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The Rugs of Nero Wolfe Et Al.

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THE BROWNSTONE ON WEST 35th STREET

According to Rex Stout's novels, detective Nero Wolfe owns and lives in an old brownstone house located between 10th and 11th Avenues on the south side of West 35th Street, Manhattan, New York City (the number is variously given as 618, 902, 909, 914, 918, 922, 924, and 938). Nero Wolfe is a man of refined tastes in many things, including cuisine, Orchidæe, books, and comfortable furnishings. The last category includes Oriental rugs. Others before me have tackled the question as to what kinds of rugs Wolfe and his assistant Archie Goodwin have possessed (Baring-Gould 1970:41; Gotwald 1993:175-78; McBride 2003:55, 73, 105-06), but I propose to considerably refine the answers previously supplied by these useful works, to make some corrections, and to add observations on rugs beyond the West 35th Street venue and (a little way) beyond the Wolfe Corpus.

In *Please Pass the Guilt* (PASS) set in 1969, we are told that there is no rug in the Brownstone's front hallway (Stout 1974:Ch. 14, 119). According to notes that the late Mr. Stout (1992:notes 2) left, written in 1949, "Wolfe hates bare floors and all rooms are carpeted" (Stout, too, hated bare floors; McAleer 1977:251); there is a "wide carpeted hall." The hall floor-covering is, therefore, almost certainly machine-woven, wall-to-wall carpet that is not overlain by any Oriental rug. We learn that the stairways, too, are carpeted, at least in 1938, according to *Over My Dead Body* (Stout 1964 b:Ch. 1, 6).

Rex Stout visited a Moroccan carpet workshop during his travels of 1928 (McAleer 1977:207), and Oriental rugs appear in a number of his novels. The hand-woven Oriental carpet of greatest note in Wolfe's Brownstone graces the highly satisfactory room in which most of the Nero Wolfe mysteries are solved: the great detective's spacious office on the main floor. In William S. Baring-Gould's (1970:41) distillation of the up-to-then (1969) Wolfe novels, he summarized what the Corpus tells us:

On the floor is a big 14' by 26' rug, mostly yellow, given to Wolfe in 1932 as a token of gratitude by an Armenian

merchant who had got himself in a bad hole (Wolfe suspected that he had stolen the rug in Kandahar). It is either a Keraghan or a Shirvan—[narrator] Archie does not seem to be quite sure which, although he claims to have learned about rugs from Wolfe.

Regrettably, this paragraph conflates and confuses certain matters. Let us, then, look more closely into what Wolfe's detective assistant Archie Goodwin's reports actually tell us and what kinds of rugs are being talked about. We will begin by combing the Corpus itself.

It is notable that no Oriental rug is mentioned for the Brownstone before the mid-1950s, a period during which many members of the American public had come to view Orientals as passé, and during which myriad previously fashionable hand-woven gems were very widely replaced with wall-to-wall commercial carpeting. Wolfe's office carpet is first mentioned in the 1954 case "Die Like a Dog" (Stout 1957:Ch. 2, 142); Mr. Goodwin calls it "the best rug in the house," thereby indicating that there are others in the domicile. This office one "was given to Wolfe years ago by an Armenian merchant who had got himself in a bad hole." Armenians have long been prominent in the Oriental-rug trade.

According to the admirable O. E. McBride (2003:73) — echoing Baring-Gould, to some extent — "Wolfe's original rug is a Kerman in yellow (naturally) and red (fortunately, since it has a murderer's blood spilled on it in 1935)." But although Kermans come into the picture elsewhere, I have not found the carpet in Wolfe's office being termed one, nor the color yellow mentioned (Wolfe dislikes red [Gotwald 1993:129], but that hue is difficult to avoid in Oriental rugs). The first time that the office carpet is assigned a geographic name-of-origin in print, as far as I have been able to ascertain, is in connection with a 1956 case, *Might as Well Be Dead* (MIGH; Stout 1958:Ch. 1, 7), in which it is called a Feraghan and is said to have measured 14' by 26', and to have "covered all the central expanse." This would leave some of the floor of the "nearly square" room bare unless the Persian was laid atop wall-to-wall floor-covering — a highly likely circumstance here.

In the rug literature, the designation "Feraghan" refers to rugs from a plain of that name to the north of Arāk (Sultanabad), in western Iran; it is also spelled Farâhân and, today, Ferahan (Stone 1997:77). In light of the fact that in later Wolfe books, the name given is Keraghan, we are faced with a problem. Two possibilities have been offered: 1) the Persian carpet type known as Feraghan or Ferahan is truly meant (Persian /gh/ is pronounced between hard /g/ and /h/, like a Greek gamma—thus, the spelling variants) and subsequent "Keraghans" are misprints, as concluded Frederick G. Gotwald (1993:175) in *The Nero Wolfe Handbook*, on the basis of finding "Feraghan" but not "Keraghan" on the map

in G. Griffin Lewis's 1920 *The Practical Book of Oriental Rugs* (neither "Keraghan" nor "Kharâghân" appears in Stone's 1996 *The Oriental Rug Lexicon*, either); 2) the initial letter "F" used in MIGH is a misprint for the "K" of "Keraghan," both because subsequent mentions in the Corpus call the carpet a "Keraghan" and because Goodwin *acknowledges* the "F" as a typo in his (non-canonical) *The Brownstone of Nero Wolfe* (Darby 1983:105). The fact that Archie gives the same 14' x 26' dimensions in 1969, toward the end of the Wolfe Corpus — in PASS (Stout 1973:Ch. 5, 32) — as he did in MIGH might seem to favor the idea of there having been only one kind of carpet.

It is in 1969, in PASS, that Goodwin first comes to call the office carpet a "Keraghan" (Stout 1974:Ch. 5, 32, Ch. 14, 119). The "Keraghan," with the same 14' x 26' dimensions specified, is mentioned once more, for 1966, in *Death of a Doxy* (Stout 1967:Ch. 9, 60). Again in 1974, in *A Family Affair*, the final novel, Assistant District Attorney Daniel F. Coggin observes, speaking of the Keraghan, "That's a beautiful rug." Wolfe, realizing that he is being buttered up, replies, facetiously, "A gift from the Shah of Iran" (Stout 1976:49).

What, we may ask, then, *is* a "Keraghan"? The name does not appear in most Oriental rug books. The *Oriental Rug Lexicon* does tell us this: "Kharaghan, Kharaghân. A group of villages in Hamadan province of Iran, northwest of Sâveh. These villages produce single-wefted rugs with Kurdish designs," featuring central medallions (Stone 1997:124; Kurds, who speak an Indo-Iranian tongue, are the majority population in the Hamadan region and are the main rug-weavers; note that in Persian, some /a's/ and /e's/ are close to one another in pronunciation and may be interchangeable according to dialect). P. R. J. Ford (1989:236-37) elaborated:

In the north[east]ern part of the Hamadan region, on the edge of the [Turkic] Shah Sevan tribal area, lies the Kharaghan group of [Persian] villages which produces rugs and runners of all sizes in designs which often look Kurdish-influenced. . . . Dark-blue grounds predominate, but red is also found; birds and animals often feature as subsidiary motifs.

According to Ford's *The Oriental Carpet* (1989:92; also, Black 1985:136), the Ferahan, from a village of that name also in western Persia's Hamadan region, "is one of the best known [and sought-after] of all nineteenth-century [commercial] carpet designs. . . . in its heyday it had a great reputation for quality combined with elegance and restraint. . . [it is characterized by] tasteful restraint and economy of design, durable construction with very good wool"—all of which would have appealed to Wolfe. The fields of Ferahans were in madder red or, less

commonly, cream (a tone not too far from yellow) or blue, and they carried repeated floral-cone motifs, the Herati pattern (a dense overall pattern of rosettes), or a central medallion; the pile was close-clipped, which produces clarity of design. A pre-1890 Ferahan rug was usually rather long in relation to its width; somewhat later ones, such as **Wolfe's, followed Western preferred dimensions; such rugs began to be sold in the West around 1875.** It is of considerable interest to learn from Ford (p. 94) that Ferahan carpets came from an area to the south of the **Kharaghan** villages and, though finer, share characteristics with Karaghans. A Farahan/Feraghan could, then, perhaps be confused with a Kharaghan/Kheraghan! Thus, the same office carpet could conceivably be referred to by either name (the orthographic difference between Keraghan vs. Kharaghan is also seen in the rug literature and so seems not to signify).

Note the colors mentioned above for Kharaghans (similar ones are used **in Ferahans**). **Ford (1989:246) also speaks elsewhere of “the dominant dark blue and red; the limited use of other shades, including a little gold”** — leaving little room for Baring-Gould's “**mostly yellow,**” something that would be aberrant among Middle Eastern rugs of just about any kind (yellows in Old Oriental rugs tend to be fugitive — i.e., to fade relatively quickly — though not to black). In reality, with respect to this color Baring-Gould **appears to have merely extrapolated from Wolfe's** known tastes rather than relying on known facts, for I find no reference in the Wolfe books to the color of this rug. And because the Keraghan and the Shirvan (see below) were both gifts, Wolfe would not, in any event, have been the one to select a particular color.

And what **about** the Shirvan (Shirvân) alternative? The latter is mentioned only in ***The Final Deduction* (FINL)**. In 1961, Miss Margot Tedder asks Wolfe, “**Is that a Kazak? ‘No,’ he said. Shirvan.’ . . . It was given to me in nineteen thirty-two, in Cairo, by a man to whom I had rendered a service, and I suspected he had stolen it in Kandahar. . . . Only an ignoramus could mistake it for a Kazak. Kazaks have a long pile” (Stout 1963:Ch. 7, 74); short pile is associated with a finer weave.** (Note that the donor of **this** carpet is not specified as Armenian).

How might we explain this seeming conflict between the “Keraghan” and the “Shirvan” identifications? Of course, Wolfe might have replaced the former carpet between the time of the action of FINL (1961) and that of PASS (1969). However, Wolfe's notorious inertia and devotion to routine — as well as the long-wearing quality of antique Oriental rugs — suggest that it is unlikely that he would have chosen to exchange one carpet definitively for another. As Kenneth Van Dover (2003:3) put it in *At Wolfe's Door*, “inside the house, the furnishings are permanent.”

First, let us deal with Wolfe's derisive dismissal of Miss Tedder's Kazak identification. In terms of structure, there are two main groupings of Caucasian carpets, Kazak and Kuba. "In general, the [Kazak] rugs have a long pile" (Azadi, Kerimov, and Zollinger 2001:98). Still, "The khanate of Kazak produced both high-pile rugs from the mountainous areas and low-piled rugs from the valleys, villages and settlements ... (Schürmann 1983:112). Was Wolfe just pulling Ms. Tedder's lower extremity, then — piling it on, one might say? Very likely, yet perhaps it was not entirely frivolity. Schürmann (1983:111) does say, "Length of pile can also provide some clues towards defining the district of origin. More warmth is needed in the mountains and the pile is consequently thick and high, whereas in the more temperate areas the pile is lower." Caucasian-carpet experts Azadi, Kerimov, and Zollinger (2001:90-91) have told us this: "Compared to Kazak rugs, their [Shirvans'] pile is high (though not as high as the pile of Kazaks." Said Eiland and Eiland (1998:278), "Shirvan rugs are more finely woven and have a shorter pile than the Kazak-Karabagh type, and they are usually small ... although there [is] ... group of older rugs measuring about 5' X 12'." Wolfe's Shirvan is extremely large for the type, then, and would have been made near the transport lines, where pile tended to be lower. But pile length is by no means a definitive way of classifying carpets as Kazak; other criteria are more informative. "Kazak rugs are [often] recognizable by the fact that they [unlike most Oriental rugs] have a fringe at one end only, or no fringe at all" [Schürmann 1983:111]; for a somewhat different statement, see Azadi, Kerimov, and Zollinger 2001:98; what is meant is that the loops of a continuous warp are not cut at one end; Eiland and Eiland 1998:270). Too, repeat elements are far more common in Shirvans than in Kazaks; typically, Kazaks have large, geometric central medallions with a good deal of ground showing, red being the usual tone. Still, some Shirvans (e.g., Chajlis) have octagonal central medallions reminiscent of those of some Kazaks (e.g., Karachovs; Stone 2004:149, 168-69; Black 1985:112).

Shirvân is a region (once, a khanate) to the south of Kuba, Azerbaijan (not Armenia, as per McBride 2003:73). Designs of Shirvans are very variable, making characterization more difficult than with Kubas (Azadi, Kerimov, and Zollinger 2001:90). What Schürmann (1983:112) has to say is most interesting:

"Rugs from the prolific carpet-weaving district of *Shirvan* have characteristics of both 'Kazak' and 'Kuba' groups. The top ends are not cut to form a fringe, and the bottom fringe is either knotted or braided. Warp threads lie on one level, unlike the stepped warps of most Kuba rugs. To the east, tribal rugs from the foothills of the Caucasus . . . use typical Kazak motifs and geometric designs in clear bold colours."

Thus, an amateur could readily mistake certain Shirvans for Kazaks, giving impetus to the hypothesis that Wolfe was merely being ornery with this unwelcome woman in his house, a snooty female with questionable manners and twenty-five minutes late, to boot — sure to pique a courtly man of clockwork habits. Could it be, then, that this rug is what Archie reported it to be at other times, a Kheraghan, and that Wolfe said Shirvan merely to permit a snide rug-insider joke on what **would then be Ms. Tedder’s far-grosser misapprehension that a Kheraghan was a Kazak? Wolfe’s aforementioned bit of fun with the assistant D.A. supports the theory of this kind of behavior on Wolfe’s part. And if** Wolfe was putting Margot Tedder on about the type of rug, he may equally well have made up the business about the origin of this particular rug — especially about its probably having been stolen in Kandahar, **since it isn’t a type of rug likely to have been present in that remote city** in southeastern Afghanistan. We could also quibble with the 1932 Cairo date that Wolfe mentions. Although Wolfe was in Cairo in 1913, by 1930 he was installed in his Manhattan brownstone, which he was most loath to leave for *any* purpose, much less for a jaunt to Egypt (where he did own a house; Baring-Gould 1970:36, 85, 179, 181).

If, however, the rug is indeed a Shirvan, on the basis of size it would **presumably be of the Bijov subtype: “Bijov design rugs are ... the largest of Shirvân rugs....The design consists of a vertical arrangement of nested bracketed elements”** (Stone 1997:26), and the ornamentation would have been dense; dark blue is the most likely background color. Still, **“Light ivory, red or yellow may occur as background colors of the central field, but they are seldom [encountered]”** (Azadi, Kerimov, and Zollinger 2001:91; emphasis added). The ranks of repeated elements would have appealed to Wolfe’s sense of order.

All this aside, Archie, as edited by Ken Darby (1983:105), has explained that the reason that the Shirvan was for the moment covering the office floor, was because, as Archie took note of in MGHT (Stout 1958:Ch. 1, 7), **every April Wolfe had the usual office carpet cleaned: “I must remind Fritz to send it to be cleaned and put the others down.” The Shirvan was obviously one of the “others.”**

An interesting fact is the mention of a *third* type of office rug, in Stout’s 1949 private notes, well prior to the first mention of Oriental rugs in the saga. Regarding the office, Stout (1992:notes 3) wrote, **“The carpet was woven in Montenegro in the early nineteenth century and has been extensively patched.”** Although large for a Balkan flat-woven rug, this piece may indeed have been one. According to *Rugs and Carpets of Europe and the Western World*, **“Those [flat-weave] kilims woven throughout the Balkans tended to mimic designs and colors of Orientals from Asia”** (Weeks and Treganowan 1969:155). Wolfe’s rug’s being **“extensively patched”** is more suggestive of a flat kilim weave than it is

of a pile weave. Repair of either of these kinds of rugs would normally involve reweaving rather than the use of a patch; but because of the pile, **a knotted rug's repairs tend to be less noticeable than those of flat-weaves** and would at least look less patch-like, ordinarily — although it is occasionally the case that fragments of similar rugs are grafted into a pile rug to replace a worn, damaged, or missing area. In any case, Wolfe **may ultimately have found the Montenegrin rug's deteriorated condition intolerable** and this may have prompted his retiring it in favor of the Feraghan/Keraghan.

Another Oriental rug in the Brownstone is referred to, in *Gambit* (Stout 1964c:Ch. 5, 45), which takes place in 1962: the fifteen by eleven foot Kashan in the south room, a guest bed chamber on the third floor opposite Archie's then bedroom, a rug not mentioned by Baring-Gould (1970). Kashan is a central Iranian oasis city that “produced and exported carpets of the highest artistic craftsmanship and cultural value.” Predominant colors are clear blue or red and sometimes beige or ivory. **“The colours excel in their subtle brilliance” (Aschenbrenner 1981:193);** a red or blue field is usual. Fluid floral designs are typical, focusing on an elaborate central medallion (Black 1985:142-43). Gotwald (1993:177-78) asserted that the rug is of silk; but when a carpet is as unusually large as this one is, high-quality, finely-woven imported soft merino wool is much more likely.

Silk is not ideally suited for floor covering, as the pile becomes matted down and wears poorly. Consequently most silk rugs are small enough to be used as wall hangings or other types of coverings, although one will occasionally find a large silk carpet. (Eiland and Eiland 1998:116)

(One may also note that merino wool, suited to making soft woolen clothing, does not wear as well as other, harder native wools.)

Since high-quality Kashans are essentially a product of the twentieth century (Eiland and Eiland 1998:116), we may suppose that Wolfe's is only semi-antique, if that. There is a good chance that the design is floral. **In light of Wolfe's tastes, the ground is likely ivory rather than the more common blue or madder-red.**

The question of the rug in Archie's own room awaits the following section.

ORIENTAL RUGS IN OTHER STOUT AND GOLDSBOROUGH NEW YORK CITY VENUES

In 1933, at the time of *Fer-de-Lance* (Stout 1964a:Ch. 3, 21), Archie Goodwin states that his original second-floor bedroom “had a real carpet all over, no damn little rugs to slide you around like a piece of butter on a hot cake.” Things had changed by 1957, the time of *If Death Ever Slept* (Stout 1959:Ch. 3, 21). In the course of that case, Archie spends time in the enormous Fifth Avenue penthouse apartment of affluent businessman Otis Jarrell. In the novel’s relevant passage, we learn not only something about the Jarrell’s taste in floor-covering, but also Archie’s as it has evolved over the years. In the Jarrell reception hall, the detective spots “a Kirman twice as big as my room at home — I have a Kirman there, paid for by me, 8’4” x 3’2”.” Kirman — now, usually rendered Kerman — is an isolated city in the desert interior of southern Iran; although significantly involved in weaving during nineteenth century, its commercial hand-woven carpet production flourished during the latter quarter of that century and up to 1930. Eiland and Eiland (1998:142) observed:

The rugs of Kerman have always been among the most easily recognized fabrics of Persia, with curvilinear, graceful floral designs in a brilliant variety of colors.... They have been woven in virtually all sizes up to the largest carpets, with a size of about 4’ x 6’6” being perhaps most common, along with the standard 9’ x 12’ carpet. [At 8’4” x 3’2”, Archie’s rug has the proportions of a short runner rather than those of a throw rug.]

Cochineal is the characteristic dyestuff in classic Kerman rugs. “This provides shades from the most delicate pink to a deep magenta that are characteristic of the Kerman carpet.” Respecting design, “the Kerman’s general level of excellence has been unequalled.” Regrettably, from 1930 on both design and palette deteriorated markedly (Eiland and Eiland 1998:142-43). While we may hope that the Goodwin rug is a classic one, the curvilinear style and rosy tones sound a bit fussy for his presumed tastes. On the other hand, the more modern rugs feature pastels and ivory, not likely to be appealing to the man of action, either. Archie may have chosen an elaborate, polychrome pre-World War II rug with a central-medallion design and good, saturated colors — although he might instead have chosen a more contemporary pictorial; I would favor his electing to buy a hunting carpet, as are woven in Kerman (Ford 1989:161), displaying an action scene of dynamic mounted bowmen or lancers bringing down leopards and (non-Neronian) wolves.

In 1964, at the time of *A Right to Die* (RGHT) Archie’s affluent female friend Lily Rowan’s abode is a spacious and sumptuous penthouse on

East 63rd Street between Madison and Park Avenues. In her living-room lies a 19' by 34' Kashan carpet, in a garden pattern in seven colors (Stout 1965:Ch. 2, 9), said to have cost \$14,000. The designs of most Persian rugs are floral to a greater or lesser degree. The term "garden carpet" refers to a particular kind of layout, probably originating in Kerman circa 1600, in which the field is divided into oblong compartments by "watercourses" and "pools," as in the Savafid Persian garden, with stylized representations of not only flowers but also, sometimes, of fishes and waterfowl (Ford 1989:144-52; Stone 1997:84). However, as far as I know, this format is not characteristic of Kashans. As for the colors, seven is a moderate number for an Oriental.

In *RGHT* (Stout 1965c:Ch. 9, 80), too, Archie Goodwin visits the Park Avenue apartment of the wealthy Mrs. Kenneth Brook. The lobby of her 16-story building boasts a "maybe Oriental carpet." Machine-made knock-offs of hand-woven Oriental rugs are legion, and even the swankiest apartment houses are very unlikely to install costly Orientals in such high-traffic areas as buildings' lobbies. Many faux Orientals are woven in Belgium, but the United States also has its manufacturers, such as Karastan (established in 1928).

In 1962, in *The Mother Hunt* (Stout 1964d:Ch. 17, 119), Wolfe and Goodwin visit the West 11th Street house of client Lucy Valdon. In the nursery, Wolfe admires the fine Tekke (a.k.a., Bokhara) rug on the floor. "He inspected not only the Tekke, he looked at every rug in the house. Perfectly natural. He likes good rugs and knows a lot about them, and he seldom has a chance to see any but his own." The Tekke are a once-powerful nomadic Turkoman (Turkmen) tribe of southern Turkmenistan; their velvety rugs feature very regular rows of well-drawn repeated geometric tribal emblems called *guls* and *göls*, and are characterized by rich-red grounds and a limited palette (Mackie and Thompson 1980:96-102; Ford 1989:177-80; Black 1985:168-69). The fourth-floor Valdon bedroom in which Wolfe spent the night also "had a nice rug which he said was an eighteenth-century Feraghan." So, we have another Feraghan and presumably not a misprinted Keraghan. An eighteenth-century specimen would be rare indeed, and shouldn't be on the floor!

In Robert Goldsborough's (1987:Ch. 6, 42, 46) first post-Stout Wolfe novel, *Murder in E Minor*, Archie visits the apartment of the late Milan Stevens (Milos Stefanovic), Montenegro-raised music director of the New York Symphony. Stevens had "a handsome Oriental rug" in his entrance hall, according to Archie, and another in the library. Despite his Wolfe-garnered knowledge of carpets, though, Archie does not favor us with identifications of types here. He does observe that "The cost of the Oriental rugs alone had to be more than most people spend on all their furnishings in a lifetime."

An Oriental carpet is mentioned in Rex Stout's 1941 non-Wolfe Tecumseh Fox detective novel, *The Broken Vase*. It is "a priceless Zendjan" in the 3070 Park Avenue apartment of wealthy Irene (Mrs. Henry) Dunham Pomfret (Stout 1965b:Ch. 3, 30). Zenjan or Zanjân is the capital of northwestern Iran's Khamseh district and a source of Kurdish village rugs and "rugs woven in imitation of Bijars" (another Kurdish style; Stone 1997:257). The "pricelessness" here is puzzling, since products of the Khamseh confederacy of tribes are "small, low-quality rugs" (Stone 1997:123). Also in *The Broken Vase*, the 12th Street house of the wealthy bachelor clothing and textile manufacturer Adolph Koch is described as having "handsome rugs" (Stout 1965b:Ch. 12, 118), but no particulars are provided. In *Under the Andes*, a non-detective novel first published (serially) in 1914, "The rugs and pictures and hangings" at Mercer's gambling establishment on Fifth Avenue in the 50s "testified to the taste of the man who selected them" (Stout 1994:Ch. 1, 1).

In the 1941 non-Wolfe crime novel *Red Threads*, one of the characters, Leo Kranz, avers: "Textiles are my first love" (Stout 1965a:Ch. 3, p. 22). District Attorney Skinner is said to have a Velatan rug in his office (Ch. 20, p. 149). However, "Velatan" is not an Oriental-rug designation, and we may suppose that a contemporary designer rug is referred to, since Velatan is a surname (note that Rex Stout's wife Pola was "one of the foremost designers of wool fabrics in America"; McAleer 1977:233; also, Sullivan 2005). In Greece, by the way, "according to popular belief a piece of red thread can advert any natural or supernatural menace, illness, or the evil eye" (Weeks and Treganowan 1969:153-54). So, if threatened get out Rex Stout's *Red Threads*!

NAVAJO AND OTHER BLANKETS AND RUGS IN MONTANA

In 1968, in *Death of a Dude* (DUDE), the adventurous Lily Rowan owns the Bar JR Ranch near Lame Horse, Monroe County, Montana (in reality, near McLeod, Sweet Grass County, Montana). The big log cabin serves as a lodge. "The rugs in all the rooms are Red Indian, and on the walls instead of pictures, are Indian blankets and rugs. Three of them in the big room are genuine bayetas" (Stout 1970:Ch. 1, 9; see below).

In Lame Horse, Armenian-American Woodrow Stepanian runs the Hall of Culture, a center for the arts and entertainment. "He knew a lot about rugs," reports Archie in DUDE (Stout 1970:Ch. 9, 114), and has some in his private quarters. These are of unspecified provenience, but in light of Woody's ethnic heritage and pride they are very likely Armenian.

No rugs are mentioned in 1939's *The Mountain Cat Murders*, Stout's (1971) other Western-set novel (in Cody, Wyoming), which has no overlap with the Wolfe Corpus.

RED THREADS

Before leaving Navajo blankets, we must look more closely at Rex Stout's 1941 novel *Red Threads* (set in 1937); the book does not involve Nero Wolfe but, nevertheless, does include certain characters found in the Wolfe oeuvre, including Inspector Cramer. In the story, bayeta yarn figures critically (a yarn as used in the warp or weft of a textile is commonly referred to as a thread).

Bayeta is the Spanish word for baize, a kind of flannel cloth usually carrying a nap on one or both sides. This is what Rex Stout (1965a:Ch. 3, 29, Ch. 6, 56) — through one of his characters — had to say about it:

“An old Spanish yarn. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they made a red vegetable dye in Persia, and sold it to Spain. The Spaniards dyed yarn with it and made soldiers’ pants from the material they wove from the yarn. The soldiers wore the pants to America and had them on when they were fighting the Indians, and got killed. The Indians took the pants and unraveled them, and used the yarn in weaving their finest blankets. The blankets are still called bayeta — those with some of that yarn in them — and most of the best ones are in museums” [— textile and fashion designer Jean Farris]...**The whole period during which those blankets were being woven extends to nearly two centuries. Between any two specimens now extant, the yarn always shows a variation, minute, sometimes apparent even to a novice”** [— attorney Samuel Aaron Orlik].

Unfortunately, although containing some truth, much of the above is inaccurate.

In Europe, this woolen material was made, from the sixteenth century onward, in England as well as in Spain; it later came also to be manufactured in the Spanish colonies, including New Spain (as Mexico was termed until independence in 1821) and New Mexico, employing durable churro wool (Wheat 2003:70). Bayeta was manufactured in various colors, of which red was by far the most popular among the Navajo. Various shades of red were created with cochineal, a dyestuff made from the tiny bodies of a Mexican scale insect (which also came to be raised in Spain's Canary Islands). The reference to Persia in *Red Threads* may relate to the fact that similar insect dyes — kermes and Armenian Red — were produced in that part of the world (see below). Another insect red, lac, originated in India (Jett 1998).

Initially and through the 1600s, red baize was made in, and imported from, Spain into New Spain, as yard goods, some reaching the far northern frontier of New Mexico; and from the latter 1700s on, some English baize was re-imported to the Southwest from central New Spain, and Mexican-made bayeta also reached New Mexico. In addition, after 1867 American-made baize reached New Mexico in quantity, via the Santa Fe Trail (and may have been arriving since before the Mexican War of 1846-1848). Since there were no native dyes that yielded good reds, by 1750 Navajo Indians were acquiring and unraveling red baize yard goods, usually twisting two or three strands of thread together, and were using that as yarn in weaving the (usually limited) red portions of some of their wearing blankets and ponchos (James 1914:25-29; Wheat 2003:69-80). The notions that baize was exclusively of English manufacture and **that Navajos obtained their bayeta from slain Spanish soldiers' breeches** have been repeated from time to time over the decades, but there seems to be no factual basis for thinking either that all baize was made in Britain or that military breeches were ever a significant source of supply, if a source at all (Kent 1985:35). After the coming of the Santa Fe Railroad in 1880, much American-made baize arrived, by rail; but so did chemically-dyed, machine-spun **Pennsylvania "Germantown" yarn** — which became widely popular — as well as new, commercially manufactured aniline dyes for home use, which during the 1880s came increasingly to supply the reds in homespun Navajo blankets and, from the 1890s, in a new product of the Navajo loom, floor rugs (Rodee 1981:5-6; Wheat 2003:79-80), which traders encouraged in response to the then current popularity of Oriental rugs among Anglo-Americans.

Contrary to *Red Threads*, bayeta was not present among Indians in the Southwest during the sixteenth century (Santa Fe was not founded until 1598), nor were bayeta Navajo blankets made over a nearly two-hundred-year period but for only about 165 years (and only in extremely limited quantity toward the end). The earliest known Navajo occurrence of such red threads dates to about 1750, the very latest to 1912. Regarding the earliest specimens, some possibly Turkish-Syrian or Spanish raveled red worsted yarns, dyed with lac or lac plus Armenian red or cochineal (the last two chemically indistinguishable) appeared, very sparingly, in Navajo blankets, and these yarns are included under the **term "bayeta."** **Very, very few pre-1821** (Spanish-period) pieces of this kind have survived, even as fragments. Fuzzier worsted, often used in large quantities, characterized the period of about 1860 to 1865, when United States government handouts were issued at the Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation, near Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where most Navajos were interned for four years; this bayeta appears to have been cochineal-dyed and woven into cloth in Mexico or in Hispano New Mexico (Kent 1985:35). A fair number of middle-nineteenth-century bayeta blankets remain extant, in both museums and private collections.

“Bayeta is a name surrounded by a veritable mystique in southwestern weaving. Without doubt, it is the most famous material ever woven in **American blankets**” (Wheat 2003:70). Old bayeta blankets are, in general, the most sought-after and expensive products of the Navajo loom.

Finally, we may clarify Rev. Frederick G. Gotwald’s (1993:178) statement, “*bayetas* are a special deep nap Navaho rug.” Whereas bayeta *yarn* is fuzzy, and whereas one or both surfaces of bayeta *cloth* might display nap, Navajo *blankets* were all flat-woven and carried no pile. Rugs, a non-traditional Navajo manufacture, did not employ bayeta yarn.

One may note, by the way, that in 1941 Stout was ahead of his time in having a character speak of the National Indian Museum (Stout 1965a:56); The National Museum of the American Indian was not actually established by Congress until 1989.

CONCLUSIONS

We have learned, in this essay, that Nero Wolfe (and Rex Stout), as filtered through the reportage of Archie Goodwin, do indeed have considerable knowledge about hand-woven rugs. We have also discovered that **the novels’ rugs picture is more complex than commentators have so far** recognized. Although a few question marks remain, and although more research might reveal additional details, I believe that we now have provided a quite comprehensive and accurate accounting of the rugs of Nero Wolfe et al.

NOTE

¹Distant cousin of Gregory Jett, 36-year-old New York partner in the law firm of Otis, Edey, Heydecker and Jett, who in 1959 figures in “**Eeny, Meeny, Murder, Mo**” (Stout 1966).

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