



Photo: Gebhart Blazek

Conversation pieces

Weaving still thrives in Morocco, both for domestic use and for export. As a living tradition, combining motifs from different ages and regions might not seem that remarkable. However, as this discussion between **Alexandra Sachs** and **Gebhart Blazek** proves, looking at how designs travelled across time and space and between genders can offer greater insights into the region's weaving traditions

1 Pile rug, central High Atlas,
last quarter 20th century.
1.70 x 2.40 m (5' 7" x 7' 10").
Alexandra Sachs collection

The present-day weaving culture of Morocco is a happy cacophony of snippets of ideas, historical references and playful outbursts. Without a rigid system, yet observing a certain routine, the weavers reflect this in their individual works—often surprising, but also frequently showing allusions to the past. It is important to note that in the rural areas of Morocco families still make rugs for their own consumption, unlike most other rug-weaving nations where rug making is a commercial activity. Clearly recognisable designs and motifs appear again and again over long periods, like an echo in time or a guiding thread that links the old to the new. This raises the question of where these various design languages originate, and how they made their way into the various regions. A geographical overview, coupled with selective comparisons between older and newer rugs, may provide some answers. To that end, there follows a transcript of a conversation between Alexandra Sachs and Gebhart Blazek, leading specialists in the field.

First, though, some more words of introduction. The imagery of rural Moroccan rugs is rooted in the traditions of old Zenata Berber groups, who settled in the northern Middle Atlas from the 11th century and have connections with the weaving culture of East Morocco and Algeria. Beginning in the 16th century, Sanhaja (also Berber) groups advanced northwards from the Sahara. They now populate large parts of the High Atlas, the Middle Atlas and East Morocco, and have probably assimilated the more complex techniques of the Zenata textile culture they encountered over time.

In most of rural Morocco, weaving is mostly done by women for their own families. Particularly in the Middle Atlas, the usually strictly geometrical patterns of pile rugs are based on flatweave designs, which are highly complex in technical terms. In turn, the drawing of these rugs is strongly influenced by the geometries and logic of what is achievable in terms of craftsmanship (or technique).

Accordingly, the status of a weaver in traditional society was primarily defined by the virtuosity of her skills in producing flatweaves, which would later be used as a source of inspiration for pile rug designs. In rare cases, especially gifted female (master) weavers (*madillema* in Arabic) were paid and respected for their work. In addition, large parts of East Morocco and the Middle Atlas had professional male master weavers (*madllem*), who would be engaged to conceive carpet designs which they then implemented either with the women in the family or with their own team of female weavers. However, only wealthy families could afford them, since they had to pay for the labour and accommodation and meals for the master weaver and, if required, his team.

In consequence, the carpets made by male master weavers in particular, but also those of the female master weavers, were influential models that shaped the style of subsequent regional weavings. The design concepts of the male professionals almost always show a network of diamonds, very regular in drawing and filled with motifs in strictly controlled variations, usually in horizontal rows, surrounded by a highly conspicuous border frame (9).

The weavings made by women are considerably richer in variations and more multi-layered. Rugs by female master weavers are similarly dense in drawing, but depending on the region they can show a loose succession of horizontal design panels; a diamond lattice that covers the surface filled with motifs which are closely spaced, but often placed playfully; or enlargements of complex flatweave designs^(10,11). These are usually frameless or have



Photo: Gebhart Blazek

subtle vertical borders. Everyday rugs are less organised, whether using simple and sometimes stereotypical networks of diamonds, deconstructed citations of design details, or merely playing with shades in monochrome sections of colour (12, 13).

Some geometric designs are firmly anchored in the traditional rural design vocabulary, but they occur in many other parts of the world with great frequency. It seems to make more sense to view them as archetypes that come up time and again, regardless of the culture and period.

The chequerboard is found in very early periods, such as the Upper Palaeolithic rock paintings of Lascaux. However, it is also a well-known motif in textiles from all over the world and in various epochs, whether ancient Egypt, early South American cultures, medieval China, or sub-Saharan Africa. Fundamentally very simple, the underlying graphic principle of two lines intersecting at right angles creates an infinite universe of possibilities and variations.

However, it is not only present in the oldest pictorial relics, but reappears in, for instance, children's drawings of today. This means that it is virtually reinvented daily and interpreted in many ways—from a strictly geometric and simply two-tone structure via playful variations up to a complete deconstruction in an exuberant riot of colours (1, 2, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17).

A more recent influence originates from the historical movements in the Mediterranean, the resulting migratory movements, trade, subsequent cultural exchange and the fashions of the regional urban elites. Clearly identifiable relationships include those of 17th-century Fez lampas-woven sashes with Nasrid textiles from Granada; and the same applies to Chefchaouen embroideries of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

As far as we can tell today, pile rugs were woven in Rabat in typically Moroccan formats (ca. 150–180 cm in width, 350–more than 400 cm in length) to models of Anatolian origin from at least the first half of the 18th century. So-called 'Transylvanian' carpets and rugs from Ladiik, Mucur and also southwestern Persia, which had to be purchased as exports in the Ottoman Empire, inspired domestic Moroccan production (4).

Over the next 200 years or more, these prestigious pieces woven in professional urban workshops served as inspiration and role models for slightly simplified rural copies (5). The latter were made either for home use or for a small market with very limited regional scope. Copied over and over, they helped to carry motifs further into the country and to establish them there.

These urban models were more popular in areas largely inhabited by Arabs—the plains between the Atlantic coast and the foothills of the Middle and High Atlas—compared with the Berber areas, particularly those of the Middle Atlas, where the weaving culture apparently prescribes a stricter framework.

In Morocco, a rug's design is largely the weaver's decision, but allied to family and local traditions. Inspirational imagery from further afield was also valued, and left traces that resonate in varied ways, but which can still be heard if studied closely.

2 Rehamna carpet, central plains north of Marrakech, early 20th century. 1.70 x 5.45 m (6' 9" x 17' 10"). Gebhart Blazek collection

3 Boujad rug, Boujad region, last quarter 20th century. 1.92 x 2.55 m (6' 4" x 8' 4"). Alexandra Sachs collection



Photo: Gebhart Blazek

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Rehamna and Rehamnaesque

AS: The idea of comparing old and new occurred to me when I bought the rug in (i). I had been hoping to find an old Rehamna rug with a rare dark ground. Such carpets are extremely rare, and I was hugely surprised when I was offered this rug which to my mind is as good as any of the older examples—it has a strong design. Although not old, its composition certainly bears comparison to an old Rehamna, and it clearly makes reference to the motifs seen in the older models. On the one hand, there is that dazzling horizontal row in the upper section which slowly becomes distorted, right to left. It brought to mind the Rehamna rug woven by the Oulad Dlim group from the former Korolnik Collection that has a similar line at its horizontal centre (now in the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, inv. no. 70.2003.29.8). On the other hand, there is the horizontal row of diamonds with a salt-and-pepper design, in the lower section. Such diamond motifs are also encountered in old Oulad Bou Sbaa rugs. Echoes of various motifs occur repeatedly over long periods of time in pile rugs from the various regions of Morocco. Such rugs are individual interpretations which differ in terms of colours and materials depending on the period in which they were woven. However, they often display a remarkably similar design language that was further developed in surprising ways.

GB: This rug does include a few elements that seem familiar from older rugs, not just Rehamnas. I see connections with Boujad rugs in its square border formations, but the diamond remind me of Azilal rugs of the 1970s and 1980s, while the two medallion elements in the upper area (square and diamond) and the abstract lozenge pattern, the structure and the slight lustre, are like rugs from Siroua. In the horizontal row of diamonds, I perceive echoes of the horizontal design panels adopted from urban carpets seen in rugs of the neighbouring Oulad Bou Sbaa, and horizontal kilim designs common among Arab groups from the plains between Marrakesh and Rabat.

AS: Yes, that is true. The rug in (i) was said to be discovered in Amizmiz, 55 km south of Marrakesh, and was probably woven near there. Although in typological terms we can't attribute it with certainty, it does show other links. Rehamna first came to mind because it is hard to work out where the design language found in old Rehamna rugs developed from. The high proportion of abstract elements they contain may mean that these designs evolved from different cultures coming together, not a homogenous Moroccan culture.

GB: For example, the weavings of the mainly Arab groups between Rabat and Marrakesh borrow heavily from Rabat rugs—medallions, border elements and other motifs. While attempts were made to adhere closely to such models in the Oulad Bou Sbaa area, the Rehamna have for a long time had a more associative



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and liberal approach to these inspirations and borrowed designs. In the rugs in (3, 9–13) I would be likely to read the triangular or trapezoid forms at the centre as derivatives of urban medallions. Other influences can be discerned in the black rug too, but this playful and free treatment of models corresponds nicely to 19th-century Rehamna rugs in Ricard's *Corpus des Tapis Marocains*, vols. 3, 4. I find it is related to the Rehamna not formally and in 'spirit'.

AS: I am not sure if these more associative designs are just very abstract versions of urban models. Moroccan culture has always been full of life, with very different influences; Jewish, Arab and African influences. These different cultures must have influenced each other. For example, through the caravans in the 19th century that travelled from Rabat via Oulad Bou Sbaa to Marrakesh, then Tizi n'Tichka and through the Drâa Valley (with a detour to Taznakht) to Zagora and the Sahara proper. It's easy to imagine that the freely associative elements in Rehamna rugs are echoes of something different and unknowable.

GB: Neither do I believe that such elements are necessarily reinterpretations of urban models. I see them more as different influences interacting with each other. Especially in Oulad Bou Sbaa and Rehamna rugs, the potential African influence may be that both groups still have territories in Morocco's far south.

AS: An interesting thing about the urban models is that these products themselves were modelled on carpets from the Ottoman Empire. That is, on something which is not immediately rooted in their own culture. 'Tradition' is something far more flexible than what we generally associate with this term.

4 Rabat carpet, Atlantic coast of Morocco, mid-19th century. 1.60 x 4.00 m (5' 3" x 13' 1"). Gebhart Blazek collection

5 Ait Ouazouguite (Ait Tamassine) rug, Jebel Siroua, mid-19th century or earlier. 1.65 m x 3.50 m (5' 5" x 11' 5"). Private collection

6 Rug from the Boujad region, western foothills of the Middle Atlas, circa 1960s. 1.75 x 3.25 m (5' 9" x 10' 8"). Gebhart Blazek collection

7 Boujad rug, western foothills of the Middle Atlas, late 20th century. 1.40 x 2.09 m (4' 5" x 6' 8"). Alexandra Sachs collection

8 Rug from the Gharb plains, east of Rabat or Zaer, late 20th century. 1.15 x 1.55 m (3' 9" x 5' 1"). Gebhart Blazek collection



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Rabat/Boujad

GB: Let us now turn to the design repertoire of urban carpets in Morocco: as far as we can tell from today's perspective, the urban workshops of Rabat were established in the 18th century to fulfil the growing demand for large-format carpets that would be appropriate for the proportions of Moroccan rooms. The so-called 'Transylvanian' rugs evidently served as models for very early Rabat carpets, and later also Ladik and Mucur rugs. However, we also find border elements and, in the further course of the 19th century, floral rosettes and medallions from Persian models. In the silk embroideries of Chefchaouen, the historical models go even further both geographically and historically. The obvious delight in playing with such imported elements resembles the lively way in which this is still done now in many rural areas of Morocco.

AS: The urban workshops were not established to meet the demand of the rural population. These rugs were obviously inspired by foreign tastes rather than domestic ones, because the aesthetic influence of the Ottoman Empire was then simply 'en vogue'. However, what happened at the same time is that women from the surrounding areas worked in these workshops, adopted these models and spread them in the region in a highly individual manner.

GB: An interesting fact in this regard—as already mentioned in the case of the Rehamna—is that this 'enrichment' of the rugs is apparently

far more popular in the regions of the plains with a predominantly Arab population than in the Berber regions of the mountains.

AS: Are you saying that Arab tribes have a greater tendency to quote and emulate design elements, or that they handle prescribed structures more freely?

GB: Both, really. Very early examples of the dissemination of urban designs not only came to light in the Arab region of Oulad Bou Sbaa west of Marrakesh in the late 18th century, but also appeared in the first half of the 19th century among the Ait Tamassine, a prominent group of the Ait Ouaouzguite Confederation (5). However, in the Ait Ouaouzguite Confederation everything was wrapped up in a far more austere geometric structure, and there was strict attention to symmetry in the layout, too. Generally speaking, however, adopting 'fashionable' elements is obviously more popular in the Arab regions and their approach to them more playful.

AS: The connections are really quite clear in this series of rugs. Each is a unique interpretation of a typical urban model. In addition, you must consider, there are many, many other interpretations within the same genre. A series such as this is actually an instruction in how to read pictures. If you don't know about the existence of the Rabat template (4), you won't be able to understand or follow the design progression and influences over time.



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Berber—female and male masters

AS: As in Rabat rugs, here, too, it is interesting that models are associated with ‘wealth’ or affluence—after all, not everyone could afford to commission a carpet woven by a master weaver. Only the rich Berber families did that. This means that the ‘normal’ women weavers actually tried to imitate something because they could not afford to commission rugs like that. Now and again this would lead to creative accidents. I mean this in a good way. The strict and almost dogmatic cartoons of the master weavers’ designs were broken up and sometimes executed with a spirited cheerfulness. Whether intentionally or not, this sometimes gave rise to very personal interpretations showing a weaver’s highly characteristic signature.

GB: Most women in the Middle Atlas received very good rug weaving training in their families. This is particularly apparent in the flatweaves, which are technically truly elaborate and complex. Having said that, the technical complexity of kilims also invites stereotypes in a way. Mostly arranged in successive horizontal rows, the designs of flatweaves usually served as design repertoires for the pile rugs. Very typical in this context are the ‘V’ designs of the Beni Mguild and Zayan that appear like enlarged versions of kilim cushions (10). A very beautiful feature is the change in rhythm and the variations in design density: a typical signature and a spontaneous decision by the weaver.

AS: The rug in (10) appears a little more relaxed than the one in (9). In the rug in (11), the effect of the geometry is rather more playful, while showing extreme skill at the same time. It is really these spontaneous decisions that differentiate between weavings by male or female master weavers. The women were somewhat less strict in the repetitions, either breaking them up a little or embellishing them, whereas the men adhered to a rigid repertoire. Actually the rug in (11) is almost too playful for a female master weaver, don’t you think?

GB: This piece rather gives me the impression that, although the rug appears playful, the woman knew very well just how she was playing. Of course, the production of kilims and rugs of bold design

9 Beni Ouarain carpet made under the direction of a male master weaver, north-eastern Middle Atlas, dated 1958. 2.00 x 4.00 m (6’ 6” x 13’ 0”). Private collection

10 Beni Mguild rug, central Middle Atlas, second quarter 20th century. 2.00 x 3.75 m (6’ 7” x 12’ 4”). Alexandra Sachs collection

11 Beni Mguild rug made by a female master weaver, central or south-eastern Middle Atlas, 1930s. 1.85 x 2.30 m (6’ 0” x 7’ 6”). Private collection



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12 Ait Youssi or Beni Mguild rug, south Middle Atlas, late 20th century. 1.70 x 2.80 m (5' 8" x 9' 3"). Private collection



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13 Beni Mguild rug, central Middle Atlas, circa 1960. 1.70 x 2.50 m (5' 5" x 8' 2"). Private collection

is far more elaborate and requires greater concentration when working. The everyday rugs were primarily needed as articles of regular daily use, as sleeping rugs or blankets, and were often simpler in conception, so I rather think that the rug in (11) was not an everyday object.

AS: We can see this in the sleeping rugs that are often plain or very sparsely decorated. On the other hand, aside from other attributes, designs

The designs by male master weavers are organised down to the last detail

surely have something to do with decoration, and I believe that many women simply took the trouble to make their surroundings more beautiful.

GB: Usually the designs by male master weavers are organised down to the last detail and implemented strictly and without any deviations. However, it's interesting to note that, in all likelihood, the master weavers had no written or drawn pattern books.

AS: Instead they used songs to pass on these designs.

GB: Yes, indeed. This information comes from an interview with an old master weaver from the Moulouya region, although due to the onset of dementia he was no longer able to describe exactly quite how the designs were transmitted and finally translated on the loom, but he was sure that they only used oral lore. This is certainly something that would be worth pursuing further.



Photo: Gebhart Blazek



Photo: Gebhart Blazek

The wild ones

AS: In addition to the clearly identifiable motifs and design repertoires that can be traced back to various models, as we have discussed so far, there are also the absolutely free designs. These may not show an origin or a relationship to something as clearly, but on the other hand these designs may lead us back much further. This happens where designs make creative use of basic elements such as lines, triangles, squares or dots, and they occur in many textiles on different continents. I may be just imagining this, but here again Moroccan women handle such basic design elements in ways that are more liberal, wilder and highly individual.

GB: The chequerboard motif occurs in the very earliest human designs over the course of history across different cultures. And it is being reinvented over and over again even now, actually thousands of times every day in children's drawings. And yet has been around for a long time.

AS: I would go so far as to assert that these designs have to do with energy. Music is vibrations, just like colours and designs. They create an atmosphere which triggers something in the viewer one way or another. Ultimately I believe it has a lot to do with the weaver's mood and her ability to improvise freely.

GB: That is a very nice image. On the one hand it is interesting that the transcription of images into songs was used quite explicitly as a method

by the male master weavers, even though—as yet—we know little about the exact processes. On the other hand, what I also find interesting in those images is that they seem to have a painterly, sometimes even gestural style of the kind we know from paintings. But what has a bearing on the speed of the brush stroke and the movement of the body in painting is actually a much, much slower process in weaving, taking place really at an almost imperceptible speed.

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AS: That's true—but I can imagine that the motivation for creating a rug, aside from its expected purpose, is similar to when you paint a picture. Ultimately it is about creating or materialising something. What springs to my mind with regard to these sometimes highly idiosyncratic compositions, is that currently many new products in Morocco attempt to capture and reflect exactly this personal creative drive. In my opinion, however, they are unsuccessful. To me these rugs



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14 Beni Mguild (?) rug, central or south-eastern Middle Atlas, circa 1960. 1.95 x 3.25 m (6' 7" x 10' 7"). Gebhart Blazek collection

15 Beni Mesquine rug, Morocco central plains, mid 20th century. 1.77 x 3.00 m (5' 10 x 9' 10"). Alexandra Sachs collection

16 Boucherouite rug, exact region unknown, early 21st century. 1.58 x 3.25 m (5' 2" x 10' 8"). Alexandra Sachs collection

17 Ourika valley (?) rug, central High Atlas, late 20th century. 1.65 x 3.00 m (5' 5" x 9' 10"). Gebhart Blazek collection

18 Flatwoven pillow cover, western or central Middle Atlas, late 20th century. 30 x 60 cm (11" x 2' 11"). Private collection

appear 'empty', like a shell of something, without substance. Although the rugs we discussed earlier are also derived from other models, such as Rabat rugs, which once again is a kind of copying. However, unlike new products made for the market, those compositions are more dynamic and exciting. To my eyes, such free compositions are highly attractive, but it is harder to identify or assess them using specific criteria. You can compare them to modern art, but this is a matter of individual choice.

GB: I think that weavings designed this freely can only succeed if they are actually allowed to develop freely in the working process. Modern commercial products previously used drawn weaving cartoons and now use digital photo cartoons, which prevents one's own creative drive and any freedom associated with it from the start. They are not about free production, but about re-production. In contrast, the cultural framework for traditional production—to meet the needs of one's own family—was and remains linked to certain conventions, but particularly in Morocco it also permitted a great deal of individual freedom. I would see this tolerance in allowing and even provoking individual creative solutions as a very important part of Moroccan textile culture. ❖