



Donegal by Gavin Morton and G.K. Robertson, Circa 1900

Ref: 21337

Size: 12' 5" x 17' 7"

Content: Wool

Collection: Antique

Hand-knotted in Ireland

Donegal Carpet designed by Gavin Morton and G.K. Robertson, circa 1900.

During the nineteenth century a virtual revolution in interior design unfolded in the British Isles. The British Empire was approaching the zenith of its power. Having witnessed a marked upswing in industrial technology under the socially progressive patronage of Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert, various arts and crafts had entered a new era of mass production, making artistic and artisanal objects of every kind affordable and accessible to a much broader clientele. The dominance of classical design inherited from ancient Greece, Rome, and Renaissance Italy also now gave way to a renewed interest in medieval European art, spurred on by the publications of architects, designers, and art critics such as Augustus Pugin, Christopher Dresser, and John Ruskin.

In the domain of painting the Pre-Raphaelite movement pioneered by artists like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Byrne Jones brought about a new aesthetic sensibility that found its foremost expression in the realm of interior design with the work of William Morris. Like Pugin and Dresser, Morris reacted strongly against the industrialized, mass production of the earlier Victorian period. Stressing a romantic notion of traditional medieval hand craftsmanship, he advocated a return to a higher standard of artistic production and public taste. Morris specialized above all in textile and wallpaper design, but the 'Arts and Crafts Movement' that he spawned also produced a whole new genre of rug and carpet production in Britain, one that could now rival the great rug weaving centers that had become re-established in late nineteenth-century Persia and Turkey.

Rug production was certainly not new to Britain at this time. Already in the eighteenth century Axminster and Wilton carpets were providing a native British alternative to the rather costly and less accessible Oriental carpets of this earlier period. But Morris, inspired by the designs and theories of Pugin and Dresser, now began to produce hand-made carpets with a distinctly medieval revivalist European sensibility at a workshop near his home in Hammersmith, London. Given the enormous popularity and success that Morris achieved, his carpet and rug designs were eventually manufactured as machine-made pieces for a wider public. But the hand-made Arts and Crafts carpets of Britain remained the finest expression of this movement within the rug medium.

By the very end of the nineteenth century British designers were keen to increase such hand-made production in the most cost-effective way, and a Glasgow entrepreneur, Alexander Morton, found a viable solution when he and his family established production in County Donegal, Northwest Ireland. Labor there was far less costly than in Britain, so much so that it was possible to pay the workers many times the local wage and still maintain a more cost-effective production than in Britain. Indeed, the Donegal carpet industry represented an economic boon for the region. Local Irish women were trained not only in the weaving, but even in the art of wool spinning and dyeing with natural, vegetable materials, and relatively soon Donegal workshops were producing some of the most distinctive and imaginative Arts and Crafts carpets. In the course of time, Donegal carpet design came to be dominated by Charles Voysey, who largely continued the medieval revivalist taste and aesthetics of Morris. Some Donegal carpets even drew upon the 'carpet page' designs of medieval Irish manuscript illumination like the renowned Book of Kells. In time Donegal carpet design evolved along the lines of the British Art Nouveau style, above all of the work of the great Glasgow designer Charles Rennie Macintosh.

In contrast to the general trend of most Donegal carpets, the present example is really quite extraordinary. It is one of a very small group personally designed by a member of the Morton family itself, Gavin Morton, possibly in collaboration with a colleague, G. K. Robertson.<sup>1</sup> This group- probably represents some of the very first Donegal carpets made, at a point when the immediate goal was to compete with imported Oriental production. At first glance the design appears inspired by a classical Persian allover *Mina Khani* or trellis design of interlocking vines spewing forth large and small palmettes in alternation with curled, ruffled leaves. Both the scale and the drawing of the design recall the Sultanabad or Ziegler Mahal capets of the late nineteenth century.

Still, the particular details make it clear that Morton and Robertson were actually inspired by a Turkish prototype of this period, undoubtedly an 'Oushak' carpet from western Turkey. Late nineteenth-century Oushaks were descended in turn from the Smyrna carpets of the eighteenth century, which had adapted Persian designs to a bolder, more graphic and large-scale sensibility. Like the Oushak examples of this kind, our carpet has the main trellis and palmette pattern overlaid upon a more fine-scaled array of blossoming branching trees that derive ultimately from classical Persian garden or 'tree' carpets.<sup>2</sup> The border system too follows the Oushak model. The main border has a series of smaller palmettes like those in the field, but now linked by a double set of vines ending in smaller flowers along the exterior edge. The intervening border spaces contain the fine flowering trees like those of the field. At the four corners of the border, however, there are wholly different palmettes echoing the leafy detail of the larger palmettes in the field.

Given these clear connections with Oushak carpets it is not surprising that in 1902 one Irish art critic commented on how closely the Donegal pieces exhibited the year before in Dublin had captured the quality and design of Turkish carpets.<sup>3</sup> Yet it would be a mistake to see this and the related pieces designed by Morton and Robertson as anything like a copy of a Turkish carpet. The sureness and precision of the drawing along with bold, rectilinearity of the trellis vines offer much more of a contrast to the delicate garden trees in the background, achieving a more structured design than one ever encounters in Oushak carpets, and this is surely the work of the Donegal designers, as is the remarkable palette of this and the other pieces of the group. The coloration of the Oushak prototypes is today difficult to gauge since most have been ruthlessly antique washed for the contemporary market, although some have survived with their original colors of deep, pungent reds, greens, and blues. In contrast the Donegal pieces have a distinctly Arts and Crafts palette of warm terracottas, soft lavender, and deep olive greens, along with a pale creamy yellow, all of which contrast so beautifully with the rich medium blue of the field. And it is this, along with the perfection of the draftsmanship that makes this a masterpiece of Arts and Crafts carpet weaving rather than simply a European copy of an Oriental rug design.

This carpet is also conspicuous by virtue of its rarity. As indicated earlier, only a few Donegals like this were made at the beginning of the production, and even within the group, this one is unique. Here, unlike the other examples, the distinctive palmettes of the border corners recur in the middle of one of the lateral borders, and, interestingly, not on the opposite one, thus introducing an element of asymmetry. The causes of this are unclear and may well indicate the

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Haslam, *Arts and Crafts Carpets*, London, 1991, Figs. 62 and 65-70.

<sup>2</sup> C. Grant Ellis, *Oriental Carpets in the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, Philadelphia, 1988, no. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Haslam, *Arts and Crafts Carpets*, 102.

particular needs of the patron, who likely ordered this as a special commission. Two of the Gavin Morton Donegals with similar designs were made in 1900 for the distinguished wallpaper manufacturer Raleigh Essex for his Home Dixcot in London.<sup>4</sup> It is tempting to speculate that this one too met the special aesthetic requirements of a similarly discerning patron.

---

<sup>4</sup> Haslam, *Arts and Crafts Carpets*, 104-105, Fig. 68.