



Moroccan carpets and modern art

Aesthetic parallels between the artwork of classic modernism and the visual world of Moroccan tribal carpets have been the subject of ongoing discussion in the past few years. Contributing editor **Gebhart Blazek** takes up the thread in the context of an upcoming exhibition in Graz

In the decorative arts trade and among various authors, the question of the relationship between 20th-century Western art and the colourfully graphic Berber tribal carpets of Morocco has been debated at length—even somewhat excessively—in recent years. However, in contrast to the often very superficial attempts to take a shortcut towards establishing a direct link, German architect and collector Jürgen Adam has spent 40 years engrossed in painstaking work with the material to see whether any direct relationships or mutual influences can be found.

Professor Adam is one of the foremost collectors of Moroccan carpets of recent decades. His 2013/14 exhibition at the Pinakothek der Moderne/Neue Sammlung—The International Design Museum in Munich, ‘Moroccan Carpets and Modern Art’, achieved particular attention (see ‘Berbers in Sharp Focus’, HALI 178, pp.94-99). The eponymous

catalogue published at that time has undoubtedly been the most influential book on the subject around the world ever since.

I first met Jürgen Adam in Marrakesh in 1995 at the ICOC regional conference, where we were both appearing as speakers (see HALI 120). Our conversation highlighted his enthusiastic search for the ‘missing link’, or the evidence for a direct relationship between the work of Western artists and the seemingly modern imagery of rural Moroccan carpets.

At first glance, this relationship appears to be obvious, particularly because visual artists, architects, writers and musicians regularly visited the Maghreb throughout the 20th century to study there, think of Paul Klee, August Macke or Le Corbusier; however many stayed for longer, especially in Morocco, such as Jacques Majorelle, Paul Bowles, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Brion Gysin, Brice Marden and many others. But the further you delve into the material, the

1 Moroccan pile rug (detail), central Middle Atlas, mid 20th century. 1.70 x 2.85 m (5'7" x 9'4"). The highly unusual complex pattern is similar to examples published in 1934 by Prosper Ricard in *Corpus des Tapis Marocains*, vol.4.



2



3

Photo: Florian Schreiber

...artistic processes that come from entirely different individual viewpoints and that work with entirely different media, methods and speeds can often lead to astonishingly similar solutions

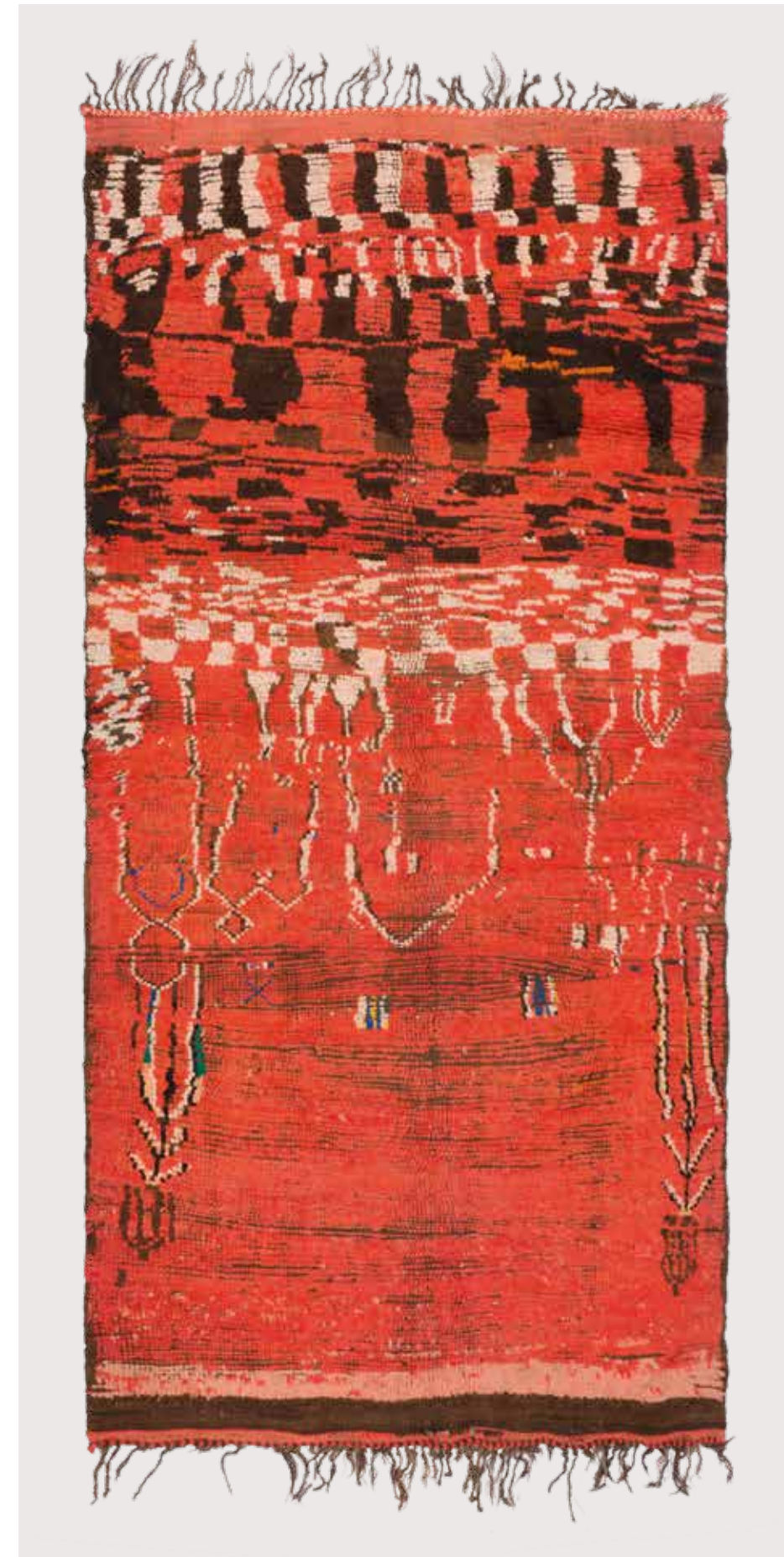
clearer it becomes that you cannot really discern any relationship just at the visual surface level. It is far more likely that such a link would be born out of the atmospheric conditions or higher-order structures.

While conducting a comprehensive classification and evaluation of the collection with Alexandra Sachs at Jürgen Adam's home in Munich in Autumn 2018, we returned again and again in our discussions to the central theme that has followed Adam for some four decades of his life as

2 Zenaga rug, southern Morocco, Jebel Siroua region or Pre-Sahara, 1960s-70s, 1.30 x 3.05 m (4'3" x 10'0")

3 Ait Sgougou or Beni Mguild rug, western Middle Atlas, 1960s-70s, 1.65 x 2.75 m (5'5" x 9'0")

4 Rug, Rehamna or Sraghna or west of Boujad in the western foothills of the Middle Atlas, mid 20th century, 1.40 x 3.05 m (4'7" x 10'0")



4

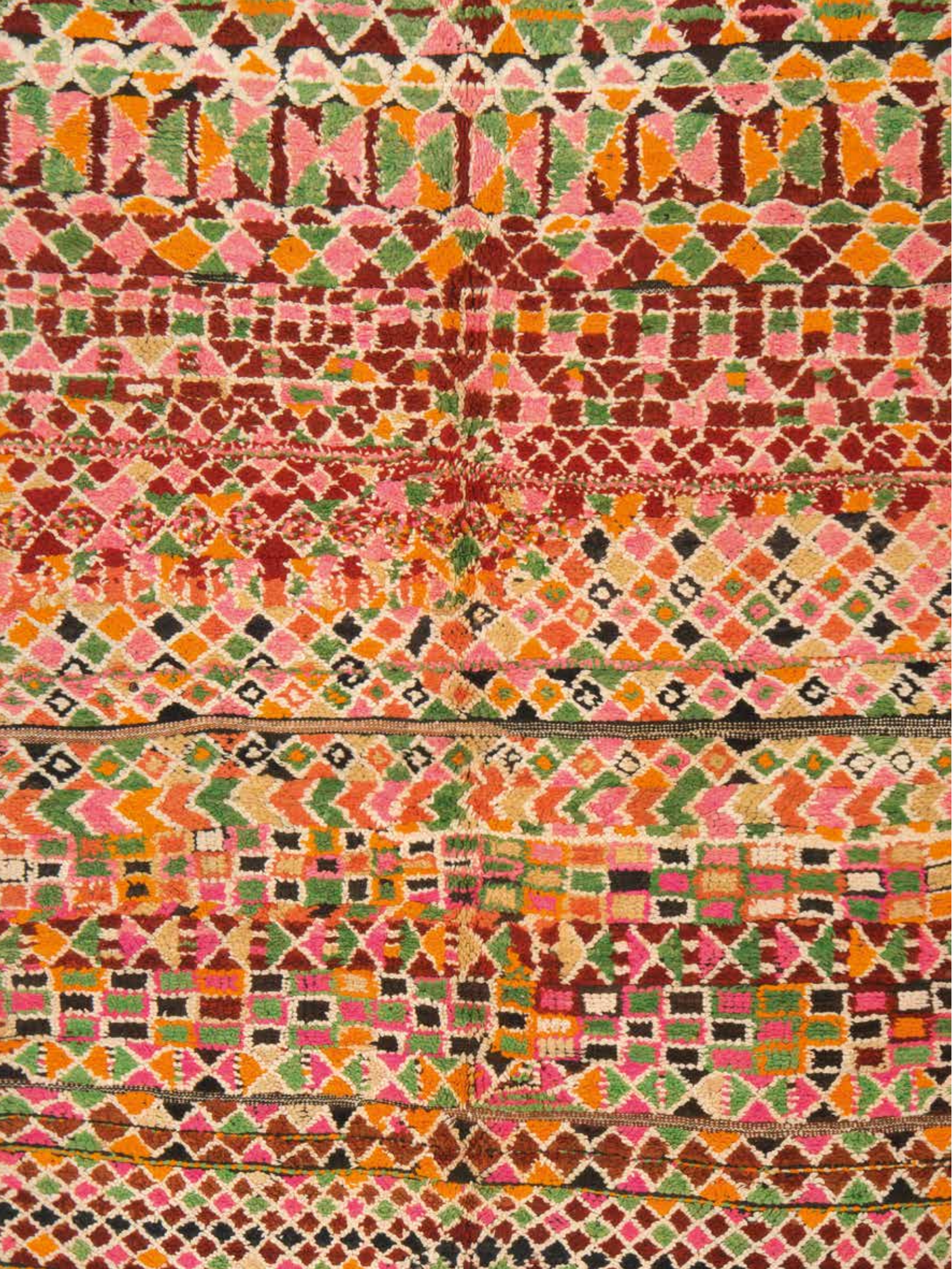
a collector—the possibility of a direct influence on Western artists of the design principles of Berber carpets. While his enthusiasm has apparently never waned, the focus of his interests has clearly shifted. His previously intensive search for a direct, formal relationship has turned into open amazement at how artistic processes that come from entirely different individual viewpoints and that work with entirely different media, methods and speeds can often lead to astonishingly similar solutions.

Among passionate collectors, the primary focus of the debate has undoubtedly come from the perspective of the aesthetics of classic modernity, as Adam presented comprehensively in the Moroccan Carpets and Modern Art catalogue. Against this background, it is understandable for him as an architect to have concentrated on the investigation of design principles, while factors such as age and regional origin were of lesser importance when judging formal issues.

But it would be wrong to limit the collection to this perspective. Adam began collecting in the 1960s and started working with the material at an early stage, so he had access to pieces that have long since disappeared from the market. They include pile carpets from Rehamna and the region surrounding the city of Boujad (4, 5), as well as a group of highly unusual pieces and a large number of monochrome carpets from the Middle Atlas (3). An astonishing number of high-quality rugs are yet to be published as they cannot be suitably integrated into Adam's catalogue classification, based on Wassily Kandinsky's 1926 manifesto Point and Line to Plane.

The Neue Sammlung acquired parts of Adam's collection around the time of the Munich exhibition in 2013, and Alexandra Sachs and I took on the task of its continued management in Autumn 2018. During the evaluation, an inventory was drawn up on the basis of the collector's guiding principles, as well as more objective criteria. Once the evaluation and systematic documentation is complete, there are plans in the near future for selected presentations, detailed publications and subsequent sales.

Following a preliminary exhibition held during Design Month Graz in 2015, Sachs has curated a selection of pieces that draws heavily on the multifaceted nature of the collection. As



6



7



8

a curator with her own artistic background, she has a powerful relationship with the collector's visual and aesthetic approach. And with her many years of experience as a dealer, she also draws on authenticity, age and rarity, as well as the cultural and historic features of the carpets' regions of origin, when composing the selection.

For the first exhibition the selection includes a unique carpet from the Zenaga people of southern Morocco with heavily modified motifs from urban Rabat carpets (2), a highly expressive piece from the Arabic-speaking areas west of the Boujad region by the Sraghna or Rehamna tribes (4), and an exceptionally complex patterned carpet from the Middle Atlas (1). The last was not included in the catalogue for reasons mentioned above, and will be displayed for the first time from 25 April to 18 May 2019 at my gallery at Leonhardstrasse 12, in Graz, Austria.

An additional presentation is planned at the HALI London festival in June 2019, while further exhibitions in Switzerland are scheduled from Autumn 2019 onwards, with the USA set to follow. ❖

5 Rug (detail), north of Boujad, western foothills of Middle Atlas, 1960s-70s, 1.65 x 2.70 m (5'5" x 8'9")

6 Azilal rug, central High Atlas, late 20th C. 1.30 x 2.35 m (4'3" x 7'7")

7 Alexandra Sachs and Professor Jürgen Adam

8 Zenaga rug (detail), Jebel Siroua region or Pre-Sahara, 1925-50, 1.25 x 1.95 m (4'1" x 6'5")

Photo: Florian Schreiber

Photo: Florian Schreiber