War Rugs:

Woven Documents of Conflict and Hope

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Recommended for Grades 6-12

Figure 1. Subtle martial imagery (Baluch style). Collection of author. Photo: W. Charland.

Exposed to images of violence and conflict around the world, many students understand such struggles only through brief news clips and sound bites. By providing an introduction to the history, design, and production of Afghan war rugs, this Instructional Resource is intended to help students pause and consider the context within which individuals turn to ages-old cultural practices to maintain a sense of continuity as war indelibly alters the world around them. These pedagogical strategies are intended for middle-school and high-school students who have achieved a certain level of intellectual and affective maturity.

Learning objectives include:

- **Analyzing and interpreting** war rugs;
- Exploring the subjectivity of seeing, interpreting, and evaluating;
- **Recognizing constancy and change** in cultural expression;
- **Examining gender roles** and the reconfiguration of gender expectations;
- **Investigating related work** by contemporary artists; and
- **Exploring the role of creativity** as a universal coping mechanism.

War Rugs: An Introduction

War rugs (see Figures 1 and 2) are hand-made woven commodities produced in the rural villages and urban workshops of Afghanistan, as well as crowded refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. Graphic and visually striking, war rugs are marketed globally, available on the street corners of New York and other major cities, and in the virtual markets of eBay and other online sites. War rugs are afforded exhibition space in museums and galleries across the United States and Europe, and discussed in scholarly books, journals, and museum publications (Allen, 2011; Cooke & MacDowell, 2005; Kuryluk, 1989; Mascelloni, 2009). They range in quality from tightly knotted intricate works of subtle coloration and meticulous craftsmanship to simpler, roughly constructed works dashed off for quick sale.

War Textiles

War is a defining activity in the history of societies, and thus provides a key theme for artists and writers through the ages. In Homer's *Iliad*, Helen of Troy is described weaving "the story of the war" (Pantelia, 1993, p.495) between the Trojans and the Achaeans. The war ships and battlefields, hails of arrows and crowds of warriors, the supine dead and dying that constitute the *Bayeux Tapestry*, probably commissioned in the 1070s, speak of the Norman conquest of England in the Middle Ages (Lewis, 1999). Textiles with war themes generally occur "in societies where the production of cloth is already a pervasive medium of deep cultural significance" (Cooke, 2005a, p. 9), and are nearly always created by women. In addition to Afghan war rugs, examples of textiles that document conflict are found among Hmong story cloths, Asafo flags, Haitian hunger cloths, Chilean arpilleras, Kuna molas, and other artworks depicting the modern world through a prism of traditional culture.

The Socio-Political Context of Afghan War Rugs

The invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979 followed internal unrest in the Afghan government (Maley, 2009). Afghanistan's communist party, upon seizing control in 1978, turned to the Soviet Union for support, alienating large portions of the country's traditional Islamic population. An Islamic insurgency formed to drive the communists from power. Fearing the loss of influence in the region, Soviet leaders quickly overthrew the Afghan government and replaced it with a more reliable subordinate government (Kakar, 1995), simultaneously flooding Afghanistan with troops to quash the determined resistance efforts of Afghan Muslim groups.

However, "the resistance to the Soviet invasion was nationwide" (Kakar, 1995, p.79). Afghanistan's 250,000 square miles of topographical contrasts made modern warfare difficult for the invaders. While Soviet vehicles ground down in sand and dust, Afghan resistance fighters struck with hit-and-run skirmishes, and found refuge in rugged mountains and valleys. The weaponry employed by both sides—automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, missiles, fighter planes, helicopters, tanks, and personnel carriers—are depicted in war rugs (see Figures 1 and 2). During the conflict, more than 5 million Afghans fled their homeland, most of these to the relative safety of surrounding nations (Maley, 2009).

The Taliban, a militant fundamentalist group, moved to assume control of Afghanistan. Soon after the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington, DC, the US demanded the Taliban turn over leaders of the group claiming responsibility for these attacks (al-Qaeda), who were believed to be seeking refuge in Afghanistan. The Taliban refused, and the US (with British support) commenced bombing Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan, eventually handing over command of the military security forces to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2003.

Figure 2. Red rug, obvious imagery (Turkman style). Collection of author. Photo: W. Charland.

By comparing early impressions with later knowledge, students come to understand how interpretations of art can develop and grow.

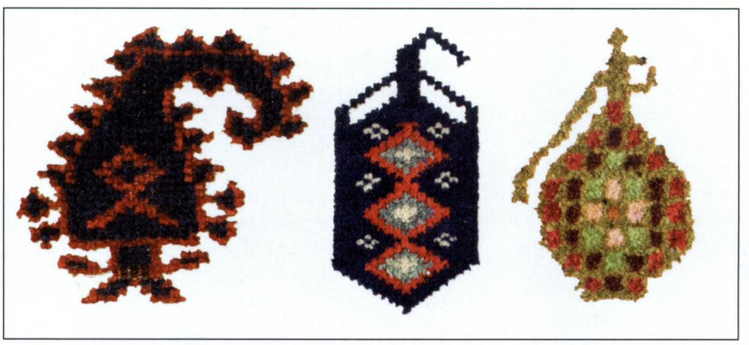

Figure 3. Traditional boteh form (left) as basis for grenade images. Photo: W. Charland.

Although Afghanistan has witnessed the approval of a new constitution, the seating of the first democratically elected leader, and the training of a national army, conflict continues. The civilian population of Afghanistan continues to suffer hardships and casualties, while many millions wait out the war in refugee camps (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2009; Public Broadcasting Service, 2008).

Cultural Adaptations

War rugs are created by "survivor-artists… driven by the twin needs of subsistence and self-expression" (Cooke, 2005a, p. 24). Rug weavers from Baluch, Turkmen, and Hazara tribes (Cooke, 2005a) fled to refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. There they shared experiences, skills, and visual motifs, thus synthesizing distinct tribal styles (Hawley, 1970) into a new, broader Afghani aesthetic. Deprived of traditional means of earning a living, men resorted to weaving, an expressive and economic venue previously the domain of women (Mascelloni, 2009).

While the evolution of the war rug is not clearly delineated, modern weapons were seen in Afghan rugs produced in the Baluchistan region beginning in the 1930s. Examples of weaponry as visual motifs that appear prior to the Soviet invasion refute the notion that traditional weavers were simply documenting the war around them. Instead, they replaced the dragons, goats, peacocks, and other symbols of prosperity, pride, and protection with depictions of weaponry and mechanized war in a natural process of modernization (Mascelloni, 2009).

Repurposing Traditional Design Elements

The composition of war rugs is based on axial symmetry, a characteristic of traditional Afghan rug design, although some weavers employ Persian-influenced figurative representation (Mascelloni, 2009) and narrative content. Images range from flattened, highly geometricized, and abstracted forms (see Figure 1), to simplified but recognizable representations (see Figure 2), as well as pictures and maps detailed enough to distinguish specific battles, individuals, and weapons (Cooke, 2005b, p. 59).

As the technique of weaving is built upon an *x*/*y* axis of vertical warp and horizontal weft threads, certain shapes are more easily created than others. Straight lines are more readily woven than curves, and the edges of diagonal lines and circles appear stepped, much as they do in a magnification of pixels in a digital image. This repertoire of simplified and geometricized forms allows artists to adapt existing motifs to new purposes by applying a few simple changes. Thus a boteh form (known in the West as a paisley) becomes a hand grenade (see Figure 3). A row of decorative diamonds in a göl, a prominent Turkmen ornament, shifts into the tread of a tank (see Figure 4), and stars and flowers are reinterpreted as explosions (see Figure 2).

Formal Analysis vs. Lived Experience

When presenting eye-catching works, a risk exists of inadvertently deemphasizing the challenges, setbacks, and triumphs of the artists' daily lives within war-torn environments. No discussion of the conflicts wracking Afghanistan can capture the depth and range of human emotions felt by the weavers. Images on the rugs, reducing killing machines into pleasing patterns of soft wool, may inure the viewer and lead to facile misinterpretations. We may begin to approach an understanding of the fear, grief, bravery, and persistence experienced by Afghan weavers by listening to their stories in their own words (Cooke & MacDowell, 2005; Lessing, 1987).

Pedagogical Strategies: Research and Discussion

The evocative images depicted on war rugs capture the attention of the viewer. The challenge in the classroom is to gradually move past immediate perceptions to explore broader issues. To facilitate students' journeys from fascination to deeper understandings, it is essential that students are provided with open-ended study that contextualizes war rugs and explores the art, the artists, and the culture of Afghanistan. The following strategies guide students from subjective to increasingly objective understandings.

Analyzing and Interpreting War Rugs

Prior to sharing information with your class, allow students to view and analyze a war rug using the technique of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS).[1] Based on research in aesthetic development (Housen, 2002), a VTS session begins with a moment of quiet observation of a work of art, followed by the teacher asking, "What's going on in this picture?" From that point on, students do most of the talking, while the teacher's role is that of non-judgmental facilitator. The teacher follows a student's observation with the query "What do you *see* that makes you say that?", prompting students to provide reasons and support. Paraphrasing comments, the teacher asks "What more can we find?", throwing the discussion open to another cycle of observations and interpretations that build upon previous responses.

Explain to students how an anthropologist or art historian might initially approach an item of material culture in a similar way. Asking these types of questions provide researchers with frameworks for subsequent exploration, revealing information that leads to new understandings.

Figure 4. Tank treads (top) derived from traditional göl form. Photo: W. Charland.

Exploring Variability in Seeing, Interpreting, and Evaluating

To demonstrate how one's understanding of a work of art can change over time, ask students to write about a war rug at the beginning of a unit, and again at its conclusion. By comparing early impressions with later knowledge, students come to understand how interpretations of art can develop and grow. The three VTS questions illustrated earlier are particularly effective as prompts for student writing exercises.

To illustrate how the meaning of a work of art can vary among viewers, share and discuss excerpts from literature on seeing (Berger, 1972; Wolcott, 2008), understanding (Belenky, 1986), and valuing works of art (Karp & Lavine, 1991). Ask students about instances when their own artwork was misinterpreted by peers, teachers, or parents/guardians. As a creative application, ask students to role-play. How might a female weaver, a male weaver, a rug merchant, a collector, or a museum curator describe her/his relationship with a war rug?

Comparing Constancy and Transition in Cultural Expression

Have students list differences between their generation's styles and language, and those of their parents/guardians. Share and discuss these differences, working to determine how generational styles occur. Next, view an image of a decorative or utilitarian (non-war) Afghan rug beside an image of a war rug[2] such as that shown in Figure 1. Ask students to find motifs and forms common to both, and identify elements possibly originating in traditional rug design.

Figure 5. Chicago artist Barbara Koenen creating war rug installation. Photo courtesy of artist.

Through strategies designed to expose students to the persistence of art in even the most challenging situations, we help them see the world through another's perspective, and facilitate their development as learners, artists, and informed citizens.

Investigating Gender, the Arts, and Contextual Change

Have students close their eyes and picture a typical artist at work, and then quickly write a description of the artist. Sharing descriptions, note how often the artist is imagined as male, and how often as female. In many classrooms, this exercise reveals a stereotype, a bias toward thinking of an artist as male. Ask students why this gender expectation occurs.

Ask students to draw a circle and divide it into a simple two-portion pie chart, writing in one portion the percentage of males artists and in the other portion the percentage of female artists they think currently work in the United States. The sum of the two percentages should add up to 100%. Do their pie charts match the results of the artist-stereotype exercise? Reveal statistics from the recent census, which shows that slightly more than half (52.4 %) of professional artists and designers in the US are women (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). You may want to follow this with data published by the Guerrilla Girls (1995) quantifying gender inequities in museum exhibitions and collections. These facts may help explain the male stereotype of an artist.

The story of the artists who create war rugs exemplifies how environmental change can revalue or reconfigure gender expectations. Just as men began knotting rugs in Afghan refugee camps, women in the US assumed positions in business and manufacturing previously dominated by men during World War II. In both cases, social events—the existential threat of war—allowed deeply ingrained understandings of gender roles and expectations to become suspended or transformed.

Making Relevant Contemporary Connections

If at all possible, arrange a visit to your school by an Afghan artist to relate first-hand knowledge about their homeland, life, and modes of visual expression. Lacking this resource, have students explore the work of contemporary Afghani artists[3] online. For example, an interview with Lida Abdul, whose videos and performances deal with issues and images similar to those in war rugs, is available courtesy of the Indianapolis Museum of Art.[4]

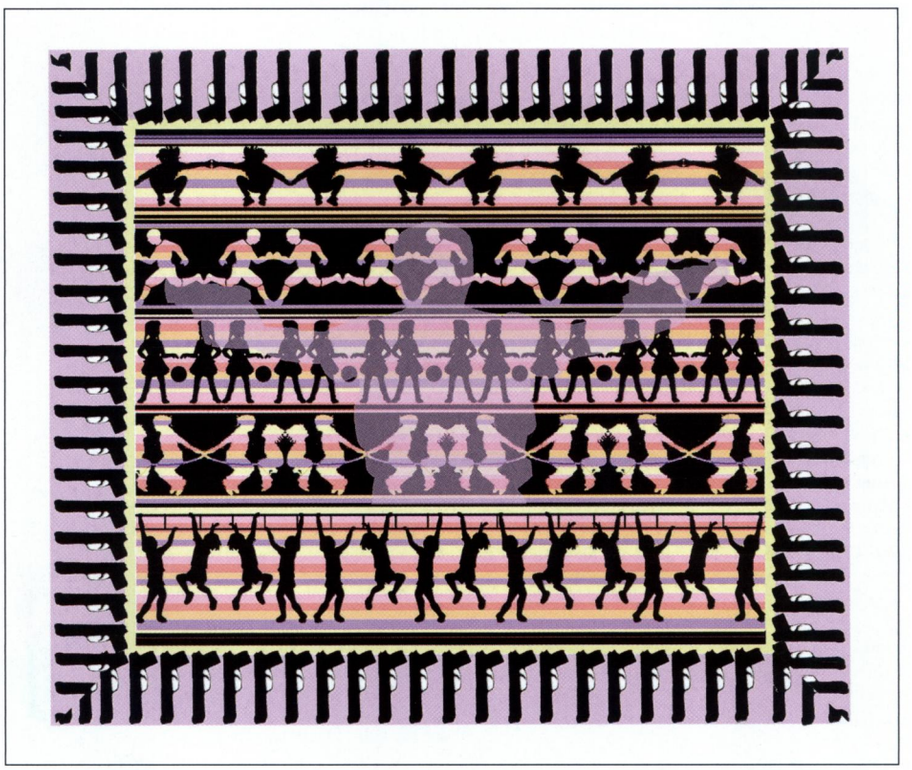

Figure 6. Margi Weir. *Child's Play*, 2007. Digital inkjet print on rag paper. 12" x 18". Photo: M. Weir.

A number of US artists create works that pay tribute to war rugs. Barbara Koenen,[5] a Chicago artist and activist, creates temporary installations and prints based on war rugs (see Figure 5). To create her fragrant "rugs," she sifts powdered spices and seeds through templates, delineating the edges with fringes and firecrackers. To document these ephemeral works, Koenen lays prepared paper over the installation and gently lifts it off, adhering the powdered materials to the paper's surface. Several "monoprints" are pulled from a single installation, each successive state appearing increasingly faint and fragile.

There is a formal connection to war-rug imagery in Margi Weir's print *Child's Play* (2007), showing children engaged in playground activity (see Figure 6). Weir designs digital compositions of appealing patterns that, upon careful viewing, reveal darker underlying messages. The frolicking figures in this print are circumscribed by a border of handguns, while the ghostly image of a young person pointing two guns, paramilitary style, looms in the center. Inspired by the massacres at Columbine and Virginia Tech, the tapestry-like motif and juxtaposition of mundane and violent iconography recalls elements of the war rugs, and represents "the idea of children shooting children in a civilization overflowing with guns" (M. Weir, in personal correspondence with the author, February 2, 2011). Ask students to consider why an image such as *Child's Play* may be acceptable in an art gallery, but perhaps not in the hallway of a school.

Assessment

These pedagogical strategies focus on understanding and appreciating war rugs, the motivations of the artists who create them, and the context in which they are created. They call for authentic assessment methods to measure students' ability to describe, define, and reflect. Whether assessing the whole group, a small group, or individual students, teachers can track learning by looking at levels of engagement, participation in discussions and exercises, clarity of thought and expression, the ability to arrive at novel insights, and the capacity to empathize.

Conclusion

We teach art for many reasons, not the least of which is to broaden students' understanding of, and empathy toward, the human condition in its diverse forms. This instructional resource employs images of weapons and conflict, which are often censored from the art curriculum, as a basis for cognitive, aesthetic, and affective growth. Through strategies designed to expose students to the persistence of art in even the most challenging situations, we help them see the world through another's perspective, and facilitate their development as learners, artists, and informed citizens.

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ENDNOTES

[1] For additional information visit www.vtshome.org/

[2] See DeWitt Mallary Antique Rug and Textile Art at www.antiqueweavings.com/Detail%20Pages/Baluch%20Salar%20Khani%20Bagface.html. See also the Textile Museum of Canada at www.textilemuseum.ca/apps/index.cfm?page=collection.browseExh&exhId=271

[3] See the Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan at: www.ccaa.org.af/?p=39

[4] The interview is available through the online video source Art Babble at www.artbabble.org/video/ima/lida-abdul-factory

[5] See www.barbarakoenen.com.