



Ivory-ground 'Bird' Rugs



Portrait of a Protestant Doctor of Laws, about 1560, Hans Mielich (1516-1573).
This is the earliest depiction of an ivory-ground rug, showing the fully developed design of the 'Bird' motif; the border has alternating half diamonds.
Formerly in the Kress Collection, New York, whereabouts unknown.

Introduction

This very iconic group, the largest and best known of the ivory-ground rugs, is named after the field ornament resembling double-headed birds. However, long ago it has been observed that the 'Birds' derive from floral or arabesque motifs. Similarities with Iznik tile revetments (such as those from the Ruštem Pasha Mosque in Istanbul) suggest that the 'birds' are in fact highly stylised leaf forms.

The *Portrait of a Protestant Doctor of Laws*, of 1557 by Hans Mielich, shows the earliest depiction of a 'Bird' rug, reflecting the pattern woven in the first half of the 16th century.

The 'Bird' rugs are mentioned in Ottoman documents as well as in European records. The most important one is probably the 1640 Ottoman price register published by the Turkish scholars Kütükoğlu and Halil Inalcik, which refers to small-format "Selendi style" white-ground rugs with the "leopard" or "crow" motif. Selendi, the village in Manisa Sanjak where such white-ground rugs were woven, is about 80 km from Ushak. The register does not mention large white-ground Selendi carpets, which probably were made in Ushak, where carpets for the Ottoman palaces and Mosques were made. Typically, the Selendi rugs have a higher horizontal knot count, while in Ushaks it is the opposite.

According to the most recent data (Ionescu 2024, Appendix II), worldwide there are about 70 Selendi 'Bird' rugs. Many survived in Transylvania (about 40 rugs in existence today) or were sourced in the early 20th century in that region and are scattered now in world collections from Doha, to Europe, and America. An inscribed 'Bird' rug from the Monastery Church in Sighișoara, illustrated here to the right, bears the donor inscription with the year of donation: **TESTAMENTUM LAVRENTIUS BOLKESCH A.D. 1646**. This implies the rug belonged to the deceased, and it is likely that it was a few decades older.

This is a unique case where we can safely associate surviving types of rugs, with those mentioned in Saxon, Hungarian, and Ottoman sources, which reveal pattern, size, price, and the area of weaving.

Inscribed 'Bird' rug,
Monastery Church,
Sighișoara / Schässburg, inv. 534



'Bird' rug

Selendi, West Anatolia, Early 17th century

Wool on wool,

Size: 188 x 120 cm

Symmetrical knots: Vertical x Horizontal knots/dm.

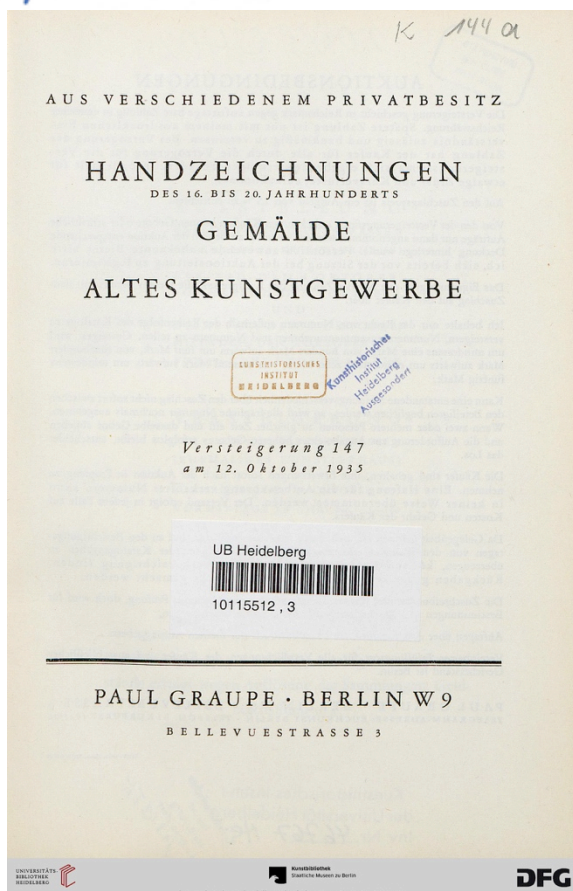
The rug shows a symmetrical field, with one column of three elongated 'Birds' oriented vertically, and three pairs of 'Birds' oriented horizontally, which look fatter (because of the lower vertical knot density). In between the usual composition with a cogwheel rosette and buds. At the vertical edges of the field there are a series of triangles of various colours (blue, red, and pale yellow), which are known from other examples, for instance the very similar rug from St Margaret's Church in Mediaş, Transylvania, inv. 503 or the Zaleski rug.

The border shows a well-designed cloudband and rosette pattern; the two motifs in the vertical border are slightly elongated compared to those on the horizontal border. This is typical for Selendi rugs as the vertical knotting density is lower than the horizontal one. What makes this rug almost unique is the fact that the vertical borders are remarkably well planned: at the point where the vertical pattern meets the horizontal one there are no truncated cloudbands.

The similarity of the Cattai rug with the inscribed rug from Sighișoara, supports a dating to early 1600s. The same dating was given in the description made by the great German carpet scholar Kurt Erdmann (MIK archive VT.1-c.42).

The history of this rug can be traced back for almost 100 years as the rug was published in the auction catalogue of the firma Paul Graupe, of 12 October 1935, Berlin, lot 241. It is very rare to have such early photos and one can see that at the time the rug was in spectacular condition, which suggest a Transylvanian provenance. For a long time, according to the Erdmann archive, the rug was in the F. Niescher Collection, in Chemnitz, Germany.

Stefano Ionescu



241 Wollener Knüppteppich (sogenannter „Vogelteppich“). Weißer Grund mit eckig stilisierten Rosetten, von denen an dünnen Zweigen Lanzettblätter ausgehen. Der Grund zwischen je zwei sich begegnenden Lanzettblättern braungelb gefärbt (die sog. „Vögel“). Die Rosettreihen an den Längsseiten zu Dreiecken zusammengeschrumpft. Weiße Borte mit fortlaufender Ranke und Wolkenbändern in Rot oder Mattgelb. Anatolien, um 1600. 188 x 124 cm. (2)
Gutes Beispiel dieser nicht sehr zahlreichen Gattung.
Tafel 37.



Comparable Examples



St. Margaret's Church,
Medias, inv. 503



Zaleski Collection
MITA, Brescia, inv. 144267.2



Rupea / Reps Parish,
inv. 38



Cerruti Collection
inv. CC.18.T.A681