

The Phenomenon of the Polish Kilim

The exhibition combines two dialogic kilim collections, from the holdings of the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź and a private collection of art historian Prof. Piotr Korduba. The textiles on display exemplify the most interesting phenomena of Polish kilim-making of the 20th and 21st centuries. The juxtaposition of the textiles and their designs attempts to shed light on the kilim phenomenon in Poland and its cultural code.

In Poland, the eastern name "kilim" has been used since the mid-17th century to describe a two-sided decorative patterned textile of native origin, made by hand on a loom in a plain weave, with a woollen weft and usually a linen warp. Earlier, such textiles were called a *gunia* or a *derka*. The manufacturing technique was believed to be an ancient and local Slavic tradition dating back to the early Middle Ages.

Kilims have for generations united people from different backgrounds and representatives of different social strata. In the past, they were indispensable interior decoration elements in cottages, manor houses, flats, sacral interiors, and prestigious public buildings. For instance, the kilim was used as a warm blanket, wall or floor decoration, door or window hanging, or furniture cover. By the end of the 19th century, with the influx of factory-made products, the kilim had become a sought-after collector's item displayed in national and international exhibitions. It was then recognised as "the Polish textile", sparking the interest of artistic circles looking for sources and forms of native art. From the beginning of the 20th century, it was an artistic textile designed by prominent painters and architects. Still a field of applied art, it contributed to the creation of a national style, successfully playing a propaganda role both at home and abroad.

Despite its technical limitations, the kilim has stood the test of time thanks to its exceptional versatility of use. It has undergone constant stylistic changes, ranging from strong links with folk or manor art, to its fusion with decorative arts in the inter-war period, and on to full artistic autonomy. Nowadays, it resides in the territory of design, reactivating traditional motifs and solutions and constantly introducing new ones.

Multiple Threads

The futility of trying to classify the myriad of motifs and their combinations makes the kilim a difficult phenomenon to define. The question of authorship is as complex and multifaceted an issue of kilim-making as its history. This is due to the weaving tradition being based on copying and processing old kilim patterns. Kilim weaving in a factory followed two stages since at least the late 18th century. The textile was made by the weaver on the basis of a premade design. Only old household and manor products were created without a prior drawing.

In the first half of the 20th century, ready-made kilims could be purchased in shops or ordered from a wide variety of catalogues. The most well-known and respected weaving workshops used trademarks, while kilims designed by the most famous painters and architects were additionally signed. In the 1920s, the growing demand for kilims made the reproduction of readily purchased, fashionable designs common again. Textiles patterned after the same design were made in different workshops. For example, the studios in Hlyniany shared fabric patterns, and the "Ostoja" Kilim Factory in Krakow wove kilims patterned on designs by leading Polish artists. Most frequently, motifs or even entire compositions by Bogdan Treter (1886–1945) and Roman Orzulski (1887–1971) were imitated. Individual artists' unique productions are an interesting and extremely rare phenomenon in kilim making. Designed and hand-made by the artists themselves, such kilims extend beyond artistic craftsmanship.

The Polish-Ukrainian Side of Kilim-Making

Poland and Ukraine share a common weaving tradition. Before 1939, the south-eastern territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were one of the principal areas of kilim weaving. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were numerous ateliers in Eastern Małopolska, the Kyiv region, and Podolia; 13 studios operated in Lviv alone, and 22 in Krakow. Collections were created, and kilim-making associations and schools were established. Important exhibitions of kilims were held in Lviv. The local School of Decorative Arts and Industry founded in the mid-19th century fostered handicraft skills and cultivated interest in the Hutsul region.

The earliest active studio in the south-eastern borderlands was the kilim manufactory of Volodyslav Fedorovych. It was established in Vikno, a village in Podolia region, where this Ukrainian landed estate owner and collector of precious textiles set up a studio and an affiliated school in 1886. The atelier copied the patterns of old kilims, applied local weaving traditions, and returned to dyeing wool using natural dyes.

Local companies revived local design, while the war caused the disappearance of cottage industry production after 1918. Old folk weaving motifs, especially those developed in Podolia and the Kosovo region, were copied and designs inspired by folk art were made. Local peasants usually worked in the manufactories and weaving became a source of steady income, especially for the Hutsul population. Hlyniany near Lviv was famous for its folk art products. It was here that manufactories run by Poles, Ukrainians and Jews processed the largest number of designs, often borrowed from the textiles of neighbouring regions. To this day, Hlyniany continues to be a vibrant kilim production centre.

Interpretation of Tradition

In the first half of the 20th century, artistic pursuits related to kilim patterns played a special role in the creation of the Polish national style. Patterns were drawn from folk and manor (gentry) culture, as the custom of woven kilims was present both in the villages and in the manor houses of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Renowned artists, most often representatives of the intelligentsia, revived old patterns and adapted them to contemporary utilitarian and aesthetic criteria. As for manor culture, these included motifs borrowed from the end panels of the kontush sash and from kilims with floral decorations. Regional inspirations were also drawn upon, especially the arts, crafts and customs of the Podhale region, one of the major centres of kilim production in the successive decades of the 20th century.

The introduction of what was perceived as folk motifs into kilim weaving and their artistic rendition was a long-term phenomenon proceeding in a variety of ways. A decorative approach to textile design was adopted by members of the Polish Applied Art Society (*Polska Sztuka Stosowana*, 1901–1914), continued to some extent by the "Kilim" Association (1910–1926). The relationship between form and function and method of making an object was recognised in folk art by the artists of the Krakow Workshops (1913–1926). In turn, contemporary manufacturing based on domestic materials and hand-spun wool dyed with natural dyes was taken up by "Ład" Artists' Cooperative (1926–1996).

The ideas and expectations imposed on folk art were taken up once again in the cultural policy of the Polish People's Republic. This time, however, the idea of expansion of art and folk handicraft was promoted, and the famous *Cepelia* (1949–1990) was designated as the institution responsible for its production and sale. Former private factories were replaced by *Cepelia*-affiliated cooperatives. Ingrained in social memory, products of "folk" handicrafts dominated the domestic market, while abroad they became a symbol of being "made in Poland".

Experiment

The technical constraints of the kilim both perpetuate earlier patterns and compositions and encourage a greater variety of motifs. Colourful stripes are the simplest and oldest decoration used in kilims. Outlines of other ornaments followed oblique lines.

A change in the approach to kilim composition was spearheaded by pre-war research and experiments with the technique, carried on in the textile departments of colleges and schools. Instrumental here was also the work of Maria Łaskiewicz (1891–1981) in the Warsaw Experimental Studio of Artistic Weaving, founded in 1951. The artist made the workshops located in her home available to young graduates of the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts and artists of the older generation.

In the 1960s, individual creative pursuits in various weaving techniques brought about radical changes, also in kilim production. In defiance of the weaving tradition resulting from their ornamental, decorative character and technical limitations, kilims were moving towards autonomy. Freed from utilitarian duties, kilims became a form of artistic expression in their own right.

The kilims made later in Cepelia-linked workshops also applied bold designs, notable for their novelty of form and sometimes content. Experiments in kilim production consisted in, e.g., building the contour of the motifs parallel to the direction of the warp, combining techniques, or modifying the interlacing of the weft in order to differentiate the texture.