



## CARPETS.

THE ORIGIN OF CARPETS IN THE EAST. — THE NATURAL REASONS FOR THEIR USE IN WARM COUNTRIES. — THE MAGICAL PROPERTIES ASCRIBED TO CARPETS IN THE EAST. — CARPETS AMONG THE EGYPTIANS. — THE PERSIAN CARPETS. — CARPETS AMONG THE GREEKS AND ROMANS. — THE INTRODUCTION OF CARPETS IN EUROPE. — HOUSES AT THE TIME OF QUEEN ELIZABETH. — CARPETS IN FRANCE. — THE FIRST CARPET IN THE UNITED STATES. — THE COMMENCEMENT OF THEIR MANUFACTURE. — ERASTUS B. BIGELOW. — THE PROBABLE FUTURE OF CARPETS.

ACCORDING to the best authorities, the manufacture and use of carpets originated in the East. It was but natural that this should be so. The domestic customs of the people, their mode of sitting or reclining upon the floor, instead, as we do, upon chairs or couches raised above it, made the necessity for some covering for the floor more apparent; and as necessity is the mother of invention, carpets, or, as we should rather call them, rugs, were always, and are still, one of the chief articles of domestic wealth in the East.

The open-air life so common to the nations of the East was also another cause for their use of carpets. Reclining as they do under the shade of trees, lying sheltered from the sun in the cool shadow of their gardens, and at the close of the day seeking the fresh evening air upon the house tops, the necessity for some texture upon which to recline must early have been met by carpets. The importance attached to the carpet in the East is shown by the stories in the *Arabian Nights*, ascribing magical powers to it. To the wonders of fairy-land it is what the railroad and telegraph are to modern science. By its time and space were annihilated, and the fortunate possessor of one of these wonderful fabrics had only to seat himself upon it and wish to be transported to any distant spot, to find himself there. In fact, the carpet plays a role in every phase of Eastern life, and it is as impossible to separate the idea

of a Persian, a Turk, or a Hindoo from his carpet, as it is to separate a Frenchman from his *café*, or an Englishman from his umbrella.

Among the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians, the use of embroidered carpets and of woven hangings was equally common, and they carried the art of their decoration to a high point of perfection, while each of these nations, as in their architecture, and all their decorative industry, displayed in the patterns of their carpets peculiarities which make the style of each of them distinct and easily recognized from every other. In Persia, from the earliest times, their carpets have been distinguished for their patterns, made by a combination of simple, bright colors, put together apparently without any definite method, and in irregular forms, but which are really arranged with an instinctive eye to harmony of effect, and so successfully managed that they have all over the East, and in Europe also, a high value.

Among the Hebrews, carpets and hangings were in frequent use. In *Exodus*, the directions given for the hangings of the tabernacle and the court "of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twilled linen wrought with needle-work," show conclusively that the art of decorating and adorning fabrics of this kind had even then reached a point of high development.

In Greece, the use of carpets as coverings for the floor is mentioned by Homer, and the web of embroidery which Penelope was engaged on every day, and unravelled every night, so as to keep the suitors for her hand at bay until the return of her faithful Ulysses, was intended to serve either as a hanging for the walls or as a covering for the couch or for the floor. At the banquets of the Greeks, and of the Romans, who obtained most of their luxuries from imitation of the Greeks, the use of splendidly embroidered coverings for the couches upon which the guests reclined was carried to a pitch of wasteful extravagance. No material was considered too precious or costly for this use. Gold, silver, and precious stones were used in profusion to decorate fabrics made of silk, of velvet, of the finest cashmere wools, or of camel's hair.

In Europe, the use of carpets is of comparatively quite recent date, and though their manufacture by the improved machinery of modern times has so cheapened their cost as to put them within the reach of many, yet they are by no means considered as indispensable an article of household necessity as they are here in the United States. In this respect, as with the ballot, and the personal responsibility of the people in the government, the United

States have made rights and luxuries universal, which in the old world are confined to the privileged classes.

The use of costly and elaborate tapestries for the decoration of the walls was common in the palaces of Europe, while the floors were either bare or covered with rushes—a kind of grass much resembling our rank meadow hay. Even as late as the time of Queen Elizabeth, the floors of the royal presence chamber were covered with rushes, and luxury in this respect was a daily renewal of this covering. This daily change of fresh straw was brought as a charge of inordinate luxury of living against Thomas á Becket. The filth which was allowed in these “good old times” to accumulate upon the floors, even in the palaces and houses of the rich, we can hardly conceive to-day. Erasmus, in his letters, speaks of the dampness and moisture thus kept in the houses, and how prevalent fevers, colds, and diseases of all kinds are made by living in such an atmosphere. The rushes, or hay, thus strewed over the floor, were often allowed to remain until they rotted, while the scraps of meat and food from the tables, the mud from the shoes, and the dust which the careful housewife of to-day removes so carefully once or twice a day, were allowed to remain until they became the actual hot-beds for disease.

It is by no means a pleasant picture which Erasmus gives of such a floor, over which the dogs fought for the scraps and bones they found, while the fleas and other insects, thus disturbed, attacked in their turn the legs of the guests. In fact, there is but little doubt that the comparative freedom of modern times from the plagues and pestilences which periodically visited the society of those days, is caused by our habits of greater personal cleanliness, and the attention given to public and private sanitary conditions.

It seems the more singular that the use of carpets should have been delayed so long in England, when we reflect that the manufacture and use of tapestry were quite general at a very early period. One of the most interesting and historically valuable pieces of the tapestry work of this early period is that known as the Bayeux tapestry, which was made in the time of William the Conqueror, under the direction of Queen Matilda, by herself and the ladies of her court. The design of this most elaborate piece of work is to represent, in various pictures, the conquest of England. This piece of work is in seventy-two divisions, is twenty inches in height, and two hundred and fourteen feet long. Each

of the divisions contains pictures of scenes illustrative of the conquest of England by the Normans, and they are singularly valuable as correct representations of the costumes and manners of the times. This tapestry is now the property of the town of Bayeux, in France.

As early as the reign of Henry VIII. an attempt was made to introduce into England the manufacture of tapestry upon a large scale. Before this date England depended chiefly for its supplies upon the Low Countries. Bruges, Antwerp, and Arras, — from which last the term *arras*, for tapestry, as used by Shakespeare, was derived, — together with Brussels, and other cities furnished the chief supplies. This first attempt was unsuccessful; but in 1609 a manufactory was established at Mortlake, in Surrey, to which James I. contributed a subscription of nearly three thousand pounds. The business, however, increased slowly, but attention began to be directed to it, and in 1757 the Society of Arts awarded a prize for the best imitation of Turkey carpets to their secretary, Mr. Moore, who had induced some Huguenot refugees from France to devote themselves to this branch of manufacture. Now England manufactures carpets which are used all over the world.

In France the manufacture of carpets was begun as early as the reign of Henry IV., but, as in England, the first attempt was not entirely successful. In 1664, Colbert, the great minister of Louis XIV., to whose personal interest France was indebted for the introduction of so many new branches of industry, established at Beauvais, an ancient town situated about forty miles north-west of Paris, a manufactory of carpets and tapestry, which is still in operation, and is still classed as second only to that of Gobelins. This manufactory, which was also established by Colbert as one of the "royal manufactories of the furniture of the crown," is still acknowledged universally to be the leader of the world in the production of carpets as objects of luxury. None of them are sold, but they are all used either for the decoration of royal palaces, or as presents to other royal houses. The weaving is all done by hand, and, as the designs are chiefly copies of famous masterpieces of painting, the work necessarily requires more artistic than simply mechanical ability for its execution, and is both costly and slow. A square yard is considered a fair result of a year's work, and the value of such a piece is about seven hundred dollars. The largest single piece of work ever made here was a

carpet for the Louvre, which measured about thirteen hundred feet in length, and was composed of seventy-two separate pieces.

In the United States, it is traditionally reported that the first carpet ever used in a private house was one found in that of Captain William Kidd, the famous pirate, who was executed in 1701. This was probably some small Eastern rug, which he had taken from some one of his prizes. From the files of New York papers of the year 1760 advertisements have been culled, showing that Scotch and other carpets had been offered for sale there by merchants engaged in importing from the mother country. Yet until after the revolution their use was very limited. The rag carpet, of strictly domestic make, and the sanded floor, satisfied the demands for comfort or fashion made by the mothers of the republic. The production, however, of rag carpets had become considerable, in order to prepare the way for the establishment, in 1791, of a carpet factory in Philadelphia by William Peter Sprague. Mr. Sprague called the products of his factory Turkey and Axminster carpets, and wove one of them, in which the design was the arms of the United States, with figures emblematical of its achievements.

In his report as Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, in 1791, recommended that the duty of five per cent. upon imported carpets should be increased by two and a half per cent., as a further protection to this branch of home industry. The census of 1810 returned nine thousand nine hundred and eighty-four yards of carpetings and coverlets as the amount of that year's production in the United States. Of this, seven thousand five hundred and one yards were made in Philadelphia, at a valuation of about a dollar a yard, and seven hundred and fifty yards in Harford County, Maryland, at some little over three dollars a yard.

Up to this time, however, the weaving of carpets, both in this country and in England, had been done entirely by hand. American invention had been turned in the direction of improving the looms in ordinary use, and before 1840 several patents had been granted for looms to weave carpets, but even then only carpets of the simplest kinds. The problem of making a power loom which should automatically perform so apparently difficult a task as to weave a two-ply web, so as to produce any required pattern, had in England been abandoned as insolvable. It was, however, solved by Mr. Erastus B. Bigelow, of Massachusetts, who also invented a loom for the manufacture of Brussels carpets. His improved

loom, by which figures were produced which would match, was patented in 1845.

By the introduction of these looms in manufactories in Massachusetts and Connecticut, carpets were so greatly cheapened as to be brought within the reach of almost every one, and would be so now were it not for the working of our tariff, which so enhances the cost of all the materials used in their production, that the business of carpet manufacture is, of necessity, nearly abandoned.

Besides carpets of wool, straw carpets, imported generally from the East, are largely used, on account of the fresh and cool air they give to a room in summer. Carpets of hemp were also introduced a few years ago, but the rapidity with which they wore out has caused their almost total abandonment. Carpets are also made of canvas painted, known as oil cloth, and an imitation of this, made of painted paper, is also largely used. The so general use of carpets was a necessity some few years ago from the fact that the floors of our houses were generally built of such poor material, and in such a shiftless manner, that the floor was too unsightly to be left exposed. Within a short time, however, with greater attention paid to the construction of our floors, having them properly laid in narrow boards, which are accurately fitted, and then stained and oiled, the carpet has become again reduced to its proper position — as a covering to the floor, instead of being a concealer of its defects. A room thus furnished, with a well-made floor, upon which a carpet with a border is laid, is kept clean so much easier, and looks so much better than one of the old style; where necessity required that the carpet should fill every corner, that there is no doubt of its general acceptance. The fashion of our carpets will then change, and no carpet will appear well unless it has a suitable border, and a pattern which is not a fragment, but complete in itself.

