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Succumb to the Warmth and Splendor of Antique Shawls

By Victoria Scott



Antique pashminas adorn the walls of Minasian Brothers rug shop on Chicago Avenue; the exhibit is entitled "Wrapped in Beauty."

Antique Kashmiri Shawls at Minasian

Here is the wrap: Pashmina shawls like those coveted by late 20th-century fashionistas are far from new. They were all the rage in the days of grandmothers many "greats" removed.

"Wrapped in Beauty: The Allure of Antique Shawls," an exhibit at Minasian Oriental Rugs, 1244 Chicago Ave., showcases a group of shawls created in the 19th century, when shawls reached their zenith as status symbols.

In the 1870s, after enjoying nearly a century of popularity in the West, shawls fell out of fashion favor. And with the Franco-Prussian war further eroding the European export market and famine ensuing, many Kashmiri shawlmakers - along with their art - died.

"For practical purposes," reads the exhibit handout, "none of these shawls have been made for well over a century."

Joseph W. Fell, a textile expert and consultant to the Minasian family business, curated the show, selecting pieces from the Minasian Textile Arts inventory and his own and others' collections. With their vibrant colors and kaleidoscopic designs, the shawls represent an art form frequently relegated to Oriental rug dealers' attics and basements, says Stephen Blackwelder, director of the new textile department at Minasian. A classical musician, Mr. Blackwelder is also a textile collector who is anxious to see these stepsiblings of carpets get their due.

"Shawls," he says, "are often not well respected."

The word "shawl" comes from the Persian shal, referring to a class of woven fabric. Shawls may date back to the 12th and 13th centuries. In 1623 an Italian traveler observed Persian noblemen wearing

shals in the form of narrow waist girdles and important Indian males wearing them as wide shoulder mantles.

By the 1800s, discovered by explorers and travelers and the British East India Company, Kashmiri shawls had become the wrap of choice for wealthy European women. So popular were they among upper-class females that their owners often embroidered a personal signature or symbol in order to pick them out in a crowded cloakroom. Traces of such "name tags" appear in the exhibit.

One of the first things to notice about the shawls is that they are neither straight-sided nor flat to the wall. "Handmade pieces won't be perfectly flat," says Mr. Blackwelder. Another notable feature is their impressive size, some more than 6 feet square and the largest a rectangle of 131 by 58 inches.

The Kashmiri shawl, the finest of the breed, was woven of wool from the undercoat of the Himalayan mountain goat. The finest fleece came from wild goats and was collected in the spring from bushes the animals used to rub off the coarse outer hair that kept them warm in winter.

But the majority of shawls were woven from pashmina hair (also called cashmere, from the old spelling of Kashmir) from the underbellies of domesticated goats. The term Kashmir is misleading since at no time, according to Internet sources, was pashmina produced in Kashmir. It was always imported from Tibet and Central Asia. Europeans began to imitate Kashmir shawls on hand looms as early as 1790, but the silk or wool they used made them up to 10 times heavier than Kashmiri shawls.

So fine was the pashmina yarn that before the 19th century it took a good weaver two to three years to weave a shawl. By the 1820s one British account describes stepped-up Kashmiri shawl production now involving 12 or more specialists, from spinners and dyers to a warp-threader and pattern-drawer.

As Western demand for the shawls increased, Kashmiris further increased productivity by setting several weavers to work at once on smaller pieces of cloth in different colors. A highly skilled needle worker then sewed them together to create a kind of patchwork shawl. The exhibit contains work so fine it is barely possible to see how the pieces are joined.

Embroidery was also introduced to speed production, as a complicated pattern could be executed faster with a needle than on a loom. Notice examples of all-over embroidery used to "patch" pieces of cloth; it is often so flat it appears to be woven.

Mr. Blackwelder encourages visitors to examine the backs of the shawls. A hand-embroidered shawl tends to have stitches going every which way, he says; machine-made stitches tend to be more even.

He says most experts agree the center medallion design so common in shawls is derived from Oriental rugs. But the most common design element in shawls is the familiar teardrop shape known to most Westerners as a "paisley." Named after the British town that pioneered the mass production of shawls by reducing labor costs through specialization, the paisley evolved over a couple of centuries.

It originated in the 17th and 18th centuries as a single flowering plant with its roots, inspired by English herbals. This motif changed into an upright bouquet of flowers and then, around 1800, became the stylized boteh, also called the "Paisley pine." During the 19th century the boteh design developed from a squat cone shape to the elongated curve most people associate with the word paisley.

Most shawl designs came from Persia, says Mr. Blackwelder. But he says, because "you make money on trade routes by making what people want," the growing Western market influenced shawl design.

The shape of the shawl also changed with fashions -- from simple, straight shawls (none on exhibit) in the late 18th century to the huge squares Victorian women folded into triangles over their huge skirts.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution the cost of shawl production in Europe plummeted - and along with their cost, their popularity. Now affordable for the middle class, says Mr. Blackwelder, shawls lost their cachet and "the wealthy ceased to be interested."

He and Mr. Fell hope the exhibit will rekindle interest in what they call "a largely vanished art form." Many of the antique shawls are for sale at prices (from around \$3,500 to as much as \$9,000) reflecting their rarity.

Though beyond most Santas' budgets, they make for lovely viewing on a cold winter's day.