

THE ART OF KURDISH CARPETS

A Kurd and former student at St. Cloud State is trying to revive the tradition of weaving rugs in his native Iraq.

By **Cyrille Cartier**
Special to the Star Tribune

IRBIL, IRAQ — The strong hands that come out of the nomad's black garb conspire with the wrinkles around Zoleha Hamed Amin's eyes to exaggerate her age. Those hands carry a dying secret: the art of weaving.

It has been two years since she made a carpet, and she is the only one in her family who knows how.

"I don't need to teach [it] to my daughters because they're not going to need it," Amin said. "It's not the fashion these days."

Amin is only following modern times in which hand-woven carpets are replaced with factory-made ones and nomadic life gives way to city dwelling. The disappearance of the nomad means that the art of weaving and dyeing also is being lost, said Lolan Sipan, who is trying to revive the traditions and salvage what is left of Kurdish woven art.

Sipan had to travel far to appreciate his heritage. Only when he was more than 6,000 miles away from it, as a student at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, did he begin to understand the significance of Kurdish carpets and weaving. Sipan came to the United States to improve his English at a community college in California when he took his first cultural anthropology class.

Then 40 years old, he decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology and looked for the best programs and tuition plans before deciding on St. Cloud State.

As the oldest student there and the only Kurd, he was given special attention by peers and professors and would often give seminars about Kurds and his native Kurdistan. He traveled extensively to South and Central America where he learned about the native populations and the importance of preservation and promotion.

"The whole anthropology discipline helped me understand about my culture, my people," he said.

The carpet palace

Every day after work, Sipan joins his brother in the heart of Irbil, in what the inhabitants claim is the oldest continuously inhabited citadel in the world. The Kurdish regional government gave them a rent-free house so that they could open their carpet and textile museum last December.

The Arab-style house — a two-story structure with an open courtyard and pillars supporting the wraparound indoor balcony — contains woven artifacts from about 30 tribes from the area. Stools covered in colorful woven wool are laid out



Source: ESRI Associated Press

invitingly for visitors. An old-fashioned goatskin baby basket is displayed in the courtyard.

About 400 of Sipan's personal collection of nearly 3,000 pieces are hung on the walls, stacked in the corners and spread on the floors.

"My idea is first to save them, then to promote them, then to revitalize the weaving tradition," he said.

For 13 years, Sipan has seen his hobby of collecting carpets and rugs transformed into a personal cause of saving the art.

Since the end of the Gulf War in 1991, when the region was given semi-autonomous status through the United Nations, waves of foreigners bought thousands of carpets to take back home.

"I want to tell my people 'Hey, we have to think twice.' This is not backward art. This is very sophisticated art. This is rich tribal art."

— **Lolan Sipan**, former St. Cloud State University student who is trying to preserve Kurdish woven art

There are tens of thousands of Kurdish carpets in Iran, Turkey, the United States and Europe. Carpet traders are more interested in selling than in salvaging older pieces, Sipan said.

"I didn't want them to buy everything," Sipan said. "This is part of our heritage and history."

During his frequent trips home — he lived for 23 years in Sweden and the United States — Sipan would buy carpets. Kurds living abroad return to their homeland with a special status of one who has traveled far, witnessed the grandeur of distant lands and, usually, come back with money to settle down.

"People come from Europe, they buy a house and get married," Sipan said. "I don't buy a house, I buy carpets."

His friends think he is crazy, but his family has come to terms with his hobby. Sipan persuaded his younger brother, Sertip, to join him in his cause.

"I want to tell my people 'Hey, we have to think twice.' This is not backward art. This is very sophisticated art. This is rich tribal art."

After receiving his degree in 1996, he returned to Sweden and worked as a purchasing manager before resettling in Iraq in April 2004.

Sipan has had to make his case to everyone from government officials who promise him extra funds for the museum to his colleagues who are too busy looking toward the West and the latest cell-phone models. He also must convince nomads like Amin about the importance of her work.

Dying lifestyle

Amin made the tent under which her family sleeps and the reed curtain that divides the tent in two. The carpets she wove share the floor space with the factory-made ones she and her husband bought. Hers are lighter and therefore easier to carry when they move to the highlands during the summer. Making carpets is a laborious process that has changed over the years. Naturally dyed wool is replaced with less durable chemical dyes. Most of the factory-made carpets are from Iran. The ones made in Iraq are made with Iranian motifs and symbols, not Kurdish ones.

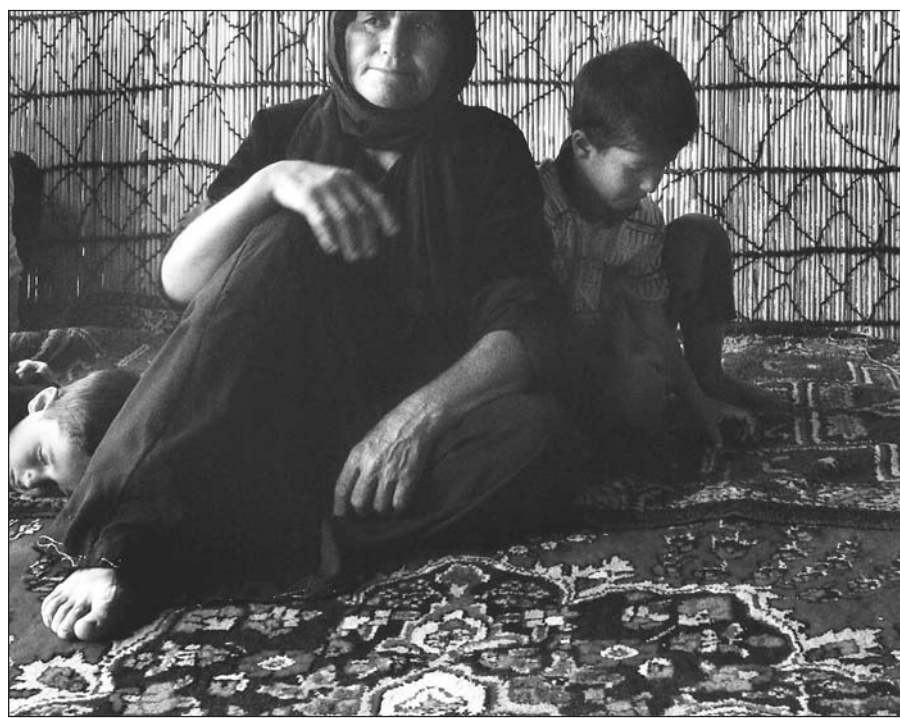
The livelihood of the nomad — selling cattle, sheep and goat — is not as fruitful as it was years ago. Many nomads, including one of Amin's married children, have abandoned the way of life of their ancestors.

Years of warfare and the dangers from landmines have also limited the grazing fields of their herds.

Since the museum opened four months ago, the carpets, the oldest of which is 120 years old, have been exposed to the seasonal moods of the north. The bottom halves of the large carpets hanging on the second-floor walls have begun fading. A recent storm destroyed the canvas that Sipan used as a temporary roof. He would like to see the house in the citadel transformed into a sort of salon where people can discuss politics, history and art, while listening to traditional music among the rich surroundings.

He also would like it to be a place where weaving and dyeing are taught. He already has the looms and has connections with people who know the trade and can speak with more expertise than he has about the carpets.

But first he needs a roof. "Many rugs are fading now and I'm very worried."



Zoleha Hamed Amin, a nomad, sits on the last rug she made two years ago. She is following modern trends in which hand-woven carpets are replaced with factory-made ones. But one Kurd, Lolan Sipan, has taken on the cause of saving the art of carpet weaving.

Cyrille Cartier/
Special to the Star Tribune

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2.00 ct	Radiant	VS2-F	\$20,500	2.54 ct	Round	SI1-H	\$18,900	17.73 ct	Oval	\$27,000
1.62 ct	Round	SI2-H	\$9,900	2.39 ct	Pear Shape	VS2-H	\$12,600	4.00 ct	Oval	\$5,800
1.53 ct	Round	SI1-F	\$11,800	2.02 ct	Princess	SI2-G	\$11,250	3.53 ct	Round	\$14,500
1.36 ct	Round	SI2-H	\$7,200	1.92 ct	Round	SI2-E	\$12,300	3.01 ct	Radiant	\$4,900
1.29 ct	Square	Radiant Fancy Yellow	\$5,800	1.70 ct	Round	SI3-E	\$8,300	2.84 ct	Round	\$8,400
1.18 ct	Round	SI1-I	\$6,200	1.59 ct	Round	SI2-G	\$8,200	2.55 ct	Round	\$4,400
1.14 ct	Princess	VS2-E	\$6,300	1.14 ct	Round	SI2-E	\$6,500	1.78 ct	Marquise	\$2,900
1.03 ct	Round	SI1-G	\$5,900	1.08 ct	Round	VS1-H	\$4,900	1.47 ct	Round	\$2,300
1.02 ct	Emerald Cut	WS2-G	\$6,200	1.05 ct	Round	SI2-I	\$3,800	1.20 ct	Round	\$2,350
1.00 ct	Round	VS2-G	\$5,670	1.00 ct	Round	SI2-H	\$4,100	1.07 ct	Round	\$2,400
1.03 ct	Princess	VS2-G	\$5,750	1.00 ct	Round	SI1-E	\$5,200	1.02 ct	Round	\$1,950
.76 ct	Princess	VS1-F	\$3,600	.97 ct	Princess	VS2-F	\$4,550	1.01 ct	Radiant	\$1,850
.51 ct	Round	VS2-F	\$1,650	.77 ct	Princess	SI2-F	\$2,500	.70 ct	Round	\$1,200

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