

The Creation of the "Rainbow Rug"

for the renovation of the 1904 Building of the Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick

Clare Moss, April 2005

Stephen and I received a letter at our shop, Araby Rug in Falmouth, Maine, in December of 2001 from Stephen Podgajny, the Director of the Curtis Library in Brunswick that read "I am writing to seek your assistance in a project that Curtis Memorial Library is undertaking". Thus began a quest to adorn a beloved public space with a colorful hand-woven carpet which in its creation enriched us, the weavers, and we hope the community of Brunswick.

The Curtis Library had just completed the expansion and renovation of the original 1904 building and was beginning to celebrate its Centennial whose theme was "Voices of the City and the Sea," a phrase from poet and Bowdoin College alum, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The carpets were to be the "culmination of the building projects" to quote Steve Podgajny, in the "Friends of the Library" newsletter.

His letter to us continued... "We are hoping that you might spend some time with us to tour the space and suggest approaches..." Although Steve Podgajny was aware that Stephen and I were long time residents of Brunswick, he was not aware of our strong ties to the library. On our first trip (of what would be many) to the library beginning in the 1980's with our then five year old son, Justin, (who at this writing in April, 2005 is twenty three) we were greeted warmly by a smiling librarian, Mrs. Fuchs, who presided over the children's room and read to the children in front of the fireplace in

the old library, on top of what we, as rug people, admired as the large old Heriz carpet.

The "fireplace room" was a warm and inviting space even then. The old Heriz had a lined face that said to all, "It is safe to come sit with me." Steve Podgajny would say to us after the completion of the project that this old Heriz impacted many who came to the library over the years. He told us the story of a Brunswick resident who approached him during the Centennial festivities to talk about his childhood memories of the "fireplace room" and its importance in his life. He told Steve how he sought safe haven reading near that fire and on the old Heriz carpet. The boy felt that that the library room became the best room in an imaginary home that his family could never afford in reality. That room and that rug gave him hope that someday his life might be different, which speaks to the influence of public libraries everywhere in changing destinies.

Heriz carpets have been brought to the United States since the days of the clipper ships. They are very much "oriental rugs in the New England tradition" that have graced homes and large public



spaces since the earliest days of our country. We knew that the big elderly Heriz needed a bit of a facelift if it was going to continue to inspire future patrons and Stephen and I eagerly offered to do the restoration.

“With Steve Podgajny and the board’s approval, we began the quest for the large carpet, hoping to find a compatible hand-woven piece”

We met with Steve Podgajny shortly after the receipt of the letter and began the process of thinking through with him what was right for the space and the community, both now and for future centuries. We walked the space with Steve Podgajny and began to listen to the voice of the one hundred year old library and re-look at the face of the old Heriz in the adjacent fireplace room. The library director wondered aloud with us at this first “walk through” about maybe using simple runners along the three rows of massive reading room desks but my husband kept measuring and shaking his head.

Immediately after that visit, Steve Podgajny wrote us a letter of thanks as we were contemplating the options: “I thoroughly enjoyed our chat and have high hopes that we can move forward to create an area that will be a tremendous comfort to the people who use it. For the citizens of Brunswick, my hope is that the old library will be a public place that we all share and that will provide a special space for ‘public contemplation’.”

We promised to keep revisiting the space and that we would get back to Steve Podgajny and the library board about our recommendations. What was going through our minds looking at this very loved public space were a number of things. My husband, with his years of experience in the carpet trade, felt immediately that runners would probably be too minimalist and impractical for the size of this great room. Secondly, the carpet needed to be as warm and welcoming as the adjacent Heriz and also

be compatible with this eighty-year-old neighbor. Thirdly, we were both struck by the historic magnitude of the project for ourselves and for our town. We felt a bit daunted by the enormity of the task. Although we had designed and produced large carpets for Bowdoin College and other institutions around New England, the size and scope of this project felt different. Maybe because town and city libraries are such personal spaces for all of us, we took on the task very carefully and respectfully. Curtis Library feels like our families’ personal library, as I am sure it feels to all its patrons. Thus, the rugs had to be special.

We met with Steve Podgajny in person to give him our recommendations. My husband and I realized that the rug needed to cover the entire space under the three long reading tables in the 1904 building to provide the comfort that Steve Podgajny envisioned for the space and be visually correct for the size of the room, and mechanically correct for the large chairs at the table. The rug’s measurement would need to be approximately 19 feet by 33 feet which we also realized might be hard to find, but we had no idea how hard, until we began the search.

We also proposed providing rugs for the two “smaller” reading rooms that would need to be 12 feet by 15 feet each and another smaller piece 7 foot by 10 foot for the library’s old front door foyer.

With Steve Podgajny and the board’s approval, we began the quest for the large carpet, hoping to find a compatible hand-woven piece that we could select among ready-made new or older carpets. Unfortunately, after many trips, my husband was unable to find just the right ready-made piece in that approximate size that was compatible with the adjacent carpet and not prohibitively expensive. Oversized pieces are generally less plentiful which necessitated discussions of setting up a weaving project to weave a custom-made piece. These sizes tend to be difficult in the best of circumstances but post-September 11 our choices in the rug producing areas became fewer, the risks too large. The carpet would require a purpose-built loom and strong oversight. We kept Steve Podgajny aware of the process but still did not have a solidified plan after many months of investigation into the options.



On one of my husband's many buying trips overseas, he shared his problem with a Turkish colleague. Could this weaving project be accomplished in Turkey? Turkish weaving had declined in the last fifteen to twenty years in favor of more mass production of carpets in China and also in Pakistan where there was a huge influx of Afghan weavers fleeing the Taliban. Stephen made several trips to Turkey and he and his Turkish colleague investigated their options, traveling to several towns to find the right village that had skilled weavers, skilled dyers and a building large enough in which to weave an oversized piece. They settled on a small town in Turkey with a centuries old weaving tradition, the town of Gordes in western Turkey. From the 17th to the 19th centuries, Gordes was the center of one of the most important carpet producing areas in Anatolia. The Turkish knot is also known as the Gordes knot and has been used in all rug-producing countries for centuries. In this very old town, the techniques of hand spinning wool and creating natural dyes have been passed down from generation to generation. The earliest dated carpets show the Gordes style knot and date back to between the first and fourth centuries B.C.



Gordes, Turkey: rural village where the 19x33 ft. "Rainbow Rug" was handwoven, home of the seven women weavers. Gordes is an ancient town with a long-standing weaving tradition.

Stephen and his friend interviewed a group of seven women from Gordes who were experienced weavers. The women weavers were enthused about the prospect of working together and also working on a project of this magnitude. Historically, weaving is a very social pastime in the rural rug producing regions of the world, much as quilt making was in the early days of our country.

The weavers set the rules of how they would like to work together with an eye to the timely completion of the project and also to have time to care for their families. They decided that they would work six days a week from 7am to 12-1pm. The weavers ranged in ages from thirty-five to sixty, some of whom were related. They made a pact not to take off from work unless they had a compelling reason or there was a holiday. This assured uniformity in the weaving of such a large piece. They were as excited about the project as we were, happy to see their town, Gordes, be part of this large carpet-weaving project.



Weavers at work, tying the knots and hammering them into place.



Five of the seven women weavers in front of the large purpose-built loom for the "Rainbow Rug". You can see warp threads on which the weavers attach the knots by hand. The design template was created by Stephen Moss in a traditional "Herati" design which takes its name from "Herat", now in Afghanistan. Four leaf motifs are arranged around a flowerhead.

Stephen returned to Turkey in July of 2003 to help organize the start of the weaving. He had sketched a design that was made into a template that became the pattern that the weavers could work from. He had worked for months before, stateside, to develop the design so that it would be traditional enough to live with its neighbor, the Heriz, but with no central medallion that would be covered by the three large reading room tables. In other words, the rug needed to be a backdrop, but a dramatic one given the high ceilings and wonderful light in the room. He used a traditional Herati design but allowed room for the weavers to have input into the design as well and have the flexibility to introduce their own spontaneous motifs.

He and his colleague oversaw the wool selection, purchasing the best handspun wool from Konya, a region famous for high quality wool. Stephen specified that the carpet would be woven onto a strong cotton foundation given the wear and tear of Maine winters and the rug's public use.

They supervised the dying of the wool to achieve the colors desired. The all-natural dyes would need to be a palate that would stand the test of time and live with the patina of the old Heriz. The blues and rusts and yellows in the Heriz were the guide as were the blues in the nautical paintings in the room, the blue skies outside the windows and the backdrop of the rust and yellow autumn leaves in our wonderful New England autumns. The natural environment was also reflective in the greens chosen as an accent color.



Skeins of high quality wool from the Konya region of Turkey, handpun and naturally dyed especially for this piece.



The oversized, purpose-built loom was built in the town of Demirci, known in the rug trade as “Halikent” which literally means “rug town.” The completed loom was delivered to Gordes six weeks later on a flat bed trailer.

The loom was set up, the warps were strung and the weaving began. My husband made many trips to Turkey to oversee the project and got to know the weavers and their children well over the nine months that it took for them to weave this large carpet. He explained to them that this rug was for a library that the whole town would use, the youngest to the oldest, and that they were weaving together their history with ours. He encouraged them to tell about themselves and their town as they wove the piece.

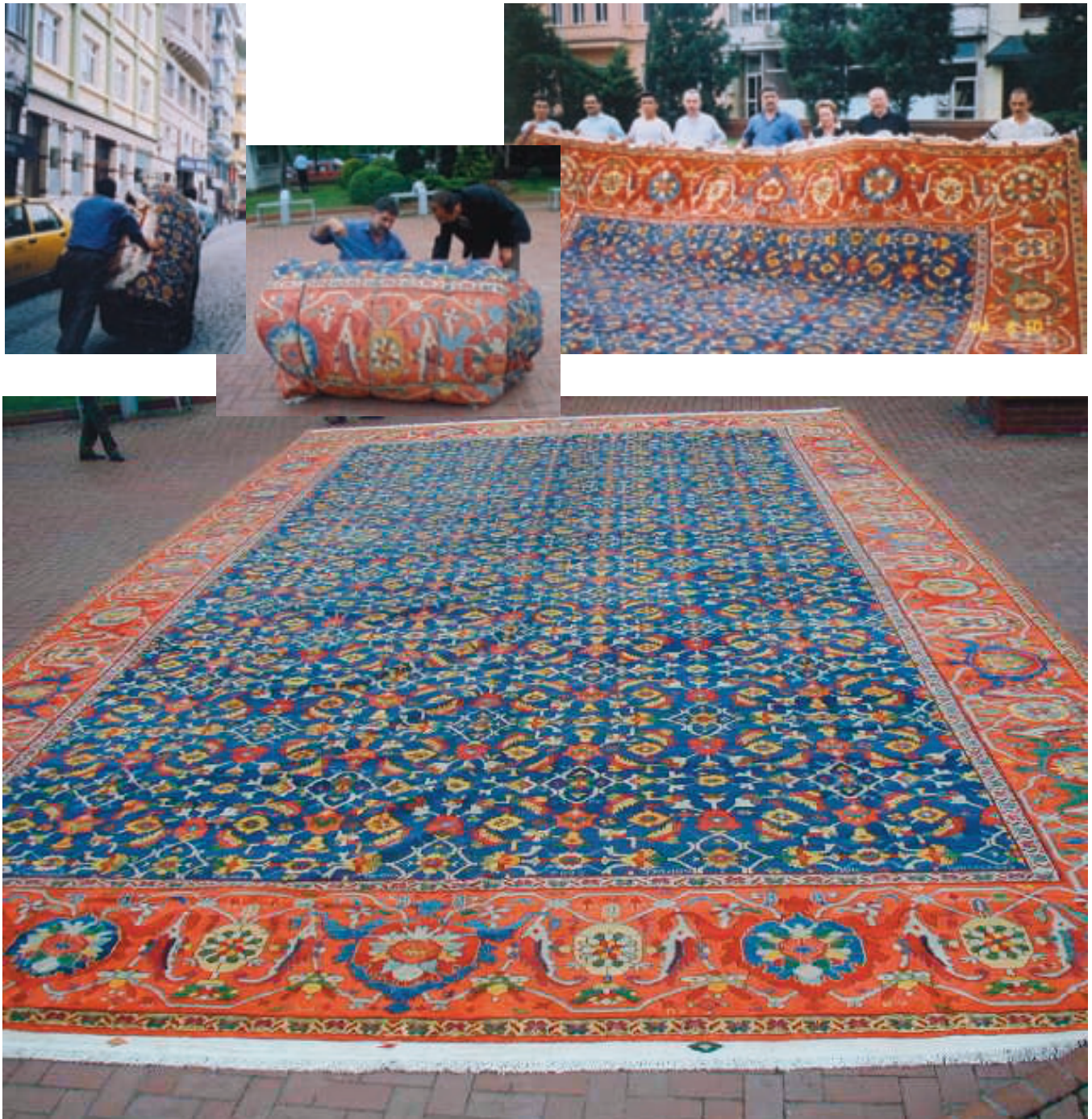
They joked with Stephen when he returned in November of 2003 to check on their progress. All was well, but the weavers confessed that they had nicknamed the rug the “Gokkusagi Hali” meaning “Rainbow Rug” because of all the saturated and beautiful natural dye colors they were using. They explained that looking at the rug was like looking at their world around them, their village, their colorful clothes, the mountains and rivers. While in Gordes, the weavers introduced Stephen to a ninety-two year-old retired woman weaver who said that this was by far the largest rug that she had ever seen, or heard of being woven in this area, in her memory. We subsequently learned that this might have been in fact one of the largest rugs if not the largest woven in Turkey in recent years.

The rug was finally cut down from the loom in the last week of May of 2004 and was taken to Konya to be washed

three to four times and sheared. It was then brought to Istanbul where Stephen and I went to see it in late June before it would be shipped to Brunswick. The piece was so large, it could only be opened in a park. Several men pushed it up an ancient lane to a small garden square in Sultanahmet, the oldest part of the ancient city, and opened it for us. We took pictures of the rug and cried from the emotion of seeing how wonderfully the project had turned out. People crowded around to marvel at its size and beauty, as did a few of the many roaming cats of Istanbul who tried to lie on the soft and comfortable wool.

The head weaver cuts the finished rug down from the loom after nine months of weaving.





The piece was so large, it could only be opened in a park. Several men pushed it up an ancient lane to a small garden square in Sultanahmet, the oldest part of the ancient city, and opened it for us.

The carpet arrived in Brunswick in September and we readied it for installation at the library along with the other large pieces we selected for the other nearby reading rooms. The day it was installed, October 12, 2004, Gary and Predrag, our employees, along with my husband, laid it down in its place with the library personnel looking on. Steve Podgajny and Stephen Moss stood together for the first time on the carpet that they had the vision to create together for this “public space.” They were, I was told, speechless.

That afternoon, my husband and I returned to the library to see it in place. I held my breath as we climbed the stairs and we held hands opening the door to the large reading room to see if this new child fit in next to its grandmother, the Heriz, and its cousins in the adjacent rooms. As we were standing quietly awestruck, a woman who was sitting comfortably at one of the large tables, the only other person in the room, saw us looking at the rug and piped up; “Have you seen how this rug makes this room come alive?” She looked up at the windows and said, “Just look out at how the colors are the same as those gorgeous autumn leaves.” We only smiled, with tears in our eyes. Did we all actually accomplish Steve Podgajny’s vision of a public space that was a “special space for public contemplation?” Like all great carpets, this one sang, and also like all great carpets, this one “reveals itself to you slowly.”

The weavers had indeed woven their world into the rug. If you look closely at the piece, you will be looking into a mirror that shows the faces of the seven women weavers. The women loved the fact that their creation was going into a place where the youngest and the oldest of our town would spend quiet “contemplative” time. You can see the wooden hair combs, the water pitchers, children, and animals just to name a few of the whimsical touches in the iconography. As important, my husband and the weavers decided together to weave all their initials as well as their nickname for the rug, the library’s name, the date of the Curtis Library Centennial and the names of the two towns. I feel it gives the rug not only a sense of time, place and permanence, weaving two worlds together, but speaks to the commonality of what on the surface would seem like disparate cultures. The “Rainbow Rug,” “Gokkusagi Hali,” will forever tie Brunswick to the millennia-old town of Gordes, Turkey.



Stephen Moss and Steve Podgajny had the vision for this public space.



Left to right: Thomas Amsler, Architect of addition to the Curtis memorial Library, Michael Jones, President of the Curtis Board of Directors, Clare Moss, Stephen Moss, Brunswick residents and owners of Araby Rug, Falmouth, Steve Podgajny, Curtis Library Director.



Clare, Stephen and Justin Moss



*Justin Moss with Phyllis Fuchs, retired
Children's room librarian.*

In the Friends of the Library newsletter, fall 2004, Steve Podgajny wrote, "It's been a long road but we always intended to develop the 1904 building as one of the great public spaces in our town with an uncommon warmth and appeal." My husband and I hope that we have contributed to that sense of "warmth and appeal" for generations to come.

Michael Jones, President of the Curtis Board of Directors, wrote to us after the dedication, "It was so much fun to meet you, to be able to thank you personally and to hear the story of the remarkable Rainbow Rug. As a product of cooperation and emblematic of diversity, it is a perfect symbol of our public library. As we celebrate our 100th anniversary, we can't help but look ahead to 100 to 200 years from now, when our descendants will read the inscription on that rug and think back to this time. That rug will dazzle many eyes for many years. It is indeed a very special gift."

At the dedication of the rugs on October 14, 2004, my husband proudly finished his talk by honoring the women weavers. He read their names to be remembered by generations of Brunswick library patrons:

Gulsum Kayhan

Gulumser Demir

Hatice Kulek

Emine Uslu

Fadime Altuntas

Gulten Cakiroglu

Hatice Cakiroglu

