

The Azerbaijan Carpet Museum: A Symbol of National Identity and Heritage in a Post-Soviet Era

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Abstract

This article outlines the history and overview of the modern Azerbaijan Carpet Museum located in Baku. It explores the museum's efforts to document and educate the public about the art and cultural heritage of carpet weaving in Azerbaijan from fiber production to finished product, providing innovative approaches to curation, such as having live carpet weavers as part of the museum display. Furthermore, the article examines the role of the museum as not simply a repository for artefacts, but as a symbol for building a national identity and shared heritage among Azeri nationals in a post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

Key words: Museums, Cultural Heritage, Post-Soviet National Identity

The stand-alone building for the Azerbaijan Carpet Museum was inaugurated in 2014. The new building for the museum was sponsored by the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, The Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan and UNESCO. The shape of the building is styled like a rolled carpet and was designed by Austrian architect, Franz Jantz (Heydar Aliyev Foundation 2019).

The construction of a new building of this magnitude and intricacy marks the importance of the museum as a cultural and national symbol, further located in the heart of Baku by the Caspian Sea. With the construction of this new building, the government prioritized highlighting the cultural significance of carpet weaving for Azerbaijan, but also made a conscious choice to use this museum as a symbolic cornerstone for fostering a shared national identity and heritage centered around the tradition of Azerbaijani carpet production. The carpet styles of Azerbaijan are unique and distinct within its borders, making the carpet the perfect national symbol of common Azeri heritage and identity, standing in contrast to previously imposed notions of standardized Soviet identity

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pushed by Moscow during the years of the Soviet Union. The building of the museum itself reiterates this very statement in its shape of a carpet overlooking the Caspian Sea for all ships entering to catch a glimpse of upon approaching the shore. On the topic of modern architecture in the former Soviet states, Grant (2014: 502) writes: "Across the former USSR, one of the strongest visual indexes of all that has been wrought over the past twenty years—since socialism came to an end, and fifteen internal Soviet republics began new incarnations as independent states—has come in the dramatic transformation of urban landscapes." The Azerbaijan Carpet Museum is an example of the urban landscape transformation Grant describes and celebrates a uniquely Azeri heritage, separate of Soviet-imposed influences. Furthermore, museums are particularly positioned in a way to help promote national identity as described by Macdonald (2003: 3). She states, "Museums, already established as sites for the bringing together of significant 'culture objects', were readily appropriated as 'national' expressions of identity, and of the linked idea of 'having a history' – the collective equivalent of personal memory." Therefore, in addition to simply changing the urban landscapes that Grant describes in the countries of the former USSR, Macdonald gives an insight into the particular power museums might have within this context. They are perfectly suited to not only house "culture objects" as she states, but to draw upon and curate the idea of shared identity and history among citizens. This is important to countries that are rebuilding and redefining their own national identities in a post-Soviet era. To further stress how museums have this ability to shape national identity, Duncan (1991: 94) writes: "In all this, the work of art, now displayed as public property, becomes the means through which the relationship between the individual as citizen and the state as benefactor is enacted."

To again reuse a term from Macdonald, the carpet is the perfect "culture object" to assist in the rebuilding and redefinition of national identity and heritage in Azerbaijan within a museum. This is because, the skill and talent of Azerbaijan's carpet weavers has been documented within the literary works of Azerbaijan for centuries according to Tagiyeva (1999: 616). In particular, the beauty of Azerbaijani carpets also appears in the works of the famous writers Nizami and Khagani, further documented by Tagiyeva (1999: 617). She also continues to state that the time period of the 11th and 12th centuries during which Nizami and Khagani lived, was considered a time of an "Azerbaijan Renaissance" in relation to culture and economics (1999: 617). It is no wonder then that a culture object so highly

praised and documented from what could be seen as a country's own "Renaissance" would then be the perfect item to represent the country's re-established national identity after the years of the Soviet Union. Moreover, despite the demand for Azerbaijani carpets on the world market during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Ibrahimov writes that the generic name "Caucasian carpet" was being used to market Azerbaijani carpets, due to the fact the term "Azerbaijani" did not yet exist in the vocabulary of foreign languages and instead people from Azerbaijan were simply referred to as "Tatar" or "Muslim" by outsiders (2017: 3). Therefore, it is logical that after Azerbaijan regained its independence it would want to highlight and take credit for an item with such beauty and demand that was previously not appropriately credited to the culture and country of Azerbaijan. Ibrahimov (2017: 3) says: "[The] Carpet is a traditional ethno-cultural phenomenon and without determining its ethnic origin, it loses its phenomenon of traditional identity, historical and material value."

The Azerbaijani government clearly understood this concept when it created and opened the new building for the Azerbaijan Carpet Museum. The museum has a beautiful exterior design in the shape of a carpet and open-air interior design. The museum documents the early history of carpet weaving in Azerbaijan and its evolution to modern times. The museum also carefully identifies the signature elements that can be used to identify if a carpet is from Azerbaijan and more specifically from which region. The curation of the museum is both scientific and accessible to the general public at the same time. The museum displays its collection with Azeri and English descriptions and incorporates both analogue and digital information into explaining the exhibits, to educate both a local and foreign population visiting the museum. The museum also includes an exhibit on the production of materials for carpet weaving, which includes the raising of sheep, wool collection and plants used for dyeing the wool. This part of the museum in particular accurately educates visitors on the complete process it takes to make a genuine Azerbaijani carpet and highlights the local production of even the materials used to complete a carpet, making it a truly signature object of Azerbaijan that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Perhaps the most interesting part of the museum is the live weavers that are themselves a living part of the exhibit. Visitors can watch trained weavers in the process of making a carpet right in the museum. This particular curation choice highlights both the tangible and intangible cultural heritage that is connected to the Azerbaijani carpet and the modern cultural symbolism of carpets in contemporary Azerbaijan. Carpets are not

simply a symbol of Azerbaijan's past to be preserved, but are rather a symbol of Azerbaijan's unique and independent cultural identity that should be honored in the past, present and future.

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