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Textiles and Minimalism at the de Young Museum, San Francisco



Posth's paradise

Martin Posth, a former VW executive and author of *1000 Days in Shanghai*, talks to **Markus Voigt** about his Anatolian carpet collection, soon to be shown at the Studio Bumiller in Berlin

1 Prayer rug, possibly western Anatolia, 18th century. 1.95 x 2.74 m (6' 5" x 9' 0"). The collector attributes this unusual prayer rug to west Anatolia, although it bears a very strong resemblance to the 18th and 19th-century Ottoman-inspired weavings typically associated with Rabat and Mediouna in Morocco

2 Bergama rug with Ghirlandaio design, west Anatolia, 18th/19th century. 1.97 x 2.07 m (6' 6" x 6' 10")



2

In 1961, the 17-year-old Martin Posth visited his great-uncle in Istanbul for the first time. As a young man, great-uncle Johannes had fled his well-to-do parents' home in Berlin to look for adventure in Morocco. Working first for the *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, he later ended up at the recently founded Deutsche Orientbank. His quick ascent within the bank took him first to Cairo and then to Istanbul, where he stayed for the rest of his life.

In his great-uncle's house overlooking Dolmabahçe Palace and the Bosphorus, young Martin encountered a wonderful 16th/17th-century medallion Ushak carpet of enormous size adorning the living room wall and a suzani draped over a table, as well as eastern ceramics and antiques. Sometimes he slept on a sofa covered with a Tekke Turkmen main carpet that would much later become the first in his collection.



3

Martin and his brother enjoyed their frequent stays in Istanbul, where Johannes was a well-known personality in the German community, active as head of the German hospital, the German school and Teutonia (the expat club). In addition to some financial help, he had some advice for the brothers: 'You are both tall, try to get into a profession where you need to be a leader.'

And lead Martin did. As the youngest-ever board member of Audi, he is best known for setting up the Volkswagen plant in Shanghai. He has described that adventure in the early days of China's opening up to the west in a fascinating book, *1000 days in Shanghai*, which is still on the reading list of many managers going to China for the first time. In 1997 he was made an honorary citizen of Shanghai.

When Johannes died in 1979, Martin went to Istanbul as executor of his will. From my own experience, I know that this can be a huge task that often needs settling in quickly changing circumstances. On top of that, the political situation in Turkey in the late 1970s was rather difficult, ending in a bloody putsch in 1980. It seemed impossible to take the antiques and antiquities Johannes had collected back to Germany, so Martin set out to sell them in the bazaar. He was helped by his friend Dieter Orasch, who had experience in the antique trade of the Near East.

'I had only passing knowledge about antiques and no sense for carpets whatsoever,' claims Martin, but Kemal Duykan, the dealer who was handling the rugs for him said: 'Keep this one in the family, I haven't seen anything like it before.' He was referring to the silky Tekke main carpet on which Martin had once slept, given to Johannes by none other than Kemal Atatürk. And here his love affair with carpets started.

Martin then went through the piles of rugs in Kemal's shop, and pulled out things he liked. Subconsciously his eye had been trained in his great-uncle's house, and it was the designs that particularly fascinated him. Quickly a second rug arrived and a third and fourth... 'What happened to the large Ushak?' I asked, but unfortunately it had rotted on the wall and fell apart when Martin tried to take it down.

Countless trips to the bazaar followed and a number of rugs as well. With the first rug came the first carpet book, the germ of a library of some 1,400 titles. While Martin shows me rugs from his collection, he pulls

*...the harmony that exists between
the eyes and the light, which is the
soul of the rug...*

books from the shelves with astonishing accuracy, finding pages with comparable examples. He knows exactly which variant of which motif is in which book, and explains to me the unique features of some of his rugs. He has always concentrated on well-preserved examples and stayed away from fragments, the only exception being a Bergama rug with a fist-size hole that he deemed too good to be missed. 'I have never bought from auctions,' he adds, 'but relied on trusted friends in Istanbul.'

If one could study Posth's inventory, one would see a gap in which there were no bazaar purchases. This represents his time in Asia. Invited to Tibet by the Panchen Lama in 1988 to promote western businesses, as a hunter he circumambulated the Barkhor in Lhasa, where there were still lovely Tibetan rugs to be found. He acquired fifteen, among them a very well-preserved large rug with fabulous colours and an all-over flower design on an unusual aubergine ground. Another very rare piece is a saddle rug with a lion design and a border that looks like abstract skulls.

Visits to Beijing led him to a large store on the outskirts of the city filled with antiques and carpets. Entering Martin's grand Berlin flat, I spotted a lovely dragon pillar rug from the early 19th century in the hallway. 'This is my next project,' he explains. 'I want to stage an exhibition of my Tibetan and Chinese rugs in Berlin, with a catalogue. The carpets will be given to the Shanghai Museum after my death.'

Last year saw the publication of Martin's first carpet book, *Collected Beauty*, a limited edition in which he shares his passion for Anatolian weavings with other enthusiasts. It presents an array of 72 classic Turkish village rugs and 22 kilims of the 18th and 19th centuries, often with a 'twist' to the design.

Martin wants his collection to help intercultural dialogue between east and west, and often refers to the fact that many religions could coexist in the Ottoman Empire. The kilim section of *Collected Beauty* is dominated by prayer kilims—16 of 22 to be precise, and I find a similar ratio among the rugs. In conversation Martin has returned to 'tree of life' designs and 're-entrant' motifs several times. Is that of special



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3 Elmadag kilim, central Anatolia, 19th century.
1.25 x 1.76 m (4' 1" x 5' 9")

4 Melas prayer rug, west Anatolia, 19th century. 1.04 x 1.57 m (3' 5" x 5' 2")

5 Demirci Kula prayer rug, 19th century. 1.00 x 1.35 m (3' 3" x 4' 5").
The inscription reads: 'Hasten to prayer, for time is fleeting, and hasten to repent of your sins before the arrival of death'



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interest to him, I wonder. 'It was more incidental, based on what I was offered,' he explains, 'but of course after I had acquired the rugs I started to look into the designs and their origins.' The book leaves out the scholarly aspect, covered competently elsewhere, to concentrate on 'the harmony that exists between the eyes and the light, which is the soul of the rug'.

Since publication there have been more purchases. While we are talking Martin's phone rings and a WhatsApp message arrives with a carpet offer from Istanbul. It is instantly discarded. I ask how he decides what to buy. 'It is a more or less an immediate decision, colour and design need to go together,' he explains. 'The condition should be good and sometimes it is the price that tips the scales.'

Martin wants to share his passion with the wider public and is aware of the lack of younger collectors. An exhibition had been on his mind for some time when he spotted an announcement of an Islamic art exhibition at the Bumiller Studio in Berlin. A meeting followed. A subsidiary of the Bumiller Collection in Bamberg, the Studio is in Kreuzberg, which has a large Turkish population. 'It is important not to look for divisions between the west and the Islamic world but for what unites us,' says Martin. 'Therefore it is especially fortunate to have the exhibition in Kreuzberg. So often Islamic culture is depicted as incompatible with the western world and I want to show the other side.' The exhibition, of 58 rugs, with a catalogue written by Georg Butterweck, opens in conjunction with Volkmanntreffen on 23 October and runs until 3 December 2016. ❖