

"Dr. MacDonald's Oriental Rug Lecture"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Former Historical Society Board Member Dr. Allan MacDonald will present a lecture on Oriental rugs on Wednesday, July 24th. The lecture will be held at 7:30 p.m. in the Society's Shriver-Weybright Auditorium, 210 E. Main St., Westminster. Dr. MacDonald will begin his talk with slides he has taken of the major rug producing centers in Turkey and the Middle East. The slides will show rug makers producing rug yarns, preparing dyes, dyeing yarns and weaving rugs on a variety of looms. Some of the differences in oriental rugs can be seen in the type of loom used to produce them. Nomad and village rug weavers used horizontal looms while vertical looms were used by more settled peoples.

Rug making is ancient as Dr. MacDonald has observed, "The place of origin of the technique of weaving knotted rugs is uncertain, but Central Asia, and Turkestan, the area east of the Caspian Sea, are usually mentioned as possibilities. The oldest rug in existence is the Pazyryk carpet which has been carbon dated to the 5th century B.C. It was discovered by a Russian archaeologist in 1949. It is approximately six feet square, very finely woven with 225 knots per square inch. Fragments of rugs dating about 200 years earlier have been found in Bash Adar in East Turkestan."

Identifying the origin of an oriental rug requires a knowledge of the construction techniques and designs used by rug makers. In terms of design Dr. MacDonald uses some guidelines. "Persian rugs are often floral and curvilinear whereas Anatolian (Turkish) rugs are usually more geometric. Rugs from the Caucasus are geometric. Central Asian and Turkoman rugs have octagons or diamond shaped lozenges in their designs." Rug makers also favored certain colors. "Persian rugs have many shades of light and dark colors which are harmonious and subdued. Central Asian and Turkoman rugs have dark reds, liver and browns with blue, white or green accents. Anatolian (Turkish) and Caucasian rugs have strong, bright colors." Dr. MacDonald is quick to point out, however, that there are many exceptions to these general guidelines.

Dr. MacDonald will also show approximately 25 rugs that he has purchased in the Middle East, Europe and the United States. Dr. MacDonald and his wife Virginia, became interested in oriental rugs more than 30 years ago during their first trip to Turkey. There they saw many rug shops and became fascinated with the variety, beautiful colors and designs and eventually visited a rug shop just "to look". Dr. MacDonald recalled that, "The dealer, of course, tried desperately to sell us one rug, but we weren't ready to buy. He finally in desperation asked me to make an offer for the rug. I made an offer which I knew was ridiculously low and the dealer was so disgusted that he gave up and we left the shop."

The MacDonalds returned to Turkey the following year and eventually became good friends and customers of the dealer. Affectionately dubbed "Eddie Cantor" by the MacDonalds because of his similar appearance to the actor, the dealer became a source for rugs and information. Dr. MacDonald recalls many fond memories of almost daily morning visits to the shop to drink tea and talk about rugs. "Eddie" spoke English and Dr. MacDonald knew enough Turkish to hold a conversation with him. On one of his visits an elegantly dressed lady and gentleman entered the store and asked to see some rugs. Eddie and his assistants showed the couple several large quantities of small, medium and large rugs but the couple did not select any to purchase. As the time wore on, the dealer became discouraged and told Dr. MacDonald that he was certain that the couple was only looking and that they would not buy any rugs. After hours of looking, however, the gentleman selected a large stack of rugs which equally stunned and delighted the rug dealer. Throughout his talk Dr. MacDonald will share many interesting anecdotes about his experiences in searching for and researching oriental rugs over the past 30 years.

When asked why he was interested in rugs, Dr. MacDonald noted that it was "the beauty of color and design" and "the amazing variety of weaving techniques used by different rug producing centers." To the former art history professor, "a fine rug ranks with a fine painting, piece of sculpture or architectural masterpiece."

Photo caption: Dr. Alan MacDonald poses with a rug from his collection of oriental rugs collected over the past thirty years. Dr. MacDonald will speak about oriental rugs at the Historical Society's Shriver-Weybright Auditorium on Wednesday, July 24th at 7:30 p.m.