





MAGHREB MASTERY

The master weavers of Morocco and Algeria are an underappreciated group of specialised craftspeople—male and female—with a crucial role in rural textile culture.

Drawing on their own research and a wealth of knowledge, Gebhart Blazek and Gus Cooney explain what we understand and what we have yet to learn about the masters' work



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Rural pile-weaving culture in Morocco is generally regarded as a purely female domain—a non-commercial craft, executed by women to equip their households with bedding, covers and insulation on the practical side, and with saddle covers and other prestige objects on the decorative side. This view of rural weaving is often accompanied by the idea of the ‘isolated tribe’, disconnected in time and space from the forces that have shaped the broader Mediterranean basin. This is short-sighted, of course, as it discounts the mechanisms of cultural transfer that have had a profound impact on rural weaving. One such mechanism is that of master weavers who, by virtue of being the creators of status-bestowing carpets for wealthy clients, played a critical, if underappreciated, role in local weaving cultures. In their role as executors of large, made-to-order carpets for typically high-status clients, master weavers are both guardians of tradition and surprising engines of innovation.

Most rugs from the Middle Atlas, even those in private collections and museums, date from the 20th century; and the vast majority, at one point, did indeed serve as objects of everyday use. These rugs normally do

1 Detail of (16). Images courtesy Gebhart Blazek (except 23). All carpets authors’ collections

2 Beni Ouarain rug found in Ain Fndel, north-eastern Middle Atlas, in January 1996, woven under direction of a Marmoucha master weaver in 1951. 2.30 x 5.75 m (7’ 6” x 18’ 10”). The geometric design is very dense and follows formal symmetries

3 Beni Ouarain rug found in Ain Fndel, north-eastern Middle Atlas, in January 1996, woven in 1951/1952 by the same women that wove (2), but without direct

supervision of the master weaver. 2.00 x 7.30 m (6’ 7” x 23’ 11”). The design in this rug is looser and reduced to key forms

4 Beni Ouarain rug found in Ain Fndel, north-eastern Middle Atlas, in January 1996, woven in 1966 by women of the same family that wove (2) and (3) but without any presence of the master weaver. 2.00 x 5.40 m (6’ 7” x 17’ 9”). The lower half shows the diamond grid that is typical for everyday sleeping rugs of the region while the upper half clearly echoes the designs of the other, more complex examples



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not have borders. They range from subtle to bold in their simplicity and, when they do pick up borrowed motifs, they are usually elements that were fashionable during the period of production. For example, it is common in Morocco for rural rugs to borrow motifs from urban Rabat carpets, often expressed using new 'chic' aniline dyes. Despite the borrowed motifs, a distinctive feature of rural rugs is that weavers arrange these motifs somewhat randomly, in a haphazard beauty. Local norms provide some boundaries, but they are usually not very strict, leaving ample space for interpretation and individual preference (4).

Occasionally, however, one can find rugs in the Middle Atlas that show a much more regular, organised concept, with horizontal and vertical borders, and based on dense, repetitive geometric elements (2). Such rugs, which are quite distinct from everyday rugs, were often woven under direction of a professional male master weaver, known in the region as a *maalem* (from Moroccan Arabic, meaning roughly, 'one who knows').

With input from the family, a master weaver was responsible for the rug's conception and construction, either in collaboration with local



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women or using his own crew. Master weavers would have stayed with the family for the period of the production, normally a couple of months depending on the size of the rug. The high costs associated with such projects limited these rugs to wealthier families; and, because wealthier families typically had larger living spaces or tents, the rugs were accordingly quite large.

Their production was understood as an important event, and visitors often came to see the rug grow. This was accompanied by rituals and festivities at all stages, until it was finally removed from the loom. Not only were these rugs created in ceremony, but they were also put to ceremonial use during their lifetime, often reserved for special occasions, such as the arrival of an honoured guest or a meeting of tribal elders. Overall, it is easy to imagine the status and prestige the rugs must have conveyed within their local communities.

Because they carried a high status, they were copied, adapted, and generally served as inspiration for local female weavers. In particularly fortunate cases, it is possible to find a series of rugs that clearly illustrate this creative copying process. Here we present three examples from the



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5,6 Front and back of a rug by a female master weaver, Zayan, western Middle Atlas, 1960/70. 1.95 x 3.40 m (6' 5" x 11' 2"). In the western Middle Atlas, among the Zayan and the Beni Mguild, rugs with deep filling pile, red or purple in colour, were made under the

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direction of professional male master weavers on a regular basis. The design knots are normally executed by the master weaver from one side of the loom, while the women introduced the filling pile from the other side (23). The filling pile is executed in a symmetric knot with longer yarn,

while the design knots are executed in a Berber knot with shorter yarn. Due to this half-relief technique, the rug initially appears as a plain field on the pile side while the design is only readable from the back. In most parts of the Middle Atlas and Eastern Morocco, rugs are put pile side down

when used on the floor, and so over years of wear, the design becomes visible on the pile side. This rug is the rare work of a female master weaver. The design incorporates some concepts from the male master weaver repertoire, but the attitude is much more playful and intuitive

Beni Ouarain, all of which came from the same family of weavers. The first is a maximally complex, detailed master-weaver rug (2). It clearly served as inspiration for the second rug, which may be considered a sort of 'intermediary' (3); and finally for a third rug, which represents an everyday piece that nonetheless shows echoes of master-weaver design (4).

It is worth noting that an exceptionally talented female weaver could also be referred to as a master weaver or *maalema*. Although the same title

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is used, the female title functions differently, as the soubriquet is something bestowed upon a woman by her local community in admiration for her weaving skill. Like their male counterparts, female master weavers had a strong influence on their local textile cultures: teaching other women weaving techniques, occasionally working on demand for a salary, and having their rugs admired as prestige objects. However, the female masters had a different repertoire. Although their designs can be dense, and may include similar geometric elements to those of the rugs woven or directed by men, they are almost always less rigid in their complex construction. Sometimes the patterns are arranged in horizontal compartments or rows that appear to mirror the formal language of the regional flatweaves (5, 7). In short, while female master weavers are also keepers of tradition, their designs are local, whereas the designs by men are from outside the culture.

A natural question then arises about where master-weaver designs came from in the first place. It is notable that, in the Middle Atlas, master weavers worked mainly on the eastern side, which is easily accessible from the Moulouya valley, in the regions of the Ait Youssi, the Marmoucha, and especially among the Beni Mguild in the more central parts and the Zayan in the west. What exactly was going on in the Moulouya valley?

In eastern Morocco, as we observed in the Middle Atlas, wandering male master weavers played an important role in the pile-weaving culture of numerous Berber tribes, from the plains and rolling hills along the lower Moulouya valley to the Mediterranean coast in the north. During two months of field research in 1996 and 1997, we had the good fortune to be able to document carpet production in the region roughly encircled by the cities of Guercif, Driouch, Nador, Berkane, Oujda, El Aioun and Taourirt; namely among the Berber groups of the Beni Bou Yahi, Metalsa, Beni Snassen and the Beni Bou Zeggou.

Rugs by master weavers from these areas display similar themes to those from the Middle Atlas, with strong borders and repetitive



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7 Rug from a Marmoucha family on the eastern side of the Middle Atlas, obviously made by a very experienced female weaver, dated 1978 twice at the upper end. 2.00 x 4.20 m (6' 7" x 13' 9"). The density and complexity of the design, less readable at first glance than its counterparts by men, relates

to examples published in 1934 in volume 4 of Prosper Ricard's iconic *Corpus des Tapis Marocains* (plates XXXV and XXXIX). The status of such a rug and its influence on the community of local weavers would have certainly been equivalent to a rug ordered from a male professional



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geometric elements (e.g., (18)). Moreover, we can also observe the same creative improvisation process that occurred in the Middle Atlas, as these rugs were again regarded as precious status objects in their local communities and, consequently, served as inspiration for local weavers (e.g. (24)).

On closer inspection, however, many of the rugs in eastern Morocco also reveal something intriguing. Consider the repetitive toothed lines, like unspooled cogwheels, either free floating or formed into diamonds; the tribal 'hashtags'; the distinctive reinforced selvages; and the overall outlining of designs in white^(10, 15). These features make it possible to trace one input into master-weaver design, and eastern Moroccan design in general, but it requires that we travel even further east.

Historically, and especially in tribal terms, eastern Morocco and Algeria have always been culturally connected. Like Morocco, Algeria has a rich textile tradition, although it remains relatively little known to this day. Many factors, including extended colonial occupation by the French, political and economic upheaval, and agricultural reform that limited the use of traditional grazing lands, meant that rural textile traditions were

disrupted earlier and more severely, making it difficult to glimpse what the past might have looked like from the vantage point of today.

The best glimpse into Algeria's textile tradition is almost certainly Lucien Golvin's *Les arts populaires en Algérie*, a comprehensive study of Algerian carpets, written as part of the author's role as the director of

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crafts for the Algerian government. This magnum opus was published in six volumes in the early 1950s, as an extended version of his already very long dissertation. It contains a rich portrait of the Algerian master weaver or *reggam* (derived from the Arabic, *reggem*, 'to design' or 'to compose'; female: *reggama*).

8 Nomadic settlement in the region of the Arabic Oulad Sidi Ali Bouchnafa west of Ain Beni Mathar/Buerguent, January 1997. A number of the rugs documented on site were clearly of Algerian origin, from the Jebel Amour region, while other rugs were of local manufacture but directly inspired by the Algerian examples

9 Fragment of a rug found in January 1997 in the region of the Arabic Oulad Sidi Ali Bouchnafa, mid/third quarter 20th century. 1.70 x 2.75 m (5' 7" x 9' 0"). This rug is seemingly made after examples from the Algerian Jebel Amour region; such rugs were found in the property of the family that owned this fragment



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In reading Golvin, the true depth of Algeria's master-weaver tradition becomes apparent. For example, there are the rugs of Guergour, Kaala Beni Rached, and the tribes south and east of Constantine, such as the Nemencha and Haracta—although there are very few surviving examples, even in museums. Of the many cultures described by Golvin, and indeed as described by almost every publication on Algerian weaving, one textile tradition stands out among the rest: that of the *Jebel Amour*.

Jebel Amour is an area south of Oran, near the present-day cities of Aflou and Laghouat. It is located in the Saharan Atlas, between the Ouled Nail mountains to the northeast, the Ksour mountains to the southwest, the steppe to the northwest, and the Sahara to the southeast. The people that populate this area are of Berber and Arab descent, belonging to semi-nomadic tribes, which are organised into larger confederations. The weaving culture in *Jebel Amour* is one of considerable talent, including a longstanding tradition of skilled master weavers who wove for high-ranking tribal members (13). It is important to note that, while master weavers provided overall direction for the carpet—conceiving the

10 Beni Snassen master-weaver rug woven circa 1920, found in Oulad Bel Aarbi near Tafoughalt, Eastern Morocco, in January 1997. 1.80 x 4.00 m (5' 11" x 13' 2"). The sawtooth lines of the diamond grid directly relate to Algerian rugs from the *Jebel Amour* region

11 *Jebel Amour* fragments, belonging to the same master-weaver rug, circa 1900. 1.90 x 2.35 m (6' 3" x 7' 8") and 1.95 x 2.45 m (6' 5" x 8' 1"). Departing from the pure elegance of older examples, the powerful and complex design reads like a design compendium linking Algeria's *Jebel Amour* region to Eastern Morocco,

especially to the rugs of Beni Snassen. The colour scheme, including the blue and calmer orange, is described by R.P. Giacobetti in 1932 as being typical for the pre-aniline dye period

12 The re-enforcement of the selvages in this rug from ca. 1960/1970 closely relate to pieces documented in the Beni Bou Zeggou region in January 1996. 1.85 x 4.45 m (6' 1" x 14' 7"). The design of the upper part of the rug, which has seemingly been made without the support of a local master weaver, shows the direct influence of *Jebel Amour* master-weaver rugs on Eastern Moroccan rural weaving culture



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design, tying the guide knots in white yarn, and possibly leading the chanting or song that may have accompanied the process—it was nonetheless the women who did the bulk of the weaving, including the most difficult parts, such as the complex selvages and the intricate kilim ends.

An additional rug from Jebel Amour (11) highlights how the traditional master-weaver designs evolved, probably subject to the same creative innovation process that we have already discussed—perhaps even here the work of a female master weaver, who over time joined the ranks of the once male-dominated profession.

There is no shortage of ideas in Algerian publications about how the distinctive designs of Jebel Amour originated. Two common hypotheses are: (a) ancient Berber symbols that remained isolated from outside

13 Algerian Jebel Amour rug, 19th century. 1.65 x 5.50 m (5' 5" x 18' 1"). This rug is certainly one of the finest of its type. Dye analysis reveals that the red is cochineal, an expensive import product, rather than the more common madder. Additionally, the very prominent weft substitution decoration in the kilim ends demonstrates considerable skill and effort, suggesting a special production for a high-ranking client

14, 15 The main fields of these rugs directly relate to Jebel Amour rugs published in R.P. Giacobetti's *Les Tapis et Tissages du Jebel Amour* (pl.IX, X, XXI). (14) has small-pattern, vertical border elements that commonly appear in Beni Snassen rugs. This large rug, measuring 2.05 x 5.00 m (6' 9" x 16' 5"), was found in Qannine near Tafoughalt, Eastern Morocco, in January 1997 and according to its owners was made around 1930. (15), measuring 1.90 x 3.60 m (6' 3" x 11' 10"),



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is considerably coarser in structure and was likely made as an everyday object. It was woven in the third quarter of the 20th century, probably in the lower Moulouya valley

16 Rug from Ait Bou Ichaouen or one of the neighbouring groups of the Ait Seghrouchene du Sud, the most eastern part of the High Atlas around the city of Talsint, third quarter 20th century. 2.15 x 4.45 m (7' 1" x 14' 7"). The calligraphic

drawings relate to Jebel Amour design elements (cf. (17))

17 The design of this rug, 1970s, measuring 2.10 x 4.70 m (6' 11" x 15' 5"), from the Ait Bou Ichaouen, home of full nomads in the most eastern part of the High Atlas, was also inspired by Jebel Amour rugs. However, design elements that were instantly readable in some examples (cf. (12)) are now deconstructed and transformed into a distinct language of its own

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influence; or (b) the natural landscape—consider how the rugs resemble ‘the long purple shadows thrown by the jagged mountain peaks at evening tide on an earth reddened by the sun and punctuated by emerald tufts of esparto grass’ (Rifaat, p.40). It is hard to argue with ancient roots and poetry, but we might add the possibility of design transfer from Anatolian kilims, such as western examples from Yüncü; or more speculatively a distant link to Mamluk workshop carpets, based on the colour balance, design outlining and the overall medallion concepts. No matter whether one chooses to believe these theories or, as we might suggest, to remain more agnostic, what everyone seems to agree on is the longevity, the steadfastness and the power of Jebel Amour design.

In sum, the culture of Jebel Amour is characterised by considerable weaving talent, a consistent and longstanding design language, and a



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18 Beni Bou Zeggou master weaver rug, found in El Khemis, Eastern Morocco, in January 1996. Woven in the 1930s, 2.15 x 6.45 m (7' 1" x 21' 2"). The sawtooth lines of the diamond grid relate to Algerian rugs from the Jebel Amour region

19 Fragment of a Beni Bou Yahri rug made under direction of a male master weaver, from the plains along the lower Moulouya valley between Guercif and the Mediterranean coast, early 20th century. 1.90 x 2.95 m (6' 3" x 9' 8"). Parts of the pile have been executed with an uncut yarn, forming loops between each Berber knot, providing a technical

link to the rugs of the neighboring Beni Ouarain

20 Fragment from the Beni Bou Yahri, Metalsa or Beni Snassen, before 1950s. 2.00 x 3.75 m (6' 7" x 12' 4")

21 Zkara rug purchased in Oulad Ben Aissa, Eastern Morocco, in January 1996, woven around 1935 by the mother of the owner. 1.80 x 4.30 m (5' 11" x 14' 1"). The overall layout is seemingly influenced by master weaver rugs found among tribes along the lower Moulouya valley, but the details highlight the more intuitive process of female weavers who weave for their own family



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sphere of influence that ranged from the mountains of the Ouled Nail to the frontiers of Morocco. Together, these factors would suggest the strong possibility that the weavings of Jebel Amour would have influenced weaving cultures outside its narrow tribal borders, perhaps even widely into eastern Morocco, which we hope our photographs make clear for the first time.

The link between the weavings of Jebel Amour and those of eastern Morocco is evident in the master-weaver rugs of the Beni Snassen and the Beni Bou Zeggou (18, 22). Jebel influence is also evident in many of the everyday rugs, sometimes directly readable (9, 10), sometimes accompanied by minor deconstruction (12, 14) and finally subject to major creative overhaul (17, 21).

It should be noted that the influence of Jebel Amour rugs on production in eastern Morocco is not only based on the work of the master weavers, but also on the highly commercialised production of Jebel Amour rugs in the 20th century, which were traded in the region. During field research in the late 1990s, we documented several of these commercialised Jebel Amour examples in the territories of the Berber



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groups of the Beni Snassen and the Ait Bou Ichaouen as well as the Arabic Oulad Sidi Ali Bouchnafa (e.g., (8)).

The existence of such fragments provides a very direct mechanism of cultural exchange (9). Nevertheless, assuming that the link between

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Jebel Amour and eastern Morocco is restricted to the phase of commercialised production would be much too reductionist. That said, the duration of the cultural exchange—whether it was through trade, intermarrying, travelling master weavers or the movement of tribes across the Morocco-Algeria border during periods



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22, 24 Beni Snassen master weaver rug (22), found in Oulad Yahia near Tafoughalt, Eastern Morocco, in January 1997, woven around 1940. 1.80 x 4.40 m (5' 11" x 14' 5"). Beni Snassen master weaver rug (24), found in Qannine near Tafoughalt, Eastern Morocco, in January 1997, probably 1920s. 1.80 x 3.85 m (5' 11" x 12' 7"). The outer minor borders seem typical for Beni Snassen, while the massive inner borders appear in a specific type of Beni Snassen master weaver rug that has concentric stepped diamond medallions in the main field. These stepped diamonds relate to master weaver rugs from the region south of Constantine in Algeria, and also to the carpets of Kalaa Beni Rached. Interestingly, in *Les Arts Populaires en Algérie*, L. Golvin notes a distant

genealogical relation between the Beni Rached who settled in the Kalaa region and the Berbers of the Jebel Amour

23 Still from the 1948 film *Tapis parterres du Maroc*, showing a master weaver executing design knots from one side of the loom while women weavers introduce filling pile from the other side



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of drought or hardship—will require more research. Even lacking the precise mechanisms of transfer, we fortunately have the result of this cultural transmission process appearing across these pages.

Finally, while eastern Moroccan master-weaver rugs appear to have been influenced by the weavings of Jebel Amour, many of the rugs also show quite distinct design patterns, such as the rugs from the tribes of Beni Bou Yahi and Metalsa (19, 20). To find the origins of these other designs, perhaps we might push further east to explore other Algerian master-weaver traditions, such as the tribes south and east of Constantine, or even neighbouring tribes across the Tunisian border. Alternatively, the design roots of master-weaver rugs may lie deeper in the past, with a common, yet-to-be-discovered ancestor.

Morocco and Algeria are crossroads where cultures from across the Mediterranean basin have come to mix and mingle. One underappreciated mechanism of cultural exchange is the master weaver, who functioned as both a guardian of tradition and a surprising engine of textile innovation. The fate of master weaver rugs is often to kickstart a process of creative improvisation that characterises so much of Moroccan weaving—as local female weavers pick up the rigid design language and transform it into a beautiful synthesis. As textile enthusiasts we should be grateful that we are still able to tell the stories of these men and women who made it their life's work to weave these prestigious objects, and acknowledge the role they played in the larger pile-weaving culture of Northern Africa. ❖

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