LETTER FROM TURKEY

THE RUG MISSIONARY

A dealer sets out to give his business a better name.

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

When I first visited the city of Antalya, on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey, four years ago, the streets near the Old Town's twelfth-century minaret were filled with carpet salesmen. They advertised themselves by shouting in German, English, Russian, and Turkish—any language that they thought might work. They hissed at me when I ignored them, and even grabbed my sleeve. One shop, however, caught my eye: the Orient Bazaar, which occupied a large brick house on Pasha Camii Sokak. There was nobody out front trawling for business, but a string of beautiful kilims hung from the walls. When I peered inside, I saw a man reading in the corner. A German shepherd slept heavily on the doorstep—not exactly a welcome mat—but I decided to go in anyway.

Whether you are in Baku, Yerevan, Beirut, or the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, every visit to a rug shop is a courtship. There is a ritual: the proprietor doesn't ask what you want, and you don't tell him, because etiquette demands evasion, flirtation. Within minutes, apple tea or thick, sweet coffee appears on a small silver tray, usually carried by a young boy. But as I crossed the threshold of this sturdy old house the owner glanced at me without getting up. "I don't bargain," he declared, in a loud voice. "My prices are fixed. If bargains are what you like, please go someplace else."

I had never heard of such a thing. Everyone knows that part of buying a rug is haggling with the dealer. Well, not here. Mehmet Saggun, an engaging, contemplative Turk, turned out to be a sort of merchant philosopher and rug missionary. I later found out that he is also the most successful dealer in Antalya, and that he has clients scattered from Innsbruck to Arizona.

Mehmet, who is forty-three, is a burly man, a former local tennis champion with a row of tarnished trophies that he refers to as "my other collection" arranged on shelves in his home. He keeps four safes filled with rugs in his rambling, seven-room shop, but rarely opens them. "Most people come in and I just let them see what I have on the floor," he told me. "If I think somebody is serious, I open a safe. If they are serious and rich, maybe I open two. And, if they are serious, rich, and I like them, I show them everything I have."

Perhaps sensing an eagerness that far exceeded my resources, Mehmet spent hours with me that day, going through his entire collection. His prices ranged from less than a thousand dollars to more than a hundred thousand. Just before I left, he unfurled his most glorious possession: the fragments of a four-hundred-year-old rug from Kütahya, a celebrated carpet city in western Turkey. It was a threadbare rag, like something you might use to clean a bicycle chain. As I stared at it, Mehmet laughed and told me that a love of rug fragments was an acquired taste. He suggested that I return someday and accompany him on one of his frequent journeys through Turkey, getting to know carpets by seeing and feeling hundreds of them. "Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts," he said. "It's a wonderful field, filled with unappreciated art and many fascinating people. But it is also a world with more than its share of frauds and liars and people you don't want to know. If you really want to learn about rugs, you are going to need to work at it. And you are going to need a guide."

When I decided to accept Mehmet's offer to travel with him, I asked a well-known American collector, Gerard Paquin, whom I should consult to get a feel for the business and the art. He sent me, by E-mail, this reply:

> The mind boggles. Who should I suggest? The secretive London doctor who built the world's best collection of Turkmen rugs? The Assassin, who lives in motel rooms between

East and West Coasts and loves to make the big score? Dynamo Denny, the Islamic-art-history professor and one of the only serious Islamic-art historians who will go near the rug world? The mother goddess nuts? The collector from California who published his collection and detailed the sexual nature of every design? Enough.

To my relief, he added:

You indicated that you were going to Antalya. If it is not Mehmet Saggun you are going to see, be sure you do. He has wonderful, wonderful kilims.

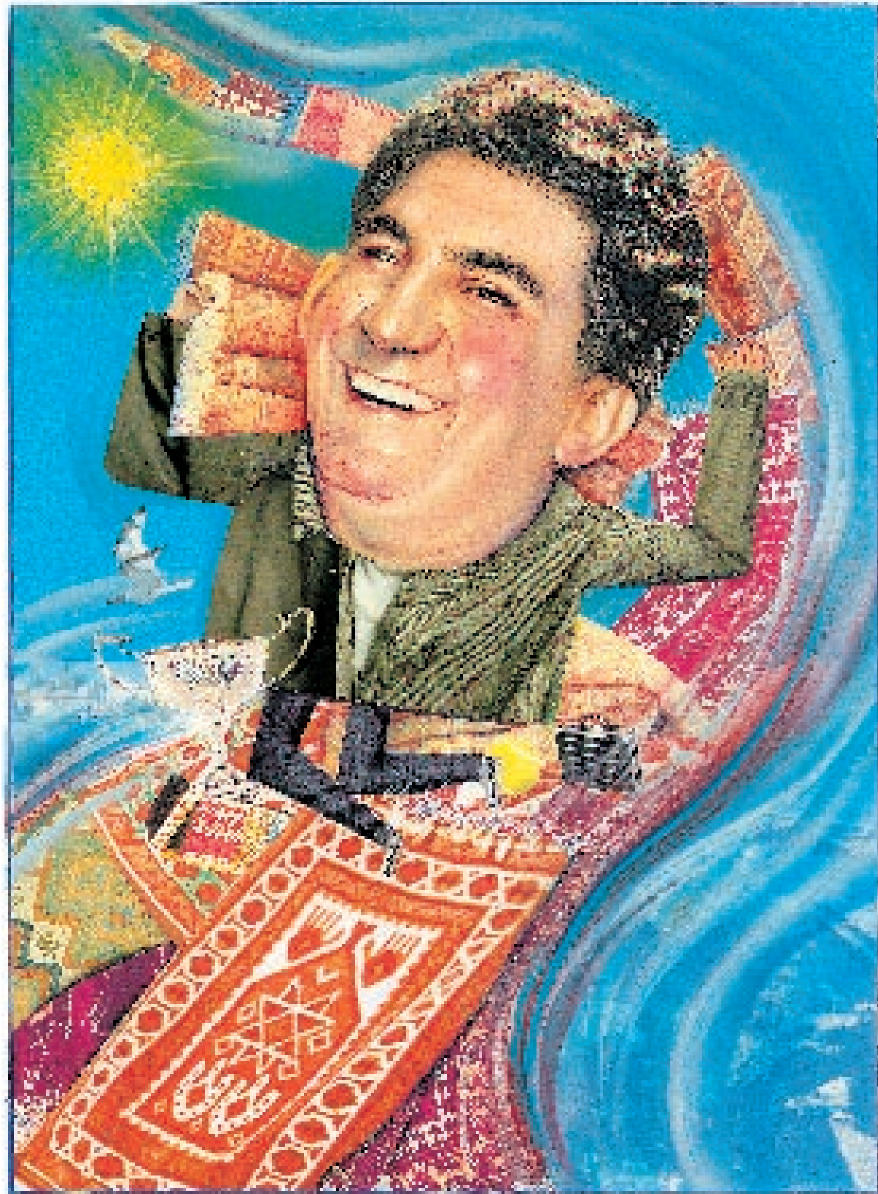
It was serendipity that had drawn me to Mehmet, but as I called around I began to realize that I had stumbled on a textiles savant. "Mehmet is the only man to see in Antalya," the rug expert Franz Sailer told me when I phoned him at his gallery, in Salzburg. The German archeologist Bernard Andreae agreed. "My father had carpets. I have always been around them. But Mehmet made me see them," Andreae said. "It would be foolish to look at him as somebody who just sells carpets. He is really the caretaker of a culture."

There are thousands of rug merchants in Turkey; no town of any size is without them. A few deal only in the rarest carpets and flat-woven kilims; they can sell a hundred rugs a year and live comfortably. Most, however, make their living by supplying tourists with what Mehmet contemptuously calls "wallpaper for floors"—large, mass-produced carpets of thick pile, made from poor-quality wool, and with garish colors created by chemical dyes. Mehmet says such rugs repel him. But in Antalya, which is four hundred and thirty-five miles south of Istanbul, you can't make a living solely on the highest tier. So Mehmet, who specializes in Turkish kilims, deals in Caucasian and tribal rugs as well, selling as many as two thousand pieces a year, most for a few hundred dollars each. "I'm a dealer," he told me with a shrug. "I try to make a ten-per-cent profit. But you can't plan it. You have to be smart and you have to be lucky. But mostly you just have to have rugs."

The past few years have been an exceptionally busy time in the textile world. Prosperity in the West has increased demand for all sorts of art, and that includes rugs. The editors of the London-based magazine *Hali*, whose audience consists of the most passionate people in the rug world, occasionally find themselves publishing ads that cost more than the carpet in the picture. The Internet, which is full of auctions as well as the most arcane conversations about textiles, has also played a role. One Web site, rugnotes.com, received about three hundred and fifty visitors a day three years ago; now it averages more than thirty thousand. But it is never easy knowing whom to trust in this world. "First, you have to see if somebody will identify himself as a rug person," Paquin told me. "Because this is not always viewed as a savory profession."

It is hard to spend any time with serious dealers and not hear them speak unhappily about their image. In France, to call someone a *marchand de tapis* is no compliment. Nor do the words "rug merchant" have warm associations in many other languages. More than one person recalled for me the line used by Robert McFarlane, Ronald Reagan's national-security adviser, when his 1986 mission to swap guns for hostages in Iran ended in failure. Of his dealings with the Iranians, he wired back to the White House, "At bottom they really are rug merchants," and said they were no better than bookies, grad students, and Tatars.

"I meet somebody and I am already thinking of ways not to tell them what I do," Mehmet told me when I returned to Antalya. "The best they will say is



"I started treating my pieces like guests in a fine hotel," Mehmet Saggun says. "Some stay with me only a few nights, others for weeks or more."

that maybe I am a good dealer, like a tame specimen of a wild beast."

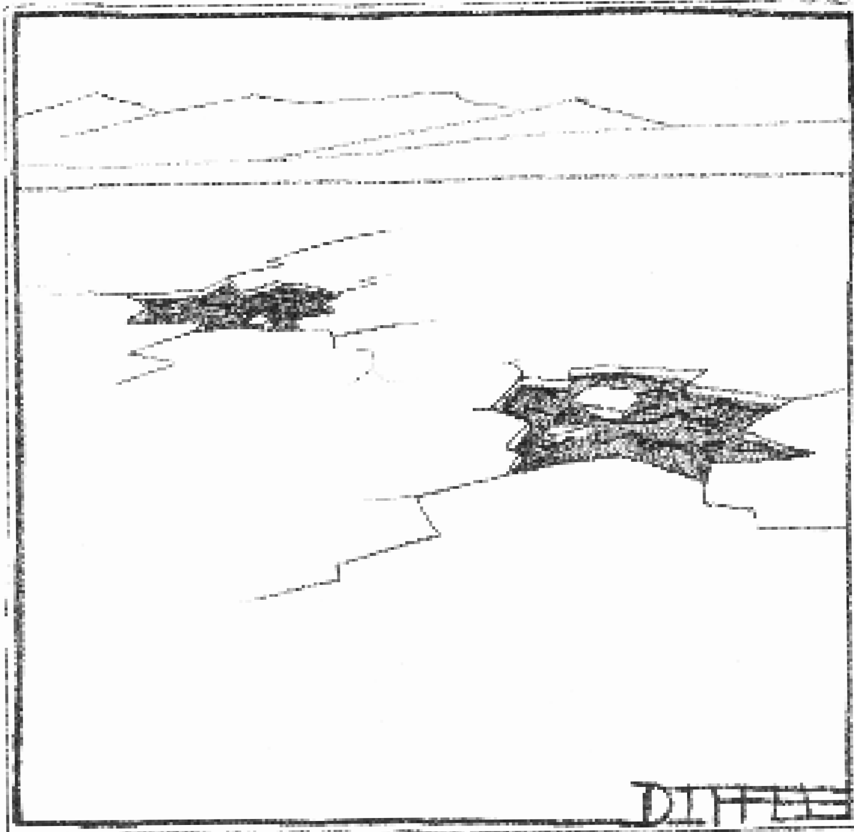
He recalled a night he spent a few years ago on a cruise ship before it left Antalya for Greece. One of his best customers had faxed him, suggesting that he bring his finer kilims to show the passengers. Mehmet hurried over, but that night an American woman lost a valuable ring. "They called the police and they assumed it had to be me—I could see it in their eyes," he said. "I still wonder what would have happened if the woman hadn't found the ring in her suitcase."

Such distrust can be disabling. "Tourists expect to be cheated," Mehmet said as we sat in a café near his store one evening. "Everything follows from that. One day, a man from Berlin was standing in front of my shop. He said to his wife, 'Watch how easy it is to take one of these carpet dealers. They are ignorant.' He spoke in German. It never occurred to him I understood every word. I said, in Turkish, 'Come in.' We spoke in Turkish, in bad English, and in a few words of German.

"He knew a lot about rugs," Mehmet continued, "and he saw a beautiful antique. I told him it was only a thousand dollars but I had promised it to a friend who was travelling. 'If he doesn't want it you can have it,' I told him. He looked at his wife and told her that I was an idiot—that the rug was worth ten thousand dollars at least. He was in my shop maybe thirty times in the next few days, always asking, 'Did he call? Did he call? Did he call?' Finally, about the fourth morning, he asked again. And I said, 'My friend, today we speak in German.' He was astonished. 'Remember how you were going to make me small, that all dealers were fools? Well, I am a fool who speaks your language. That piece you wanted is beautiful, I congratulate you on your eyes. But there is no travelling friend. It is for sale. And for a reasonable price. Only not to you. Never to you. A piece like that deserves better than such arrogant German pricks.' His wife couldn't help it. She smiled."

Although Mehmet was born in the mountains not far from Antalya, he speaks German better than he speaks Turkish. Mehmet fell into his profession in the early eighties, after leaving Stuttgart, where he'd lived for thirteen years, and moving back to a homeland he never knew. His father had taken the family to Germany when he was nine, and Mehmet had watched him struggle to fit in to a society that didn't really want him. "At the time, I was reading many heavy German books, philosophy, literature. It was a depressing period in my life. And I lived in one room with a big, empty white wall.

"I kept looking at that wall and it made me nervous," he went on. "It was so big and so white. I had to cover it with something, so I got a kilim. When I looked at it, something just happened to me. When I was a child, I collected stamps. From an early age, I always had the feeling for a unique piece. This was like that all over again. Some people always remember fine meals or wines, or they can quote long parts of their favorite books or tell you if a piece of music is played too fast or too slow. I remember rugs. If I smell one time the dirt of a fine carpet, it is in my nose forever. "



Sumo on Ice

When I got back to Antalya on a Saturday night, Mehmet was waiting at my hotel. From there we walked over to his shop. It's an open, airy building, with immense walls, which are perfect for displaying his latest acquisitions. Like many dealers, Mehmet once found it hard to part with his best pieces. "It almost ruined me," he said. "It was a catastrophe. Until a friend gave me some advice: be either a dealer or a collector; but you can't be both.

"At that point, I started treating my pieces like guests in a fine hotel," he said. "Some stay with me only a few nights, others for weeks or more. But eventually every rug I buy has got to go." There is one exception: the first unusual carpet he ever bought, a prayer rug from the nearby mountains, which he keeps as a talisman. "It's a Haghia Sophia," he said—a Turkish pile rug made in the late eighteen-hundreds. He unfolded it so that I could see the likeness of Justinian's towering dome translated into wool. "Not the most beautiful rug I have ever owned, but it is in perfect shape, and you will never see another like it. I bought it in 1981, for fifteen hundred dollars, and this I will never sell."

Mehmet follows the rug market closely, paying attention to prices at auctions around the world. He says that most customers, no matter how experienced, are insecure enough to

want somebody to tell them their rugs are worth what they plan to pay. He is always happy to oblige. "I have an eighteenth-century Mudjur prayer rug in great condition," he said, and unrolled the rug for me. It had deep blues, soft browns, and a muted red rarely seen these days. The wool felt like cashmere. Birds hovered at the border, and a rich, bold tree of life crawled up the center of the pile. "I have seen only one other this good in eighteen years. It cost me about four thousand dollars, and I am going to sell it for six thousand."

Mehmet can be aggressive; he is, after all, a rug merchant. But he is also remarkably relaxed. He succeeds, in part, because his approach is so restrained and seductive. Mehmet not only refuses to bargain, as a matter of principle, but tells every customer that he will always take back anything he sells at the price the customer paid for it—as long as it's in the same condition. That is his signature sales pitch. (In eighteen years, he says, three people have taken him up on the offer.)

One afternoon, we were standing in a sunny dayroom on the second floor of his building, planning our travels: first, a quick trip to the nearby mountains, to visit a tribe of nomads, and then a longer journey, to Konya, a hundred and twenty-five miles to the northeast of Antalya, which is one of the great carpet centers of the world. Mehmet spends a lot of time on the road. He travels to Ankara and Cappadocia at least once a year, and to Konya and Istanbul several times. He stays in cheap hotels, spends his days on overstuffed divans in musty rug shops, and eats when he has the time. Later this month, Mehmet will display kilims in San Francisco, at the American Conference on Oriental Rugs. It is his first trip to the United States; he has not come to America before, partly because his language skills have turned Germany and Austria—where kilims are especially popular—into natural markets, and partly because he knows that there are often better carpets on sale in the rug district of Manhattan than in most Turkish cities, and at better prices. When I visited Mehmet, his inventory was getting low after a successful six-week sales trip through Europe, and it was time to replenish his stock.

Mehmet said he'd show me factories that used traditional looms and dyes—a vital development in a country where poorly made carpets have threatened the industry for well over a century. Nothing has been more damaging than the introduction, around 1860, of synthetic dyes, which can bleed easily, and which gradually pulled villagers away from a tradition they had perfected over centuries.

Making dyes was once a treasured craft, something akin to sorcery, and the recipes were often so complicated and obscure that most tribes chose certain people to do nothing but gather the necessary roots, nuts, leaves, fruits, and insects. It can take three hundred and twenty-five pounds of dead insects or dried herbs to produce just one pound of even the most common color. Here is the nineteenth-century recipe for Birbul's blue, a pale-sky tint, which was first published in the West by Walter A. Hawley, in 1913, in his classic book, "Oriental Rugs Antique & Modern":

> Take cinnabar, indigo and alum, grind and sift lighter than the light dust of the high hills; soak for ten hours; keep stirring it; put in the wool and soak for many hours. Boil for three hours; wash in kurd water, water in which kurds and whey have been well beaten up; leave for three hours, and then wash and beat again in water.

These are the instructions for dark gray, a more difficult color to get right:

> Take the fruit of the *Cupressus sempervirens*, and seeds and seed pods of babul (*Acacia arabica*), iron-filings water, and alum. Steep over night. Now add the water and let it soak for twenty-four hours, then boil for two or three hours, until the color is right, then wash and dry in the sun.

Although Mehmet often says that you can't know a fine rug until you feel the wool, he is primarily a color man. "Mehmet has the visual equivalent of perfect pitch," Bernard Andreae told me. "He is like a man who hears all the notes in a complex orchestral work." Andreae, who was for many years the head of the German Archeological Institute of Rome, and is one of Mehmet's most devoted customers, said, "It is a gift I have only seen a few times in my career."

Mehmet can spot a bogus green, an oxidized black, a cheesy yellow from across a darkened room. He has been known to talk for hours about madder, indigo, and saffron. He told me that he once spent three days deciding not to buy an old Anatolian kilim of potentially great value. "It was a perfect rug," he said. "The wool was right. The design was wonderful. But the blue gave me a bad feeling. So I walked away."

Another time, he was in the shop of an internationally famous Istanbul dealer, on the trail of a special kilim. "I was looking for an antique piece from Bergama for a collector, and I saw it in this shop. It seemed perfect. But every time I touched the piece it said it was a lie. My heart told me not to buy it, but my brain said, 'It's O.K.' It was a beautiful piece, a little repaired. Old, great colors. But I said to myself, 'Don't buy this.' There was something about the red that bothered me. It was absolutely exact, but it didn't belong on *that* rug. I couldn't figure it out. Finally, I told the dealer that I had a bad feeling about the piece. And he said to me, 'We are friends, so I will tell the truth. It is a fake.' "

The making of a tribal rug is similar in many ways to the performance of a jazz standard: the patterns are traditional, but the improvisations—varying colors, spatial relationships between design elements, even the type of wool—can change in any carpet. Although the colors and the placement of every knot in a Persian or an Indian court carpet might be mapped out, planned for months, and executed with precision, Caucasian and Turkish kilims often seem coarsely woven, abstract, and spontaneous. Mehmet hates the floral fussiness of even the most majestic Persian carpets. One day, he suggested that we go to the mountains "to visit the Dosemealti"—nomads who are known for their craftsmanship. "I have made a lot of money from these rugs," he told me. "When I started, in 1982, I went to their villages, and it was like finding gold. I would take dozens of beautiful old pieces home in a week. Now I am lucky if there are five a month." When I asked why the old pieces were so good, he replied with one of his basic rules of the carpet trade: "They were made before tourism. There are no wrong pieces from before tourism."

Mehmet's shop is closed just four days each year, so he can fumigate the building to protect his precious stock from weevils. In the hot weather, when his store and the city are most active, he

never gets out of bed much earlier than noon and rarely shows up at work before 6 P.M. As a favor to me, though, we left early, and as we drove toward the snow-capped mountains Mehmet suddenly pulled the car to the side of the road next to a cemetery. One headstone towered above the others.

"That man was the first carpet dealer in Antalya," Mehmet said, pointing to the marker. "When I started, I went to his shop. He said he would help, and he sold me several pieces. I spent most of my money. The next day, an expert told me the rugs were all new, washed in chemicals to make them look antique. I was shocked. I asked many people to go to this dealer, and I arranged to come while they were drinking tea, to see if he was ashamed. He just laughed at me and said, 'Welcome to this business. You have to open your eyes if you want to become a dealer.' I was so angry that I read every book about carpets, and when I found experts I would invite them to eat, to drink. I wouldn't let them go. I worked longer, I learned more. He took me for eight thousand marks"—about three thousand six hundred dollars. "It was a lot of money, but it was well spent."

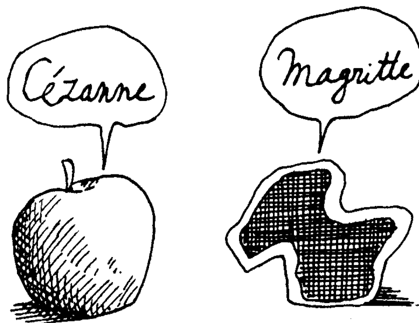
We started to drift back toward the car. "We did not speak for many years," he continued. "In 1991, I went into a new shop. I saw him there and he said, 'What do you want?' The shop turned out to be his. I told him I saw some nice pieces. He said, 'You will never own one of my rugs.' But not long after that he got drunk and he tried to force a taxi-driver to go the wrong way down a one-way street. The driver said no, so he refused to pay. They struggled. The cab-driver took a knife from his glove compartment and stabbed him through the heart. As soon as he was dead, his younger brother came to me and said he didn't want the rugs. So I bought every one of them."

Soon we were driving through the foothills near Dosemealti, and passed a wide marketplace with blue-and-white umbrellas. Dogwood and cherry trees were beginning to bloom. "Wool!" Mehmet shouted, as a huge flock of sheep scampered across rocks above the roadway. "Look at those carpets." Where some might see lamb chops, Mehmet sees rugs. "We have wonderful sheep here," he said, explaining that it is the breed and not the climate which matters most in wool production. "Nice weaving, wonderful colors, great design, and a bad sheep will always make a bad rug."

We passed houses of recent vintage, made from cheap brick, and each had two or three rooms—a kitchen, a living room, and a bedroom. Women sat in hallways, hunched over looms the size of harps; there was a powerful smell of fresh flatbread stuffed with chives, fennel, and peppers. When we arrived at the home of an old friend of Mehmet's, I stood in the street listening to the dull thwack of the hammers that village women use to pack knots tightly in horizontal rows on carpets.

Mehmet walked into the living room, stood in the center of what seemed to me to be a sea of identical carpets, and found what he was looking for within moments. "There is a very nice rug here," he said softly. "The rest are nothing." The rugs had the Dosemealti pattern: a large field filled with camel's hooves, crabs, and stars. Mehmet patiently explained the symbols to me, but he can't bear collectors who cling to technical rug facts as if they were baseball statistics. "You see them," Mehmet said, laughing. "Knot counters." He was referring to people who believe that the number of knots per square inch is all that matters in a rug. "They dive onto the carpet and start counting. They never even step back, take a breath, and try to decide if they love it." He went on, "You know, I've thought about this. People like music because it's just sounds put together in a way that has the power to move us. The same is true with carpets. There is a harmony, when it works, that is really beautiful. The rest is really silly."

The next day, we took off for Konya, and several hours into a drive through the broad plains Mehmet's brand-new, fifteen-hundred-dollar cell phone started to chirp. He answered, speaking briefly, in Turkish. A man with a rug was calling from a Russian border town. He is a picker—the closest thing in the Asian steppes to a travelling salesman—and he wanders through Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan looking for antique rugs and kilims to sell to dealers like Mehmet. (The word "antique," though it is used often, is ambiguous. Most experts, including Mehmet, consider anything made before 1900—and sometimes up to the beginning of the First World War—an antique.) "People just roam the country looking for rugs," Mehmet said. "It's foragers, pickers, and ghouls. Many of the mosques have been robbed. If you see something wonderful, you have to wonder why."



Clearly, the man thought he had something special. Mehmet listened for a minute, asked a few questions—about colors, pile, structure, design—and then told him the rug was a type that has been easy to find in the West since the Soviet Union collapsed, in 1991. The fall shook the carpet market profoundly. Across the Caucasus and southern Russia, rare rugs and kilims were suddenly selling for almost nothing. Classic pieces—Kazaks and Sevans, prized nineteenth-century Caucasian rugs known for their rich pile and unusual medallion designs—disappeared for the price of a modest bribe. When I lived in Moscow and often travelled to the Caucasus, I heard frequent tales of trucks backing up late at night to the loading docks of museums in Tbilisi and Baku and carrying off carpets. "If only I was in Baku when the Soviet Union died," Mehmet said dreamily. "With fifty thousand dollars, one weekend, and a truck, I could have become rich forever."

Konya, which has about half a million residents, is one of the world's oldest cities, and it is Turkey's center of Islamic fundamentalism. This is where the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi founded the whirling dervishes, and where he wrote the "Spiritual Couplets," which helped shape Islamic thought. Textiles have been woven in Konya at least since the time of the Seljuk dynasty, of the eleventh century. Some of the oldest surviving Islamic carpets, made in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, were found in the Alaadin mosque there, in 1905, after

lying undisturbed for hundreds of years.

In Konya, Mehmet intended to drop in on a dozen shops that carry antique Anatolian kilims, and a few factories. He made it clear that on these visits I was to keep quiet. "There are rules," he said. "Never ask me if a piece is good or bad. If you think a rug is nice, and you want it, just say it looks interesting. If I agree with you, I will ask the owner what he wants." The process seemed a little secretive, and I said so. "These are people I have to work with," Mehmet replied. "Don't embarrass me by making me comment on the quality. I can do that, but only when we are alone."

We arrived late in the day and went straight to a factory. I noticed one large carpet based on the flower-and-medallion patterns of rugs made in Ushak, another important carpet city, in western Turkey. I asked the price of this new piece; the owner said nothing but threw it on the floor for me to examine. I walked around, admiring its colors—rose, ochre, aubergine—and thought about buying it for a friend. Before I could stop myself, I turned to Mehmet and asked the forbidden question: "What do you think of this one?"

"Your metabolism is the envy of everyone at this party."

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Mehmet looked as if I had struck him. Torn between honor as a host and duty to his clan, he approached the rug slowly, like a lion sizing up a sleeping wildebeest. Finally, he knelt down and began to rake his fingers violently across the carpet while the factory owner looked on in dismay. Clumps of wool fell away every time Mehmet moved his fist across it. "What do I think?" he said, deliberately, still filled with rage at the predicament I had created for him. "I think this is one of the ugliest rugs in Turkey. It's badly made, the pattern is weak, the dyes are all chemical, and the wool won't last a year. That's what I think." He made brief apologies and walked out of the room. He didn't speak to me until we got back to the hotel. "Tomorrow, we are going to see some friends of mine," he said. "Don't do this again."

The muezzin's wail rolled through the center of town at five-twenty the next morning. I took a walk in the gathering light and braced myself for the coming day—and Mehmet—with three cups of strong Turkish coffee. After the business with the bad rug, I had given Mehmet some time to himself. We were to meet around eleven at a friend's shop, but before we did I went to visit a merchant named Pasha, whose "million-dollar rug" is discussed with much amusement from Antalya to Istanbul. Pasha is famous, not so much for the quality of his rugs but because he will sell them for prices that no reasonable person would pay. Mehmet did not want to comment on what I would see there. "Talking about other people's pieces to somebody like you is like giving away national-security secrets," he told me grumpily. But he said that he wanted me to understand something about rug prices. "Rugs are worth what people will pay," he said. "It is not a rational business. Art never is. It's emotion. There are many dealers who charge a lot because they think it will make them important. And, much too often, it works."

Pasha turned out to be a well-dressed man in his sixties with a blazing smile featuring two gold teeth. He had short gray hair and a trim little mustache. After he ordered coffee, we looked at a dozen antique kilims and several nineteenth-century Caucasian rugs—all costing far more than they should. Soon a man arrived carrying a large key chain. I assumed that the million-dollar rug was in a copper safe next to the desk. Pasha shuffled over and opened it. Instead of a rug he hauled out an even larger key chain and tossed it to the waiting man, who promptly disappeared. Five minutes later, he came back with a black trash bag. The million-dollar rug, which Pasha advertises on his business cards, is from Sivas, a city in north-central Anatolia. Pasha, using a local man to interpret, said that it was a hundred and fifty years old. It was a very small prayer rug but seemed to be in perfect condition, with vines springing from rose-filled vases. Pasha told me that a few years ago he had been offered a new Mercedes filled with five kilos of gold for the rug. "I never considered it," he said, claiming to have purchased the rug for sixty-five thousand German marks—about twenty thousand dollars—in 1985. I asked him if any experts had come to see it. "Experts are fools," he replied. "They know nothing about carpets."

Later, when I showed a photograph of the rug to Danny Shaffer, the editor of *Hali*, he laughed, pointing out that the

business is filled with eccentrics like Pasha. "It's hard to judge from a picture," Shaffer said after looking at it. "But for a million dollars you ought to be able to buy a hundred of these."

Mehmet was waiting for me in a warehouse called Karavan, which must have had five thousand kilims in it. We slipped out through a back door and into an alley. Around the corner, Mustafa Buyukerkek—a pleasant fellow, who told me that he was the son of a local carpet legend named Cassim—had some pieces he wanted us to see. "I have some great things right now," he said as we entered his cold storeroom, which was crammed with kilims, all folded carefully, so that only a few inches of each was visible. Such an arrangement is actually a convenience for a professional like Mehmet, who can walk into a shop, look at five hundred rugs, all of which are turned inside out, and—just from the colors and the weft—pull out two or three "interesting pieces" within minutes.

When Mehmet concentrates on a good carpet, he starts to squint. It's like a poker player's "tell"—the tipoff that proves he's excited. "Show me the good ones," he told Mustafa. "Just the good ones." With the help of an assistant, Mustafa started tossing dozens of rugs on the floor. Mehmet eliminated ninety-five per cent of them instantly. "No," he kept barking in Turkish. "No. No. No." Mustafa threw an old Kazak to the side. It had grays and deep purples that have not been used for years. "This is recut," Mehmet explained. "It's maybe twenty per cent of what was once a grand piece."

Mustafa kept the rugs coming. "Look at this Kurdish piece," Mehmet said. "It's nice, but it's too strong." After an hour, he had selected about two dozen to look at later. Finally, it was time for Mustafa to produce his most valuable piece: a fragment of a green seventeenth-century Konya prayer rug. Green is exceedingly difficult to produce with organic dyes. This one was splendid—rich but not electric. The mihrab (the arch that points toward Mecca during prayer) was outlined in a red made from the roots of madder, whose use has declined in favor of cheaper synthetic dyes. Mehmet's eyes shrank to the size of lasers. "Buying fragments is an illness," he said, with obvious excitement in his voice. "It is also the highest level in our business. For the first ten years, I couldn't understand how people could do it. I literally threw away priceless rugs."

Mustafa found this hard to believe.

"It's true," Mehmet insisted. "When I was starting, I had a friend who was a shepherd. I gave him fifteen hundred dollars and I told him to go to the mountains and buy old kilims. He returned in a truck that was absolutely full of antique pieces—beautiful. He had bought them by the kilo, telling villagers he needed old wool. It was like saying you want to buy the works of the Renaissance masters, but only for the paint. But he told me he needed another four hundred dollars. I couldn't believe it. Half of the pieces—five hundred kilos—were in bad condition, so I sent them all back. Some were centuries old. 'We don't need to spend money on ripped, shredded pieces,' I told him."

He stopped to stare with affection at the fragment on the floor. "I already know who the owner of this will be," he said, in triumph. "I can see it on his wall."

We made our last stop as darkness fell, ending up on a backstreet at a storefront with no name on the door and no carpets in the windows. Mehmet knocked, and we were admitted at once.

"These people make the best fakes I have ever seen," Mehmet told me. "If you would rather wait outside, that would be fine. What they make are technically outstanding kilims. They are rewoven from old wool, and very few people could tell the difference." I promised to keep my mouth shut this time. Blatant forgery is relatively rare in the rug trade. Nevertheless, sophisticated fakes have made their way into nearly every major museum, large collection, and significant auction house. (The most notorious forger, a Romanian named Theodor Tuduc, was the weaving world's Clifford Irving. Tuduc died almost twenty years ago. One of his fakes hung undetected in the Victoria and Albert Museum for years.)

Inside the shop, two men were sitting at a wooden workbench, wearing jewellers' glasses and weaving on what seemed to be miniature looms. They were staring at photographs of carpets taken from an old Sotheby's catalogue. Nobody offered me coffee or tea. Mehmet started to look through a few rugs, stopping at a giant light-blue saff-kilim (which dealers often sell as family prayer rugs) from central Anatolia. He was obviously taken with the workmanship, and it was clear that the wool had been very carefully distressed. "You could pretend this is real and sell it for twenty-five thousand dollars," he said. "I prefer to sell it for three thousand dollars. People should be happy to pay that for something that looks great, is made beautifully, but is not a collector's item."

But will they be happy? I asked. Mehmet seemed distracted, although I could tell that he loved the rug. "Well," he said, "to be honest, no. People would rather be lied to and pay ten times as much. It's an aspect of human psychology. I sometimes think that if I charged five times more for a rug, people would be more eager to buy it. But I can't do that. It wouldn't be honest."

"Then why are we here?" I asked him as soon as we walked out of the shop. "Why did you just spend seven thousand dollars on three fakes?"

"Because they are beautiful," he replied, looking as if he had just wasted a lot of time on me. "Why else would you ever buy a rug?" ♦

THE STRANGENESS

The strangeness of others—
Even your sisters and brothers—
Is a responsibility to
Overcome—or some night they will be lying
In a bed dying—and *how* you loved them,
Its quality—will be as unknown
To you as your own mother was
While a living stranger.

—*Stan Rice*