

Qiz-gilam: A Unique Example of Carpet Weaving by Semi-Nomadic Uzbeks in the Southern Regions of Uzbekistan

Binafsha NODIR

Interaction between sedentary and nomadic cultural traditions has played an important role in the centuries-old history of applied arts in Uzbekistan. By the late 19th and early 20th century, driven by urbanization in the region and the gradual transition of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples to sedentary lifestyles, many industries and traditional cultural forms of formerly nomadic ethnic groups disappeared. Nevertheless, their role in shaping the national cultural identity of the Uzbek people is great. This is true in relation to one of the largest ethnic groups in Uzbekistan, the Kungrats, whose applied art represents a unique, viable, and yet little-studied phenomenon in the national culture of Uzbekistan. The article reviews carpet weaving, one of their surviving crafts, exemplified by *qiz-gilam*, a unique type of rug made using a combined technique. This study helps to show the nature of historical and cultural interrelations in the carpet weaving of Central Asian peoples and their cultural contacts with the carpet art of neighboring regions more widely and objectively. An important theoretical result of this study is the creation of criteria and tools for identifying *qiz-gilam* carpets. This allows us to bring clarity to the yet undeveloped system of their identification in museum and gallery practice.

Keywords: Southern Uzbekistan, Uzbeks, Kungrats, carpet-weaving, *qiz-gilam*, medallion, ornament

Introduction

Since ancient times, the territory of present-day Uzbekistan gave rise to farming civilizations from which advanced urban culture evolved. Along with urbanistic forms, nomadic culture existed here from time immemorial, boasting unique creative resources. The historical coexistence and cultural engagement of the urban population with nomadic tribes is specific to the civilizational development of the Uzbek nation and reflected in the aesthetics of the applied arts of Uzbekistan, where one can find the refined art of urban masters and the naturally beautiful craft of nomads. However, studies of the traditional applied arts of Uzbekistan tend to focus mostly on urban arts and crafts such as ceramics, chiseling, embroidery, goldwork, carving, and painting on wood (Kornilov 1932; Rakhimov 1961; Fakhretdinova 1972; Khakimov and Akhmedov 1999; Akilova 2005; Sukhareva 2006). Applied art specimens created by formerly semi-nomadic ethnic Uzbek tribal groups are described in literature only in general terms, without a detailed analysis of their characteristic style features, ornament, and functionality. This article examines the comparative-typological characteristics of qiz-gilam (oy-gilam) carpets and carpets of other Central Asian peoples and also applies semantic-iconological principles and approaches to the interpretation of their ornamental decoration.

Kungrat Carpet Weaving

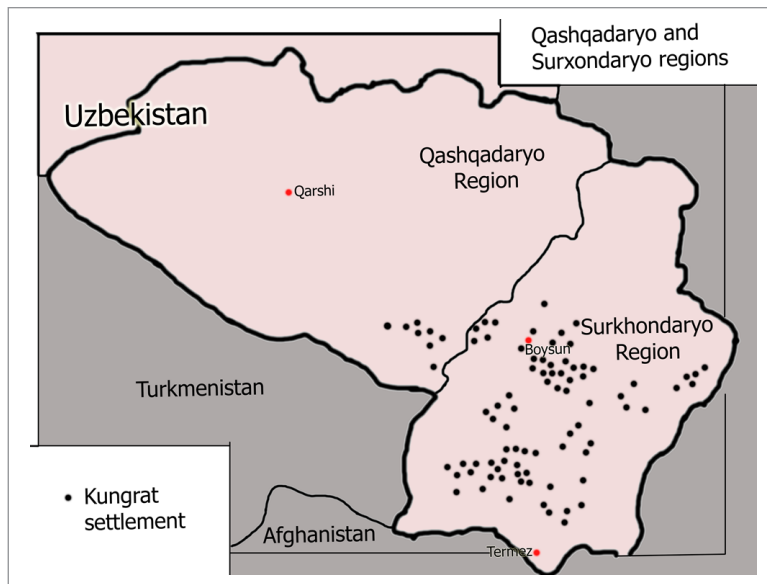


Figure 1. Kungrat settlement in the Surkhondaryo and Qashqadaryo regions in the second half of the twentieth century.

In this article, the term “Kungrats of Southern Uzbekistan” refers to the Kungrat population living on the territory of the present Surxondaryo and, partially, Qashqadaryo provinces (Sitnyakovskiy 1907; Potapov 1930; Nadjimov 1958). In the academic literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries, these regions are referred to as the eastern bekdoms of the Bukhara Emirate or as Eastern Bukhara (mostly the so-called Surxon-Sherobod valley with centers in Boysun, Sherobod, Denau, and partly Gissar) (Snesarev 1906; Karmisheva 1976, 88-89). The areas of Eastern Bukhara were located mostly on the territory of Uzbekistan and only its north-eastern part belonged to the territory of present-day Tajikistan (Kastalskiy 1930; Ergashev 1987).

In the everyday life of the Kungrats, flat-woven rugs were most commonly used, although Kungrat craftswomen also made pile carpets in the past. Pile-free *palas* rugs crafted in different techniques and decorated with an original ornament had an important function, being an integral part of *yurt* ornamentation; usually, people placed them over rough, dark-colored felt mats with no ornamentation. Kungrat women wove using narrow-roller horizontal looms called *urmak*. These mobile looms could be installed or dismantled in a matter of minutes. The strip width was 40 or 50 cm, depending on the width of the loom, and the length depended on the product type and purpose. The finished strips were then sewn together to make a whole rug.

Sheep and camel wool were used to make yarn. Usually, two types of sheep wool were used. The first type is wool from springtime shearing (*olik qirqim*), which is very soft and long. The second type of wool is harvested in the autumnal shearing season, (*tirik qirqim*) – very short and stiff, it was mostly unfit for spinning and was used to make felts. Among the Kungrats, wool washing, cleaning, spinning, and weaving were jobs for women. Yarn was dyed at home. Formerly, paints were only natural, made from roots, flowers, leaves, and fruit of different plants and trees. For instance, to get red pigment, they used a mountain plant called *ruyan* (madder); for yellow – *isparak*; and black pigment was obtained by boiling pomegranate peel with iron or walnut peel.

There are several types of pile-free products, distinguished by look and manufacturing technique. The simplest, in terms of design, is *qoqma palas* or *kokhma gilam* (from the verb “*qoqma*” – push, tamp; that is, when the filling yarn is tapped by *qilich*, a wooden saber-like instrument). Its ornamentation usually comes as straight rows of stripes of the same color on both sides. Richer and more unusual in their decorative solution are *taqir gilam* rugs (from the word “*taqir*” – smooth, i.e. with no pile), where the principal ornaments and color combinations are created by tying the filling yarn around the warp. Using weft yarn of the same color, the craftswoman has to create an ornament along the warp length and, when changing to the yarn of a different color, typical gaps appear between the ornaments of different colors.

In Kungrat households, one can often find rugs known as *terma gilam* (“*terma*” meaning “assembled” or “composed” rather than “select” or “finest,” as some researchers suggest), their décor is a combination and alternation of narrow ornamented and monochrome stripes. These types of rugs called *terme* were also popular among the Kirghiz of the Osh region. The Kazakhs used the same technique to weave strips for yurts (*bau*, *baskur*) and sew them

together to make bedding and *alasha* (lit. “variegated”) wall rugs.

A large number of Kungrat rugs – from bedding rugs to household items (horsecloths, *keburjin* carryall bags, etc.) were crafted in the *gajari* technique. Gajari rugs had a smooth ornament on the face and loose warp yarn, not used for the ornament, on the backside. These were ornamented pile-free carpets where the overall composition was created by unornamented monochrome stripes in combination with two-color ornamented ones. Gajari rugs were extensively used in the everyday life of the Kirghiz in the southern and southwestern parts of Kyrgyzstan and known as *kajari* or *bukari*.

One product specific to the Kungrats is the *oq-enli* rug, its notable feature being a combination of weaving and hand embroidery techniques. Embroidery is made mostly on light-colored (white or yellowish) stripes, while woven stripes are usually dark brown or deep red, woven normally in *gajari* and sometimes in *terma* technique.

Qiz-gilam as a Symbol of the Symbiosis of Two Cultures

One of the largely understudied types of Kungrat rugs manufactured in a combined technique of weaving and embroidery is the *qiz-gilam* (*oy-gilam*) floor/bedding rug, the known specimens of which come from the southern parts of Uzbekistan and Northern Afghanistan. Depending on the place of origin, manufacturing technology, ornamental pattern, and functionality, these rugs, with a medallion composition, are known under different names.

The name *oy-gilam* is used by the Kungrat craftswomen from the Dehqonobod District of the Qashqadaryo Province, in association with its key motif – an octagonal medallion they call *oy-nuskha* – a lunar motif. The *oy-gilam* name may be a local one and reflects the connections of the local Kungrat population with the embroidery traditions of the southern parts of Uzbekistan where the *oy-nuskha* rosette motif is a dominant pattern in large-size embroidered *suzani* panels. An indirect confirmation of this is the fact that the ornaments within the *oy-nuskha* medallion adorning the *oy-gilam* rugs are often created using the technique of hand embroidery (Fig. 2).

Oy-gilam specimens kept in foreign collections and galleries, those identified as Kungrat or Lakay, are often referred to as Uzbek kilim, or sometimes even more generally as Uzbek textile (Fig. 3). Quite often, pictures of these rugs are captioned “*qiz-gilam*,” which is probably due to these items’ intended use as part of a *sarpo* bridal dowry and their sacral ritual function.

The basis of the centerpiece composition of *qiz-gilam* (*oy-gilam*) rugs is the *oy-nuskha* ornament in the shape of an octagonal medallion with a diagonal layout – a common carpet weaving motif of the Turkic-speaking nations. The genesis of this motif goes back to the carpet-making craft of the Oguz tribes, its traditions reflected in the carpet weaving of the Turkmens (Tsareva 2013, 167-168). This motif is known among the Turkmens as *göl* (lake or flower), *turunj* (rosette or citrus fruit), or *kalkannuska* (shield-like ornament). The motif is deeply rooted and very popular in the carpet weaving of Azerbaijan, another branch of Oguz carpet weaving, as evidenced by many museum collection items (Melikova 2017, 23, 27).



Figure 2. Qiz-gilam from Kashkadarya. State Museum of Applied Art and Crafts History of Uzbekistan.



Figure 3. Qiz-gilam details. Linden Museum, Stuttgart.

The motif was propagated beyond the boundaries of the Turkic-speaking world. As noted by some researchers and also carpet weavers, “medallion of this kind that has numerous shapes holds an important place in the arts and crafts of the Middle East, Central Asia, and Azerbaijan, and is named differently by local people: in Western Europe, these are known as medallions, in Russia as rosettes, in Iran – *torenj*, in Turkey – *turenje*, in Southern Azerbaijan – *turunj* or *turush*; in many parts of Central Asia and Azerbaijan these are called *göl*, in some villages of Shirkan – *tabag*, in the north-west of Azerbaijan and in Karabakh they are known as *khoncha*” (Kerimov 1983, 96). Some researchers believe the motif to be the expression of tribal identity and regard it as a kind of ancestral coat of arms (Harvey 1996, 43-44). The

ancient origin of the octagonal medallion in Turkmen carpet weaving was explored by V. G. Moshkova: “The most common octagonal medallion in the ornamentation of the Turkmen floor rugs, the one featuring stylized images of birds and animals in the center, is a very old ornament dating back to the traditions of the medieval Ghuz people (IX-XI centuries) who assimilated with the Turkmen and some other peoples of contemporary Central Asia. One may assume that this tradition is founded in an even more ancient one” (1970, 230).

The discovery of the *oy-nuskeba* medallion motif on the *oq-enli* carpet specimens in the illustration to the article by A. Fel’kerzam suggests that the Kungrats borrowed it from the Turkmen and employed it either as one of the ornaments (*oq-enli*) or as a key ornament-building motif (*qiz-gilam*) (Fel’kerzam 1915, 29). The difference in technology is that the Turkmen long-pile or short-pile carpets are woven, while the *oy-gilam* rugs are predominantly made in the palas technique with the use of embroidered ornamental elements. The fact that pile-less palas rugs with a medallion composition were already manufactured three centuries ago is confirmed by a very interesting and one of the oldest surviving Kazakh *syr-kilemi* (*konyrat kilem*) rugs of the late 18th century, kept in the Khazret Sultan sanctuary museum in Turkestan (Ospanuli 2021, 208).

Perhaps, originally, the *oy-nuskeba* rugs with octagonal medallions (*kalkannuska*, according to Moshkova) were woven in the pile carpet technique by the Uzbek tribes and, similarly to the Turkmen carpets with *gil* medallions, did not have any embroidered stripes. This is evidenced by the specimens of Uzbek pile carpets with medallions where the composition ornaments are not stylized very much and one can discern schematic zoomorphic images with no traces of embroidery. One of these pile carpets, with ornamentation arranged in two rows with four medallions in each row, is kept in the Samarkand State Museum of History and Culture of Uzbekistan (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. *Hali gilam*, woolen floor pile carpet, early twentieth century, Nurata. Samarkand State Museum of History and Culture of Uzbekistan.

This very carpet is described in Moshkova’s book (1970). It is believed to be crafted by the Uzbek tribes from the village of Gumm located north of Nurata on the hillside of Karatash (67-68). The description of carpets attributed to the Uzbeks of the Turkman tribe from the Nurata intermountain region, known for its ancient traditions of pattern design, matches the composition of the Samarkand specimen and suggests that it was produced by the Uzbeks of the Turkman tribe: “The oldest type is carpets with *kalkan* ornaments arranged in two rows, four in each row” (73). Moshkova chooses the Turkmen name, *hali*, to refer to the short pile carpets of this type.

The assumption on the influence of the tufted *göl* carpets of the Turkmen and Uzbeks of the Nurata intermountain region on the *qiz-gilam* (*oy-gilam*) ornamental composition can be substantiated by the fact that not only the place of origin, the medallion iconography, and the principle behind the composition in the aforementioned specimens, but also, very importantly, the background filling between the medallions, coincide.

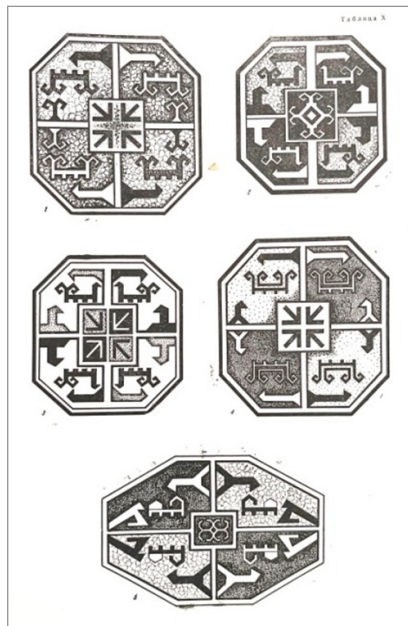


Figure 5. Hali pile carpet centerpiece ornaments. Versions of the “*kalkannuska*” ornament (with stylized zoomorphic images inside the medallion). After V. G. Moshkova.

Moshkova (1970, 69) thoroughly analyzed the *kalkannuskeha* ornament on the short pile carpets produced by the Turkman tribe Uzbeks, illustrating her research by a selection of drawings: “The *kalkannuskeha* motif (Table X) appears to be of the same type on all carpets that have been found, differing only in details. Two intersecting lines divide the medallion into four sectors, each containing zoomorphic motifs. On the lines dividing the medallions into sectors one can see two figures vaguely resembling birds. One of them looks like a bird’s head

on a long neck and steeply sloping shoulders; the other has the same head but shorter and thicker neck. The lower part of the figure resembles either two feet placed widely apart, or a broad base or body. This figure was sometimes substituted by a pair of horns. The meaning and content of the ornaments are probably known to few now. Some carpet weavers call the first element *kush*, others – *kuchkorak*...In the middle of each medallion sector there is a pattern representing a four-legged animal (in one instance this motif was named ‘*at*’ – horse)” (Fig. 5). At the end of her book, Moshkova goes back to stylized zoomorphic images with bird heads, referring to them as *tovuknuskha* and associating them with the tribal ornaments of the Arabachi Turkmen tribe (Fig. 6).

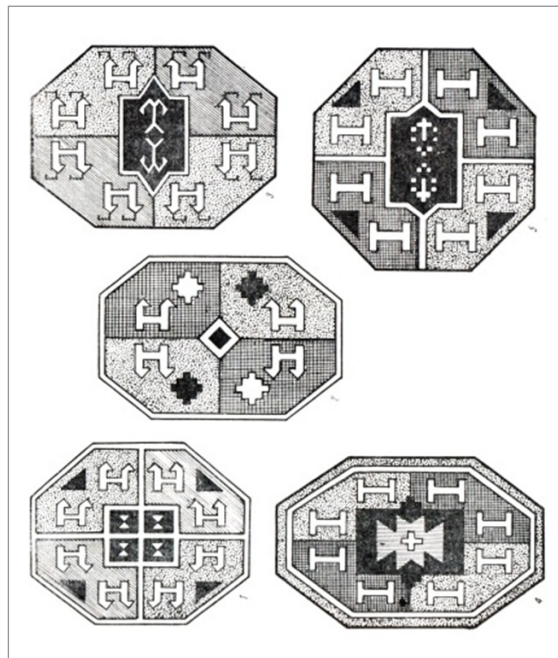


Figure 6. Arabachi medallions. After V. G. Moshkova.

Despite the fact that this motif is also used by other Central Asian nations (for instance, *tanyknagys* by the Karakalpaks (Richardson and Richardson 2012) or *tonk nuska göl* by some Turkmen tribes (Tsareva 2011, 102-103)), one cannot fully agree with Moshkova’s view. We have studied the transformation of the inside images of the octagonal medallions (*göl*, *qalqonnuskha*) and discovered that the Turkmen refer to this motif as *keyik göl* (*göl* with a goat ornament, Fig. 7)(Volshebniye turkmenskiye kovri 2006, 198-199). Thus, having studied the materials on Central Asian carpet weaving, one may agree with the opinion of F. Gogel (1950). The author, through a sequential analysis of the ornamentation of old and new carpets, has provided a drawing (Fig. 8) that shows a number of changes in the goat image shape on Turkmen carpets (27).

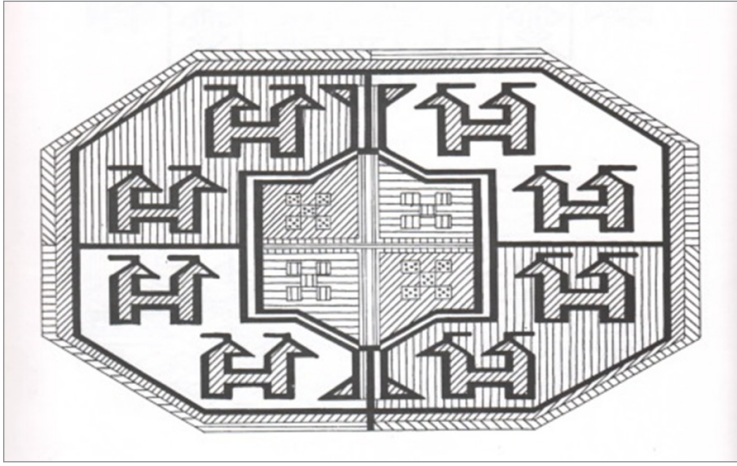


Figure 7. Keyik göl Turkmen carpet motif.



Figure 8. Transformation of the goat motif in Turkmen carpets according to Gogel.

One can see how the zoomorphic motif gradually turns into a geometric one (Fig. 9). The second *göl* (b) is a schematic drawing of a livestock corral where the goat images are at an intermediate stage of geometrization; while the third one (c) already shows geometrized forms of goat images. Based on this, one can say that over time, the original, more ancient ornament forms have changed and the ornament names were forgotten. Names for the gradually transformed motifs were chosen by the craftswomen based on their similarity with surrounding objects, plants, and animals. In this instance, the motif in question is the *tovukgöl* (literally, the chicken ornament).

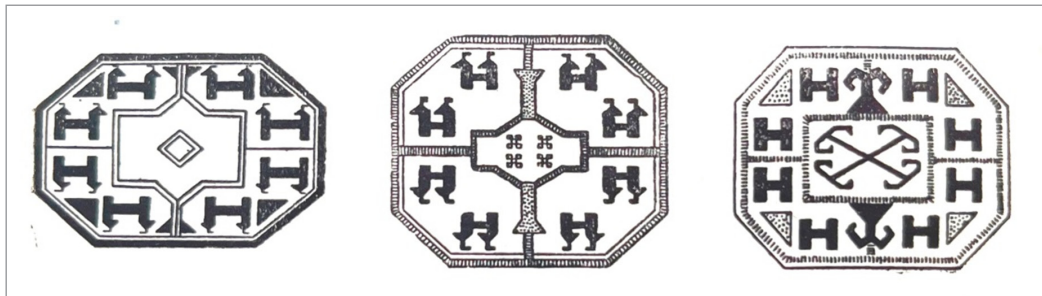


Figure 9: a, b, c — göl motif in Turkmen carpets. After F. Gogel.

As Moshkova noted, “the association between the *kalkannuska* ornament of the Nurata Turkman people and the similar motif of the Trans-Caspian Turkmen is of great scientific value as it sheds light on the historical connections among the peoples of Central Asia” (1970, 76). The presence of *qiz-gilam* (*oy-gilam*) rugs with *oy-nuskeba* medallion compositions among the Kungrat and Lakay people can also be considered in the context of ethnocultural interaction between the two key carpet-making lines of the Central Asian Turkic-speaking nations – the Oghuz and the Dashti-Kipchak. The earlier Oghuz carpet weaving has typical *kalkannuska* medallion compositions and Dashti-Kipchak carpet weaving is of the Uzbek tribal groups – the Kungrats and the Lakays. The centerpiece in the *oy-gilam* rugs retains the classical composition principle of Turkmen carpet weaving (*göl*, *keyik göl* motif) while the borders and the background space are ornamented with properly Kungrat motifs – iterating V-shapes, *pichok uchi* - knife tip, rhythmically iterating *quchqor shobi* - twisted horns, *yulduz* - eight-pointed star, or *kashgargul*.

The eight-pointed star ornament also testifies to the possible interaction between the carpet-making traditions of the Turkman tribe of Uzbeks and those of the Kungrat textiles. The ornament was commonly used as iterating shapes in the border around the centerpiece in the *kbaly* carpets of the Turkman tribe Uzbeks and in the *qiz-gilam* (*oy-gilam*) and *oq-enli* rugs of the Kungrats. This ornament serves as a kind of ethnicity marker for small Kungrat embroidery items since it is very often found in embroidered rim line ribbons adorning *bughjoma* (a rectangular cloth with embroidered corners used for wrapping clothes or bedding) made by Kungrat craftswomen.

Speaking of the ethnogenesis and self-identification of the Turkman tribe Uzbeks, Moshkova remarks: “The national identity, language and the entire lifestyle of the Turkman group allows considering them Uzbeks. However, historical legends kept by the elderly, cultural carryovers, and partly the specific vocabulary of the group speak of its genetic linkages with the Turkmen people” (1970, 67). It can be assumed that this tribal group, along with the Ersary and Choudor and other Turkmen tribes who had contacts with the Uzbek tribes, became exactly a kind of a “repeater station” spreading the Turkmen carpet weaving traditions among the Dashti-Kipchak Uzbeks. Thereby, the Turkmen carpet weaving traditions influenced the carpet products of the Uzbek tribes in different ways. Borrowing

or influencing could occur in places of shared residence (western parts of the present-day Qashqadaryo and Surxondaryo provinces) or as a result of a symbiosis between the Uzbek and Turkmen substrate (the Turkman tribe Uzbeks of the Nurata intermountain region (67-68)) as well as in the process of cultural assimilation of Turkmens with the Uzbek population (just as the Turkmen Ersary and Choudor tribes on the territory of the Bukhara Khanate (227)).

The long-term interaction and even mixing between the Ersary Turkmen tribes and the Lokay is reported by B. Kh. Karmisheva (1952): “During the long life of the Lokay in their new homeland (in the south of Tajikistan – *B.N.*), they surely (despite the aforementioned isolation of the tribe) mixed with both the local Iranian and Turkic-speaking population, and those tribes and peoples who arrived in these regions already after the Lokay. It is quite possible, for instance, that the inclusion of Turkmen and Kirgiz ethnic elements into the Lokay took place not only in the steppes of Desht-iKypchak, but also in their new homeland. Many centuries before the Deshtikypchak Uzbeks, Turkmens had already roamed the territory of southern Tajikistan and northern Afghanistan. Presently, Ersary Turkmens reside along the Amu Darya River, starting from the city of Termez. They also live in the immediate vicinity of the Lokay (to the south of them), on the Jilikul plateau on the banks of the Vakhsh river” (28).

Conclusion

Summing up, one may note that the historical dynamics of traditional Kungrat carpet weaving development demonstrate that the most remarkable authentic specimens in terms of technology and ornamental style were created in the late 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. Due to social transformations and changing lifestyles of the Kungrats of Southern Uzbekistan, some carpet product varieties disappeared, one example of which is the *qiz-gilam* rug examined in this paper. In the *qiz-gilam* border ornamentation, one can see a fairly steady system of elements that go back to the ornament-building traditions of the common Dashtikipchak area. At the same time, as a result of long-lasting historical engagement with neighboring subethnic groups and nations, the Kungrat ornament stratigraphy shows the influence and reciprocal infiltration of the carpet weaving and embroidery artistic traditions of neighboring Uzbek tribal groups as well as textiles of Tajiks, Turkmens, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs. Thus, *qiz-gilam* (*oy-gilam*) rugs are a symbolic representation of the historical symbiosis and interaction of traditions in the two main streams or lines of Turkic carpet weaving in Central Asia. In general, the problem of identifying the stylistic features of Kungrat carpet making has major academic value for describing ethnic and cultural connections among the Central Asia nations and requires further detailed study.

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