stormed into China from the north-east. There they encountered the Scythian Yüeh-chih tribes dwelling in the northern Kansu region, and finally, in the third century BC., forced them to abandon their settlements. After generations of migration during which they traced a huge arc along the northern route, the Yüeh-chih reached Bactria and the northern parts of India, where they founded the famous Indo-Scythian kingdom. With its trade routes this kingdom linked southern India with Central Asia.

But not all the Scythians took this route; a smaller group branched off from the southern Kansu corridor, and passing directly to the south-west settled in the north of the Tibetan plateau. These were Scythians who were already related to the proto-Mongolians by intermarriage, and they were accepted in their new home and assimilated, especially so in the north-eastern region of the country. Together with their native leather and felt appliqué crafts, they probably brought with them pile carpets obtained by barter on the ancient trading routes or as plunder; this assumption is supported by the finds in the Scytho-Mongolian frozen tombs of the Altai dating from the fifth century BC. Tibet with its indigenous proto-Mongolian inhabitants was a natural asylum for various peoples and scattered tribes, for the 'roof of the world' is screened from the south by gigantic mountain ranges, while another mountain barrier forms its northern boundary, immediately to the north of which lies the famous Silk Road of the Tarim basin cultures. Tibet thus became a place of refuge for tribal groups cut off from the main body of their kinfolk by the innumerable wars and constant strife with and against the advancing Huns. The discovery of two-thousand-year-old rock chamber tombs, their entrances barred with huge carved slabs of granite, bears witness to the early presence of proto-Tibetan tribes in the region near Lhasa, for the tombs lie to the north of the capital along the ancient caravan roads linking the north and south. Burned remains of charcoal, hand-made ceramics, spear-heads and bones were found in these graves. Only in the frozen graves of the northern Scythian lands could remnants of fabric and skin be preserved, but coffins containing mummified bodies have been discovered in the deserts of the Tarim basin, along with fragments of wool pile rugs, which attest to the early presence of Scythians in these once flourishing oases of culture. These carpets, today only fragments, were once objects of daily use, and similar ones must have found their way all over Central Asia along the wide-spreading prehistoric trade routes.

In Tibet the most popular kind of carpet was, and still is in the Himalayan mountains of Bhutan, the saddle carpet, which on occasion is spread upon the

Figure 3 Victory banner from northern Bumthang in Eastern Bhutan, showing the hero of the Gesar epic as the god of war, mounted and fully armed. In the four corners the mythological guardians of the four quarters of the earth: the 'White Snow Lioness with the Turquoise Mane', the Dragon, the mythical bird Khyung, and the Tiger. On the right of the inner border are the eight

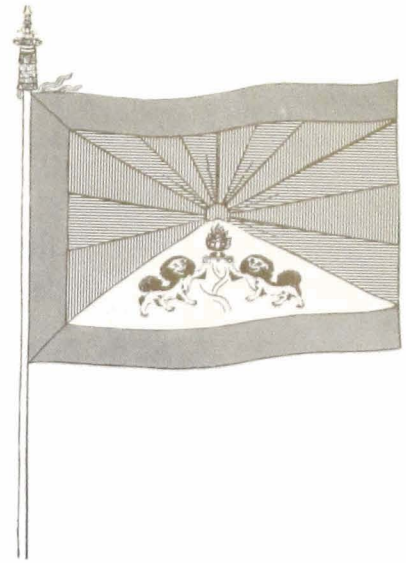
lucky symbols: the royal umbrella, the wheel of the law, the knot of life, the lotus, the two fishes, the vase with the water of life, the conch shell, and the round banner of victory. Other motifs are the flame-encircled jewels, the thunderbolt, the swastika, and mythological animals beneath waving banners crowned with yak-tails and surmounted by a trident or a flaming sword.



ground to sit on. It is square, about 1 foot 6 inches each way, and is indispensable for long caravan expeditions. The commonly used wooden pack-saddles are piled high with blankets and cushions, the pile being held in place by the fastened saddle carpet (Figure 1). At each resting place the carpet is taken off and spread upon the ground as a covering. Having a thick and warm pile, it affords good protection against damp; the name for them in Tibetan means 'earth mat' or 'earth seat'. The horse's back is protected by beautiful saddle cloths forming part of a complete set of saddle carpets (Figure 2). Even on these small carpets every element of the ornamentation has a symbolic meaning, bringing good fortune or providing protection; the same symbolism is found on the saddles of the mythological horses ridden by the heroes in the Central Asian Gesar epic (Figure 3). The symbols of this epic reappear in the appliqué saddle cloths of the chivalric age, where their purpose was to render the riders strong and invincible. Everything, from the horse's harness to the smallest detail, had its particular meaning and special protective power. The magical Shamanistic art of the age animated all things, for the protective power that repelled the foeman was thought to dwell in the object itself.

With the passing of the centuries the intrinsic significance of these symbols underwent change and they were endowed with new meanings. Buddhist symbols of good fortune were added (Figure 3). In Buddhist belief a symbol or the object sanctified by its use have no significance beyond themselves; the spiritual content alone counts; the outward form is no more than an instrument or aid, the purpose of which is to enable the observer to pursue the religious path of thought. In Tibet all these motifs, whether traditional or of newer date, were woven, carved, embossed, cast in metal, or reproduced in patchwork with cloth and felt, and later the Tibetans repeated them in the designs of their pile carpets. Thus many ancient symbols have remained in use to the present day, for example the 'Magic Horse' adorned with the strength symbols of other powerful animals (Figure 4), the 'Thunder Dragon' (Figures 7, 8), the mythical bird 'Khyung-Garuda', the enemy of the snake which he holds in his beak (Figure 3), and in particular the Tibetan 'Snow Lioness' (Figure 5), the mythological guardian of the glacier world which appears today on the national flag of Tibet.

The traditional Tibetan carpet is of medium size, measuring about six by three feet. When first introduced it took the place of the cloth-bordered tiger skin which is still used, though only in religious ceremonies. In its richest form, embellished with the chief symbols of Buddhism, it is a throne carpet that graces the seat of the head Lama in the altar room of every monastery. The centre of the carpet is framed by the 'snake-line rampart' of meanders or by rows of spirals formed into protective border patterns, their original meaning being to protect the seat from evil forces of all kinds, and from intruders, including insects, worms and damp. The borders of these lined, fringeless carpets display a multitude of fretwork and geometrical patterns, from the T-shaped interlaced motifs to the interrupted meander, as can be seen from the illustrations on page 7. Meanders appear as early as the neolithic Ma-chang pots made by the tribes that migrated from Central Asia through the Kansu corridor to ancient China. Among the oldest geometrical designs in existence, they appear and reappear in countless variations in the ornamentation of Tibetan handicrafts, and today they still figure in the woven articles made in Bhutan by the descendants of tribes that migrated from eastern Tibet to the southern Himalayas (see 'palette' No.24, 1966). There are meander-framed carpets with a flower design



The national flag of Tibet shows the pair of Snow Lions which symbolise in Buddhism the dual system of spiritual and temporal power. They hold aloft the three flaming 'jewels' that signify the Buddha, the Law of Buddhist doctrine, and the Community of the Faithful; the golden edge on three sides of the flag denotes the spread of the ideals of Buddhism. The snowy mountain represents Tibet, the 'Land of Glaciers'; the rising sun above it is symbolical of the freedom, good fortune and prosperity of the country, and it has twelve rays as a reminder of the twelve descendants of the six original tribes. On this subject ancient writings have this to say: 'It is difficult to determine the origin of the Tibetan people. One legend recounts that the Tibetans are descended from an ape; the Indians hold that they derive from a prince of the epic age who fled into the Himalayas, while the Chinese annals say that they descend from the San-Miao who once ruled in the north of Central Asia'.

Figure 4
Carpet, 72 by 38 inches, reproduced from old specimens. It depicts the 'Magic Horse' and the mythical bird Kyung amidst cloud patterns. The former recalls the most magnificent horse of the

Gesar epic, which is symbolically described as having the attributes of the mightiest animals in the world; here it has antlers, a lion's mane, a fire-spitting dragon's mouth, and hooves. The border is a T-shaped meander pattern.

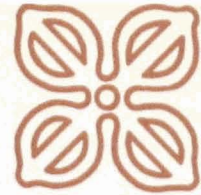


Figure 5
An old lion carpet, 72 by 36 inches, with a felt border. It shows the two snow lions surrounded by eight dragons upon a dark blue ground.

Figure 6
A flower medallion flanked by branching flower and bud designs on a pale grey ground forms the centre of this carpet which measures 76 by 38 inches. The border with its severe geometrical pattern of T-shaped meanders is typical of old Tibetan carpets.



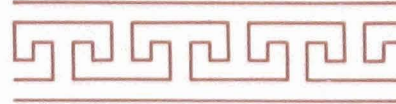
Decorative and symbolic elements used in Tibetan carpets



Simple meander



T-shaped meander



Angular T-shaped meander



Angular double spiral used as a border pattern

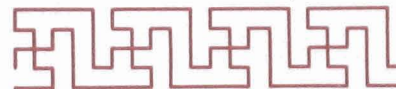


Row of single left-handed swastikas



Row of linked swastikas

Variations of linked swastika patterns



Thunderbolt in the shape of a cross, the symbol of supreme, adamantine perception, from the Tibetan name for the thunderbolt meaning 'Prince of Stones' or diamond.



Circular and linear emblems of longevity, as found on ancient Chinese silk garments. According to the Tibetans these emblems derive from a very ancient Chinese round script.



Other forms of the emblem of longevity

Figure 7

An old throne carpet, 65 by 34 inches in size, with a colourful border of cloud and water-stripe patterns. It is filled by the figures of the Red Dragon and the Phoenix amid flower sprays. Carpets with this dragon and phoenix theme were said to have been made at the express wish of the thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876–1933), who attached great importance to the 'Year of the Dragon and Phoenix'.

Figure 8

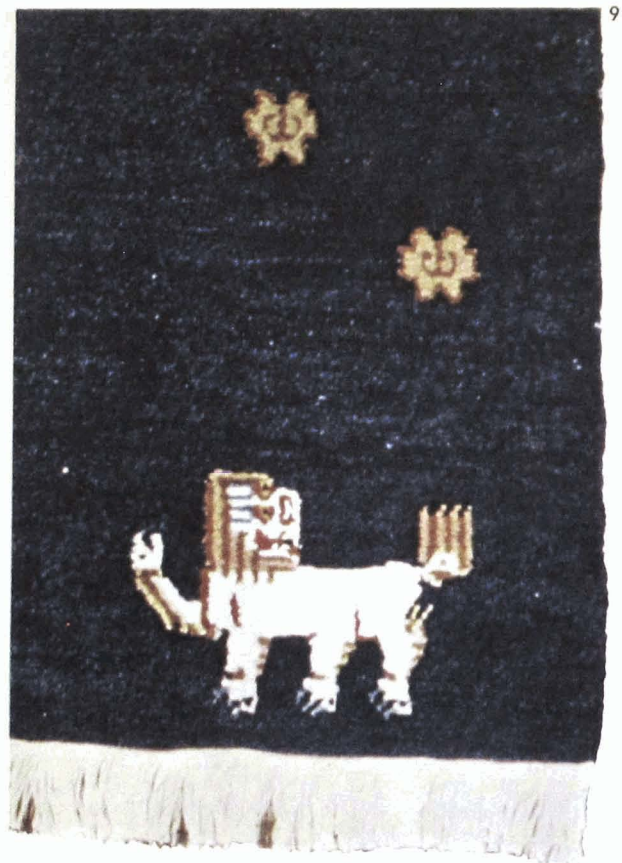
This Tibetan carpet (68 by 35 inches) with its delicate apricot ground is reminiscent of the Chinese Ning Hsia style. The pile has been lightly shorn in relief to accentuate the motifs: the cloud dragon in the centre, on either side lotus blooms with flame-encircled wishing gems at the two ends. Flowers and peaches, the fruit of longevity, decorate the long borders, cloud patterns and water-stripes the two short sides.



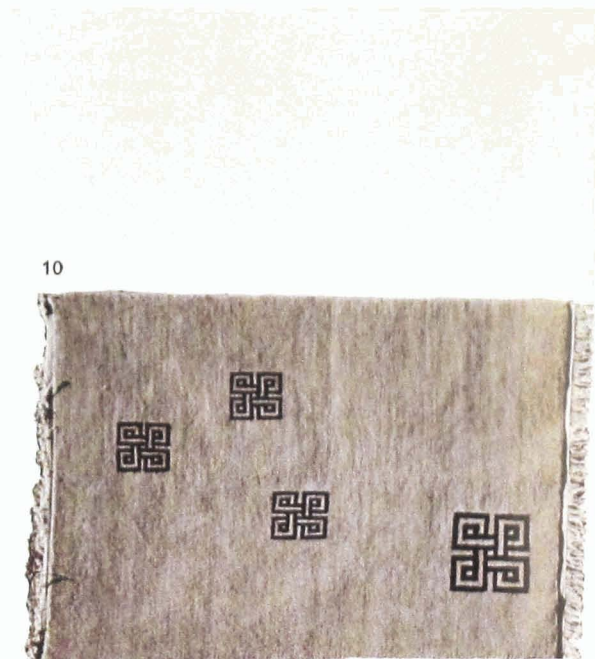
dominated by the lotus, the symbol of purity (Figure 6). The thunderbolt, once a weapon of the heathen gods, became in Buddhism a symbol of adamantine wisdom. On some carpets one of the earlier symbols, such as the Thunder Dragon, alone or with the Phoenix, stands out against a plain-coloured ground (Figure 7). Other examples show several or all eight of the lucky symbols (Figure 3). The same motifs appear on the ancient Chinese pillar carpets, where the divided blue dragon, spitting fire and strutting proudly with upraised legs, assumes its complete form when the carpet is wrapped round a pillar. The eight Buddhist symbols of good fortune that surround it and which can be seen time and again, either singly or in groups, are:

- the protecting umbrella of royal dignity;
- the Buddhist 'wheel of doctrine', with its eight spokes signifying the eightfold path to salvation;
- the endlessly interwoven knot of life;
- the lotus, symbol of absolute purity, rising unblemished from the swamp above the water to the light;
- the two fishes, symbolising fertility;
- the vase containing the water of eternal life;
- the white conch shell, one of the oldest sacred musical instruments which sounds each time a life-energy, freed from the constantly turning wheel of existence, enters the state of Nirvana; and
- the circular banner announcing the triumphant promulgation of Buddhism.

Many Tibetan carpets are decorated with single large swastikas, or with a border of separate or interlaced swastikas. This is one of the oldest known decorative motifs, and in its geometrical form is identical with the fylfot pattern common to the ancient civilisations of Europe; an example is the band of left-handed frets running below the marble relief of the Ara Pacis Augustae in Rome. The ancient Tibetan form is clearly the left-handed one. The interpretations of the swastika speak of the cross of the sun, the primum mobile, and the migration of the human race from the east to the north, west and south. Meanders and protective bands of swastikas are among the oldest loom patterns, without which the traditional weaving of the Bhutanese would be inconceivable. Yet the art of making carpets with a cut pile is not a native art in Bhutan—a significant fact, for when the Bhutanese in about A.D. 1600 founded an independent kingdom in the southern Himalayas they were recent immigrants from Tibet acquainted with all the skills and knowledge of that time—the art of constructing fortresses, timber-frame buildings and iron-chain bridges, weaving, the casting of bronze, weapon forging and silverwork, and notably the whole tradition enshrined in the Gesar epic. But at this date the art of making pile carpets was not practised in Tibet either. Carpets entered the country from the outside world, which is not surprising, for Tibet lay at the crossroads of the main caravan routes that led outwards in all directions. They reached the country along the Silk Road from Sinkiang in Eastern Turkestan and from West Turkestan, as well as from Manchuria as bartered goods, and as the possessions of the faithful Mongolian Buddhists who had been converted to the religion by the Tibetans in the thirteenth century. Carpets came into Tibet not only as merchandise but as gifts brought by the pilgrims who came to pay homage to the Royal Lamas and later to the Dalai Lamas. From the seventeenth century onwards the treasures of the Potala Palace were enriched by beautiful carpets from old China and the other countries along the Silk Road. The first reports on



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Figures 9 to 12
Examples of carpets from the Tibetan
workshops in Nepal. Above, a small seat
rug with a lion pattern on a dark blue
ground; on the right a simplified form
of the knot of life device in a beige carpet
and two flower pattern rugs.

Chinese carpet manufactories reached Europe in the seventeenth century from Ming Hsia. The carpet-making skills were introduced and furthered under the Manchu dynasty, which conquered China in 1644 and ruled it up to 1911. Lustrous Mongolian wool was used for these carpets. The colour of the ground is usually a pale apricot shade of yellow (Figure 8) or a pale grey, while the borders are grey or dark blue. Dragon motifs, the typical cloud bands, and flower garlands or flower medallions predominate, along with the traditional patterns that had long been used in Chinese brocades and silk fabrics, for example the symbol of longevity and the variations of the meander and swastika motifs (page 7). The pile of these Manchu-Chinese rugs was carefully shorn so that the designs appeared in soft relief, the effect being reminiscent of ancient appliqué work and the felt patchwork carpets of the Central Asian steppes.

As saddle cloths and sitting rugs, tent or wall hangings, these appliqué and felt rugs had been from time immemorial an indigenous craft of the nomadic Central Asian tribes and of the settled, fortress-building inhabitants of the Tibetan region. After the art of making carpets with a cut pile had been introduced into Tibet, at the earliest in the eighteenth century, the beautiful, archaic symbols and designs were adapted to the new technique. Carpets were widely used for some of the purposes mentioned, but never as floor coverings—the sacred symbols made the Tibetan forbear from treading upon them. Typical of Tibetan carpets is the sparing use of motifs; often one figure alone dominates the ground, for instance the snow lion, the dragon or the life knot. Only recently in the Tibetan refugee centres have green and brown come into use as ground colours to enliven the ancient symbols (Figures 9–12).

With the assistance of the Office of Swiss Technical Co-operation, a number of carpet-making centres for Tibetan refugees have been founded in Nepal in the past few years. The carpets are made for export, and with their fine traditional designs, although these are unfamiliar to Westerners, they are slowly winning a place for themselves in Western countries. These carpets not only provide the Tibetan refugees with the material means of life; they bear witness to the continuing vitality and the rejuvenation of a valuable cultural tradition which cannot but enrich our own occidental heritage.

The carpets illustrated in Figures 1 to 8 are owned by private collectors in Switzerland. The cover picture and Figures 9 to 12 are reproduced by permission of Mr. J. Iten-Maritz of Zurich.

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Figures 1 to 8 and cover: Foto-Studio 13, Zurich.

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