

# Transylvanian Tale

STEFANO IONESCU

A four-year project to research and catalogue all 15th to 18th century Ottoman rugs in Transylvania will shortly be published, with extensive colour illustrations, in English, Italian and Romanian editions. The author, who is the driving force behind the project, discusses its background and discusses one of the rug world's most intriguing mysteries.



Alex Marginean

The churches and museums of Transylvania safeguard the greatest legacy of small-format Ottoman rugs in the Western world: almost four hundred examples including 'Holbeins', Ushaks, 'Lottos', 'Selendis' and 'Transylvanians', many in astonishingly good condition, attributable to the golden period of Turkish weaving from the mid-15th to the mid-18th century.

No complete explanation has ever been provided for this fascinating cultural phenomenon. We remain challenged by the question of why so many rugs have survived in the Reformed Churches of the Saxon minority of Transylvania, who for centuries have shared the region with a Romanian (Orthodox and Catholic) and a Hungarian (Catholic and Calvinist) population.

The rugs are an important part of the cultural inheritance of Romania as well as being the most significant repository of Turkish art in south-east Europe, an area for so long under the military domination of

the Ottoman Empire.

Without attempting a resume of the region's complex history, we should note that Transylvania (like the other Romanian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia) never came under direct Turkish occupation. Until 1699 it maintained the status of an autonomous principality, paying tribute to the Sublime Porte. By contrast, part of Hungary was designated a *Pashalik* following the Battle of Mohacs in 1526, and was under Turkish occupation for over a century and a half.

Surviving documents confirm that the principal way rugs arrived in Transylvania was through trade with the Turks. The Saxon towns of Braşov (Kronstadt) and Sibiu (Hermannstadt), on main routes to Central Europe, became influential trading centres.<sup>1</sup> The trade lasted from the mid-15th to the end of the 18th century, a period that correlates with the age of the Turkish rugs preserved in Transylvania.

Documents only provide a very

partial idea of the extent of this trade. However, it is likely that many thousands of Turkish rugs arrived in Transylvania, of which a substantial number remained there. The Balkan nations and the Romanian principalities south and north of the Danube were also crisscrossed by this trade, and oriental carpets were highly prized in these regions. Why then have they only survived in significant numbers in Transylvania?

The reasons for this phenomenon are associated above all with the ways in which the rugs were used and valued. A crucial factor in their survival was the fact that so many rugs came into the ownership of the Saxon Evangelical Churches, mainly as pious donations from parishioners, benefactors or guilds. Church communities never bought rugs, nor raised customs duties, and there is no record of merchants making such donations. But in the austere and aniconic spirit of the early Reformation, they were considered decent, and indeed suitable, decoration for recently denuded (former Catholic) churches. And when used by parishioners to mark out their personal space in the church, they also subtly hinted at the wealth and prestige of their owners.

Today, while many rugs remain the property of the same Saxon churches,<sup>2</sup> a significant number are also preserved in Romanian museum collections and a few in the Hungarian Reformed churches.

The Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu has the most important institutional collection in Transylvania and Romania. It holds 43 classical Turkish rugs, including a famous small-pattern 'Holbein', (Schmutzler, pl.10). The rugs were transferred to the museum around

1. Above: The pulpit in the Black Church, Braşov, flanked by 'Lotto', 'Transylvanian' and a variety of west Anatolian niche rugs

2. Right: 'Ghirland-aio' two-medallion rug, west Anatolia, mid-15th century. 1.30 x 1.87m (4'3" x 6'2"), 840 kn/dm<sup>2</sup>. Alberto Boralevi must be thanked for rediscovering and dating this rug, which is one of the most spectacular rugs in the Transylvanian holdings. The minor 'S' chain borders are similar to those on other 15th century examples such as the Dragon and Phoenix rug in Berlin's Islamic Museum; Schmutzler 1933, pl.8. Evangelical Church, Hălchiu, no. 23



All photos Anpad Udvardi Brashov

## CHURCH & MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

1910 from the great Parish Church and the so-called Asylum Church, both in Sibiu, and from other minor Saxon parishes.

The History Museum of Transylvania in Cluj-Napoca has a less well-known collection, including eleven pre-19th century Ottoman rugs, acquired between the end of the 19th century and 1914, mostly from northern Transylvania.

For several generations of rug scholars and enthusiasts, the primary source of information on the Turkish rugs from Transylvania was *Altorientalische Teppiche in Siebenbürgen*, the monumental study pub-

lished in 1933 by Emil Schmutzler, a member of a prominent Saxon family from Braşov and a highly knowledgeable carpet collector. His book is of unique documentary value. Not only did he undertake the first complete inventory of the collections, identifying 440 rugs in over forty Saxon Churches, but he provided a photographic record of each of the 55 rugs he discussed, enabling a comparison to be made with the state of each piece some seventy years later.

At the time when Schmutzler carried out his research, rugs were already rapidly disappearing from

3. Left: 'Transylvanian' six-column rug, west Anatolia, mid-17th century. 1.15 x 1.79m (3'9" x 5'10"), 1,300kn/dm<sup>2</sup>. For many years incorrectly thought to be the rug published as pl.25 in the 1977 Dall'Oglio reprint of Végh & Layer, this is a particularly beautiful example of the small group of 'coupled-column' prayer rugs with a triple-arched niche designated 'type I' by May H. Beattie. This sub-group has lateral arches with unindented outlines, no hanging ornament or lamp, fields that are almost always red, and the bases of the thin columns mirror the capitals. It is also typical that above the niche there is a crenellated frieze and a deep panel with nine to eleven long-stemmed flowers. The main border is based on a curvilinear diamond cartouche. Black Church, Braşov, no.227

4. Right: Selendi 'Scorpion' rug, west Anatolia, mid-17th century. 1.16 x 1.91m (5'3" x 6'3"), 620 kn/dm<sup>2</sup>. First published here, this interesting rug, very similar to one in the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts, is one of only four known with this rare design. The bi-colour rosette and hooked leaf border appears in some 'Lotto' rugs. Black Church, Braşov, no.373

the collections. He wrote that: "The greedy hands of the merchants tried in every possible way to lay hold of these objects. When honesty was no longer possible, they bribed the sextons and they cut up valuable items so as to remove them at night through the loopholes of the fortified church walls".<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that this activity had begun several decades earlier. Writing in 1907, Ernst Kühlbrandt stated that during the last decades of the 19th century "several hundreds of rugs were bought by rich collectors from Western Europe".<sup>4</sup> In many cases we have precise evidence that Transylvania found itself serving as a main source not only for rugs belonging to the so-called 'Transylvanian' group but also for other classical Turkish groups such as Ushaks, 'Lottos' and white-ground 'Selendis'.

Many of the Turkish rugs in Hungarian museums were sourced in this region. The Christian Museum in Esztergom holds the important collection of Arnold Ipoly, including 18 Turkish rugs, assembled in the second half of the 19th century.<sup>5</sup> In 1917, six rugs and two fragments of a 'Memling-gül' carpet belonging to Emil Sigerus, a historian from Sibiu, were sold to the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest,<sup>6</sup> which had acquired other rugs from the Diocesan Council of Calvinist Churches a few years earlier.<sup>7</sup>

In Vienna, the Museum of Applied Arts holds five Ottoman rugs acquired in 1907-1908 from B. Grünblatt, a Saxon dealer in Sibiu.<sup>8</sup> London's Victoria & Albert Museum also has a double-niche rug of Transylvanian origin, accessioned as early as 1889.<sup>9</sup>

It is also highly probable that many Ottoman rugs in private collections in Hungary and Austria came from Transylvanian sources, even if there is now little likelihood of tracing provenance in most cases. Not only the confidentiality of the marketplace but the passage of time and the political upheaval of two World Wars have resulted in the loss of documentary and other evidence. Very occasionally inscriptions identifying Saxon donors reveal that a rug was once the property of a Saxon Church in Transylvania.<sup>10</sup>



As far as collections in Britain are concerned, an interesting piece of anecdotal evidence is provided by Edmund de Unger. Writing in the introduction to the 1978 catalogue of the Keir Collection, he recalls how as a young man he bought his first carpet (a Selendi 'bird' rug) from a Hungarian Reformed Church near Târgul Mureş in 1935, while cycling through Transylvania.<sup>11</sup>

As we assembled documentation for *Antique Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania*, evidence emerged that shed light on the way in which, as a runner and dealer in antique carpets, Teodor Tuduc played a key role in the depredation of the rug collections held both by churches and individuals in Transylvania between 1930-1960.

It is clear that Transylvania has been a major source of Ottoman Turkish rugs for public and private collections around the world. In assessing the real number of rugs that survived in the area, this must be taken into account.

A further question then arises. Why, in spite of their attraction for collectors and the frequent references to rugs in the specialised literature, have the collections in Transylvania been little studied and never published as a whole? A number of factors have made such an undertaking difficult. First, the collections have been carefully safeguarded by the churches and have thus remained relatively inaccessible. Nor, over the years, has there been any sign of the emergence of a local school of art historians dedicated to the study of oriental rugs. Little has been published since Schmutzler,<sup>12</sup> and there is hardly anything in the Romanian language about the Transylvanian legacy.

Further problems are posed by the number of vague (often undocumented) explanations for the presence of the rugs in the churches, and in particular by the persistent theory of their presumed extra-Anatolian provenance. Ever since the rugs in the Black Church were first catalogued by Kühlbrandt in 1898 (at the instigation of Alois Riegl) they have been considered to be of Anatolian origin, and that is still the opinion of most experts.



Nevertheless, Charles Grant Ellis's quirky hypothesis that some of the rugs might have been produced in the Balkans under Ottoman provincial rule, has had a disproportionate press and continues to muddy the water, despite the lack of any documentary evidence.

An additional stumbling block has been the presence in the collections of so many 'Transylvanian'

group rugs, often excellently preserved, compared to the very small number found in Turkey. Attention is rarely drawn to the fact that rugs of this type, in all its familiar variants (single and double-niche, prayer and column rugs), are also to be found in museums in Turkey,<sup>13</sup> as well as in Beirut<sup>14</sup> and Cairo.<sup>15</sup>

Inevitably too the hostility of the former communist regime in

## CHURCH & MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Romania has played its part in blocking or suffocating any initiatives regarding an artistic legacy belonging almost in its entirety to the churches of the Saxon minority.

Against this background, four years ago we embarked on the *Antique Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania* project, now nearing completion. Our aim was to publish an up-to-date, thoroughly researched and accessible study of the Transylvanian rug phenomenon, intended primarily for carpet lovers. In this venture we have been fortunate in having the generous support of the Superior Consistory, the governing body of the Evangelical Churches, and the Brukenthal Museum.

The book investigates the historical phenomenon of the Transylvanian collections, illustrating over 260 pre-19th century rugs in colour. These include the entire collection at the Black Church, as well as rugs from the great holdings at Mediaş and Sighișoara, and



5. Above: 'Transylvanian' and white-ground 'Selendi' rugs hanging in St Margaret's Evangelical Church, Mediaş

from all the lesser collections, many of which contain remarkable pieces such as the wonderful 'Ghirlandaio' rug (2) from Hălchiu (Heldsdorf). We also publish 14 examples from Bișrița, which owned one of the most interesting of all the Turkish rug collections, numbering 57 pieces at the time of Schmutzler's inventory. In 1944,

6. Left: 'Transylvanian' single-niche rug, west Anatolia, first half 17th century. 1.22 x 1.54m (4'0" x 5'2"), 1,600 kn/dm<sup>2</sup>. The impact of this rare and previously unpublished rug is due to the highly saturated red, blue and ochre palette. The basic layout is that of a prayer rug, but the field is richly ornamented with decoration usually seen in double-niche rugs with the vase motif. Rugs of this sub-group show great consistency in design elements, with arabesque-spandrels, star and cartouche main borders, reciprocal trefoil secondary borders and chain-link guard borders. Formerly in the Evangelical Church, Valea Viilor (Wurmloch), no.21, now in St Margaret's Church, Mediaş



the rugs were taken out of Transylvania in circumstances that have never become clear, and remain in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg to this day.<sup>16</sup>

The project has been the occasion of positive and wide-reaching dialogue with the evangelical parishes who own the rugs. The friendly collaboration of the pastors of these churches has been invaluable: the Reverend Christian Plajer (Braşov), Reinhart Guib (Mediaş and district) and Bruno Fröhlich (Sighișoara) also took it upon themselves to enlist the support of their parishioners for our work.

Prior to photography inside the churches by local photographer Arpad Udvardi, over 150 rugs were washed by conservation specialists. Technical analysis was carried out by a team headed by Rodica Dinulescu of the Brukenthal Museum, in collaboration with Alberto Boralevi, who also catalogued all the rugs.

An important part of the project has been the relaunch of a conservation initiative carried out for many years by Era Nussbächer in Braşov. In 2002 all the Black Church rugs (some 140, including those in store) were washed and conserved. Two years later, in an attempt to increase the number of pieces exhibited, six rugs from the Parish of Petersberg near Braşov, unseen for years and including the oldest 'Lotto' in Transylvania (7), were added to the Black Church display.

In 2002 the Mediaş rugs were washed and conserved and are now displayed on the white walls of the choir and over the parapets of the gallery of the Church of St

7. Right: Ushak 'Lotto' rug, west Anatolia, second half 16th century. 1.21 x 2.01m (4'0" x 6'7"), 1, 340 knots/dm<sup>2</sup>. Arguably the most beautiful of the Transylvanian 'Lottos' and perhaps the oldest, distinguished by the refined yellow-ivory and blue arabesques of the field and the rare meander border with palmettes and infinite knots on a blue ground. The elegant 'Anatolian-style' field decoration is perfectly symmetrical on both vertical and horizontal axis; Schmutzler 1933, pl.19. Formerly in the Evangelical Church of Sânpetru (Petersberg), inv.13, now in the Black Church, Braşov

Margaret (5). In 2004 twelve carpets and fragments from smaller local parishes were transferred to Mediaş. Among these are a single-niche Transylvanian (6), a number of Lottos, and a Holbein fragment.<sup>17</sup> This brings the Mediaş holding up to almost forty pieces, including fragments, making it second in importance to the Black Church.

The Brukenthal Museum has also begun to include some rugs on rotation in its permanent displays, while late 2003 saw the opening of the Museum of Art Collections in Bucharest. The displays include a number of important rugs, among them a rare single-niche 'Transylvanian'. The museum also holds the only ex-Schmutzler Collection carpet (a 'Lotto') still in Romania.

Looking to the future, in 2007 Sibiu will be designated European Capital of Culture. The Romanian Ministry of Culture has committed itself to a remarkable project that will make possible, for the first time, the public display of all 380 Ottoman carpets in the churches and museums that have safeguarded them for so long.

Antique Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania, with over 260 colour illustrations, is published by Stefano Ionescu, with contributions by Alberto Boralevi, Andrei Kertesz, Mircea Dunca, G. Schmutzler and others.



#### NOTES

- 1 | Successive Hungarian kings granted these towns the right to levy duties.
- 2 | Some of the inscriptions prove that a rug has been in the same church for over 350 years, making these among the world's most stable rug collections.
- 3 | Emil Schmutzler, *Altorientalische Teppiche in Siebenbürgen*, Leipzig 1933, p.17.
- 4 | Ernst Kühlbrandt, 'Unsere alten Kirchenteppiche', in *Die Karpathen*, I, Kronstadt 1907.
- 5 | Arnold Ipoly, the Catholic Bishop of Oradea in Transylvania (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire),

assembled an important collection in the second half of the 19th century.

- 6 | Ferenc Batári, *Ottoman Turkish Carpets*, Budapest 1994, nos.2, 9, 10, 12, 27, 31, 46.
- 7 | *Ibid.*, nos.21, 83.
- 8 | Angela Völker, *Die orientalischen Knüpftessiche im M.A.K.*, Vienna 2001; MAK 6636-6639/1907 and T 6907/1908.
- 9 | VAM 225.1889; A.F. Kendrick, *Victoria and Albert Museum. Guide to the Collection of Carpets*, London 1915; HALI 6/4, 1984, p.360, pl.IV.
- 10 | A rug in a Hungarian private collection (Dr Keszler, J.R. Irma, Budapest) bears the inscription:

"TESTAMENTV D: MICH: GROS"; see Károly Csányi, Sandor Csermelyi, Károly

- 11 | Friedrich Spuhler, *Islamic Carpets and Textiles in the Keir Collection*, London 1978, p.25
- 12 | The only book on the subject is Andrei Kertesz-Badrus, *Turkische Teppiche in Siebenbürgen*, Bucharest 1985, in German, which illustrates 100 rugs, mostly in black and white. Kertesz is also the author of several articles in German, Romanian and English.
- 13 | See, e.g., Nazan Ölçer et al., *Turkish*

*Carpets from the 13th-18th Centuries*, Istanbul 1996.

- 14 | *Exposition de Tapis D'Orient*, Musée Nicolas Surssock, Collection Sulayman Alamuddin, Beirut 1963.
- 15 | M. Mostafa, *Turkish Prayer Rugs*, Collection of the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo 1963.
- 16 | The rugs are apparently still stored in the Nuremberg Museum, where their future remains uncertain; see 'Transylvanian Intrigue', HALI 72, 1994, p.55.
- 17 | Charles Grant Ellis, 'Ellis in Holbeinland', in Robert Pinner & Walter B. Denny (eds.), *Oriental Carpet & textile Studies I*, London 1985, p.72, R-55.