

CALIPHATE RUGS

BY CHURCHILL RIPLEY

WHAT are Caliphate rugs? How do they differ from Ispahans, Indo-Persians and Damascus rugs? These questions with many others of similar nature come to one who endeavors to distinguish between the fine points that stand as silent testimony for the craft of the weaver in past centuries. Writers have called certain rugs by different names at different times.

Over a hundred years ago a confession was made by Albert Vander Puks a great art critic who wrote: "Since the publication of the previous criticism serious study has shown the necessity of correcting in one or another particular statements already advanced."

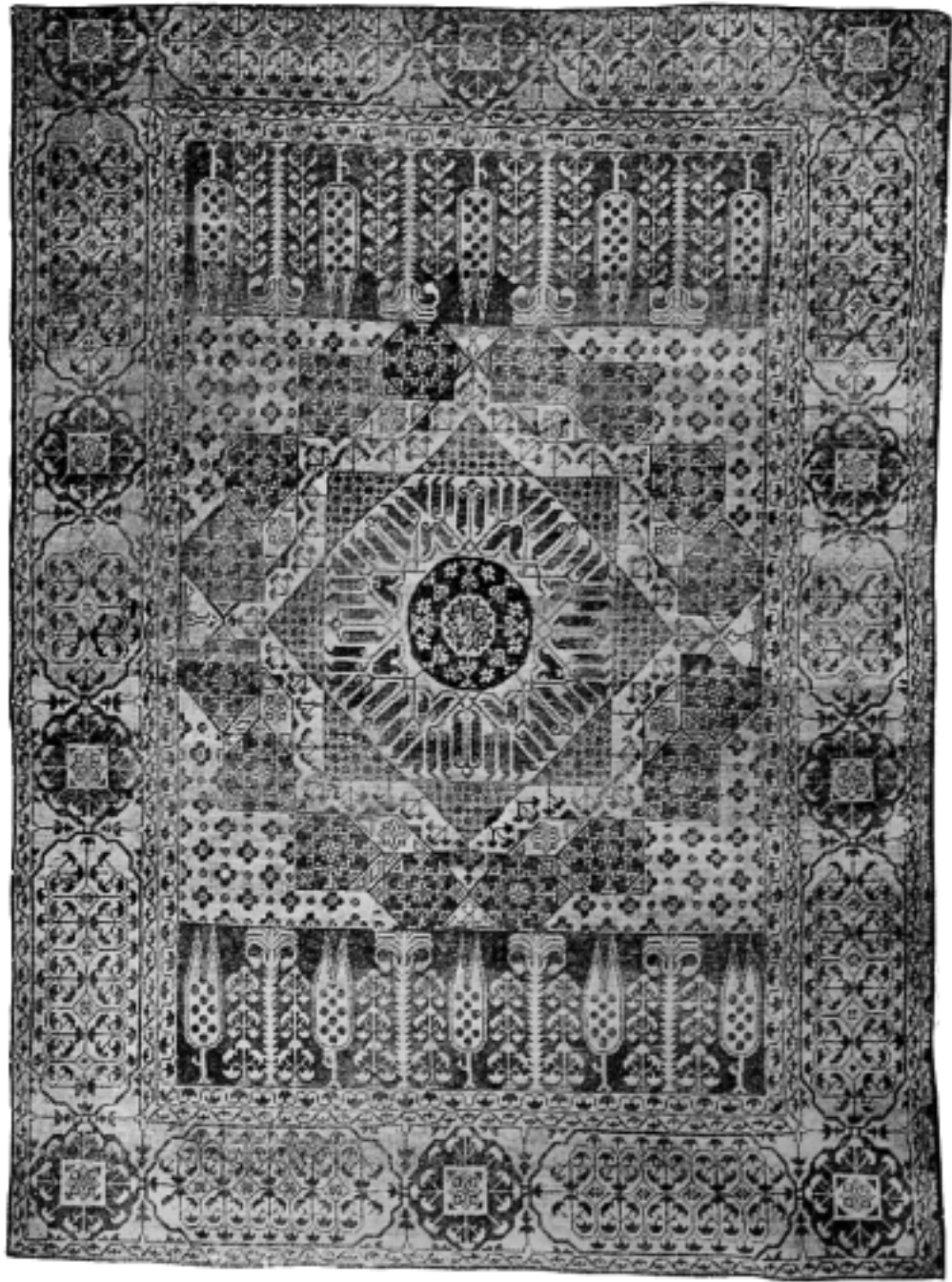
We do not possess historical proof as yet of many things that seem to carry evidence in themselves. Only as one student after another brings critical study to bear on art questions can opinions be compared and facts established.

A well known rug in the South Kensington Museum has been called by one expert an "Arab" rug, by another, "Moorish" and by still another "Saracenic." This is readily understood by those who know

that wherever the Arab travelled he carried with him not only his own native styles but those as well that he borrowed from every nation and people he conquered, so that a Saracenic style evolved which in other words is a Mohammedan style.

In some places it was of Turkish nature, in other Moorish, etc., etc. A Saracenic rug therefore might be at the same time a Moorish rug made by an Arab dwelling in Morocco, or by one living in Spain, so that several names might correctly be used for the same rug. This will explain why rugs that have appeared on exhibition from time to time in New York have been catalogued at one time as "Turkish" at another as "Syrian" and later the same rugs have been placed on sale as "Saracenic rugs of the sixteenth century."

The special type under consideration differs from Persian-Portuguese and Ispahan rugs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in that the warp is invariably of wool. The quality of this wool is somewhat unusual. After having once been carefully examined it is quite impossible to mistake it for any other. It has a certain wiry nature and at the same time is as soft



A DAMASCUS CALIPHATE RUG

STAR WORSHIPPERS DESIGN

as Kerman wool. Of it the so called "Caliphate rugs" were made. These rugs were introduced to the buying public in New York not many years ago by the Benguiat Brothers. At that time no rugs resembling them had been offered at public sale. Since that time a few have been shown and those who were interested in them have become more or less familiar with them. Of them Mr. Benguiat says

"These rugs were invariably of a geometrical pattern involving probably some mathematical emblem of remote ages. They are woven in three colors, red, blue and green—red for day, blue for night and green for holiness. The design comes down to us from earliest antiquity, being of Chaldean origin and especially used first by star worshippers and later by astronomers and magi of the East.

The large star medallion has eight triangles. About the central ornament are fir and palm leaves symbolizing everlasting life. Arrow-like heads point to the four cardinal directions."

Early star worshippers are said to have used this device in marking off the sand floors of their tents, long before it was ever copied by weavers. As compliment to early Caliphs the design may have been adopted as belonging to the revered past. Later through the centuries, when desiring to use a most important design, weavers, without doubt, have reverted again and

again to this time honored and significant "Caliph pattern."

Weavers skilled in every Syrian art went with their craft across Northern Africa into Spain after the Mohammedan conquests. Rugs were woven by them and by native weavers taught by them in Cairo, Algiers, Morocco and Spain during the early years of Saracenic supremacy and rugs then made have been copied through the centuries. There were certain local peculiarities in the weave of the rugs made that differentiated them from Syrian rugs and from each other.

After analysis of the materials of which such rugs were made as have come down to modern times, and close comparison of the rugs woven in Syria with those made in Northern Africa and in Spain, the opinion is forced upon the student that the so called Caliphate rugs were made in Syria. They may be called either "Damascus" "Syrian" or "Caliphate" rugs, either name would apply.

As nearly then as we can classify the rugs under consideration and describe them with a reasonable degree of accuracy, they are rugs made of the finest Syrian wool in the region of Damascus, bearing one or another famous design that may have been used in the past for a great dignitary or Caliph. None of the important designs copied by Damascus weavers is of greater significance than that historic device known as the "Star worshippers' design."