The Invention of the Moroccan Carpet*

Alain de Pommereau

In *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger showed how much the nineteenth-century boom in Turkish carpets/carpet production and popularity owed to the English. The Turkish carpet industry developed in city workshops everywhere from Greece to India. It was after decolonization that production of this article became domestic and rural, which is what makes it seem like a tradition today. The history of Moroccan carpet-making followed a similar path. Here I examine how these richly colored, eastern-influenced weavings insinuated themselves into the Sharifian Empire as an object associated with western modernity. The process began in the nineteenth century by way of what is known as the Rabat rug, involving a revolutionary aesthetic and production technique, and continued in the framework of the French colonial weaving industry, orchestrated by an impassioned, stubborn civil servant named Prosper Ricard. Ultimately, the rugs came to be produced as a popular “national” creation, stimulated in this last stage by the tourist market. Hobsbawm linked the invention of the “traditions” he was interested in with the advent of the nation-state in the nineteenth century. We shall see how, at the various stages running from “Moroccan” to “Berber,” the carpets we are interested in served in the construction of a national identity. The present chronological and historical study contradicts abundant literature claiming that Moroccan weaving practices originated in local traditions.

The First Fruits of a Colonial Crafts Policy

What were sold as carpets in the nineteenth century were generally knotted pile rugs, also called “high pile,” a weave thickened by knotting the yarns on the warp. The technique is amenable to all sorts of patterns and motifs. The colonial context provided a cheap labor force as well as a new global sales network. By 1850, great numbers of mid-level bourgeois households in Europe had graced their floors with these brightly colored rugs, usually made in Asia.

* Translation by Amy Jacobs.

Minor. The object became affordable thanks to the arrival on the market of chemical dyes, which from 1875 sent dyeing costs plummeting; now households across the planet could purchase one. Emblematic of this success was the Oriental Carpet Manufactures Limited, a British company with factories in Istanbul and Smyrna, workshops all the way to India and sales counters in all the major metropolises, including Sydney, Toronto and Buenos Aires. Soon France's Chambre Syndicale du Tapis à Points Noués de France et les Colonies was working to set up a similar-sized operation in the French colonial territories.

In fact, the French general government in Algeria was fairly late in implementing a policy to this effect. The carpet-weaving activity set up in the nineteenth century by the Sœurs Blanches was for educational purposes and long remained so; it only reached industrial proportions in the early twentieth century, when a vocational education inspector named Prosper Ricard arranged for training school-workshops to be set up.

Ricard knew both Arabic and Berber and belonged to the “indigenist” circles seeking to reassert the value of the autochthonous culture, which was seriously threatened by the particularly destructive presence of the French in Algeria. It was to counteract the murderous effects of that presence that in 1908 an Indigenous Arts Bureau was set up, with Ricard at its head, and set out to inventory craft activities practiced by the Muslim populations. The aim was to develop a cultural base that would unify the country, which was itself shaken by inter-community tensions. This project, which may be described as rear-guard, was no doubt implemented too late, and though it was partially realized it never attained the dimensions Prosper Ricard had hoped for.

Morocco was a new French colony, constituted under different auspices from Algeria and in a perfect position to benefit from “indigenist” thinking thanks to the heritage policy undertaken just after the Protectorate was instated in 1912. Though the first task of the new Service des Beaux-Arts et des Monuments Historiques was urban planning, Lyautey almost immediately ordered Ricard to do a survey of local industries for the purpose of “revitalizing the indigenous arts.” There was of course a political strategy at work here: in order

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3 Otherwise known as the Soeurs Missionnaires de Notre Dame d’Afrique, a religious order founded by Cardinal Lavigerie.
4 In 1929, sixteen Algerian cities had a workshop school and there were nine weaving rooms. Marie-Anne de Bovet, Monographie du tapis algérien (Algiers: Gouvernement général de l’Algérie, 1929), p. 5.