

This page: an early 20th-century rug shows the Beni Ouarain tribe's predilection for irregular lozenge shapes, in this case forming five vertical strings, each reminiscent of Brancusi's *Endless Column*. Opposite: a Beni Ouarain carpet in situ in a Gerrit Rietveld house in Utrecht





ROUGH WITH THE SMOOTH

Deep-pile rugs would seem to hold little sway with the sleek, hard-edged aesthetic of the Modern Movement. But with their graphic abstract patterns, the homespun creations of the Beni Ouarain tribe of Morocco indulged the underlying primitivist proclivities of all the modern masters. Jeremy Melvin explains



The rugs appear in Le Corbusier's 1926 *Maison Cook* (left) and *Villa Mairea* of 1937-39 by Alvar Aalto (below left). Below: a more recent example with concentric diamond shapes generating a strong illusion of depth. Bottom left: another modern design, with a strong horizontal line dividing it

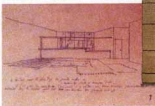


WHEN SOUAD LARUSI first met the Dutch architect Bert Rozeman, though she knew little about architecture, she noticed something familiar in his books on the great white icons of Modernism. In their illustrations of brightly lit interiors with stark forms, bare surfaces and minimal furniture, rugs with distinctive, if irregular, lozenge patterns often appeared, and she recognised them as the products of the Beni Ouarain tribe from the High Atlas mountains in her home country, Morocco. She first spotted them in interiors by the Dutch architect Gerrit Rietveld, whose Schröder House in Utrecht of 1923 offered a new vision of space and form, but they also turned up in pictures of seminal houses such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater and Alvar Aalto's Villa Mairea. One even features in a rather grainy photograph of the entrance hall to Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye.

At first sight, homespun deep-pile rugs from a traditional Berber society – in what was still, in the Thirties, a little-travelled part of north Africa – would seem to have limited appeal to crisp-suited, machine-loving Modernist architects. But underlying Modernism's slick and smooth aesthetic, a fascination for the wild and primitive often lurked just beneath the surface. Matisse had visited Morocco as early as 1911. In 1946, as his career was coming to an end, he drew a black lozenge with red dots which bears some similarities to the Beni Ouaraini designs.

Alongside a latent interest in primitivism, carpets had long enjoyed a special status in Modernist architecture. As early as 1898 Adolf Loos, arch-apostle of Minimalism, wrote, 'The architect's general task is to provide a warm and liveable space. Carpets are warm and liveable,' before covering all the surfaces of his wife's bedroom with thick fabrics. In 1932 the *Architectural Review* admitted that the rug was the only part of a truly modern decorative scheme which could be patterned, though it was left to Eileen Gray, no mean rug designer herself, to bring the interests in rugs and wildness together, claiming that rugs could 'civilise barbarity'.

The very word barbarity is said to come from Berber, the original inhabitants of north Africa who survive in pockets across the continent, among them the enclave of the Beni Ouarain and associated tribes 1,800m up in the Atlas mountains. Though Arab and Islamic influence is widespread, the more remote the tribe, the closer to traditional forms their rugs take. As one of the most remote, the Beni Ouarain have produced rugs in essentially the same way for hundreds of years. They use undyed wool, with variations in colour coming from the natural tint of black or white sheep, though, as Souad Larusi points out, the weavers do sometimes now weave in anything that comes to hand, from a piece of string to a plastic strip. Overall they could hardly look more different to the rigorous geometry of Persian carpets and their imitations from urban Morocco. Intended for bedding rather than floor covering, Beni Ouarain rugs are thick and soft. This was a point which particularly appealed to Alvar Aalto, who wrote, 'a carpet...



Some patterns are remarkably pared down (top right), while others evoke a sense of the weaver's loose structure (above). Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret incorporated one of the rugs into their designs for Villa Meyer (1925-26) in Paris (above right), and Frank Lloyd Wright sanctioned their use in his seminal Thirties house Fallingwater (right)



is not an ornamental object, but a soft area for children to play on, and possibly their parents, too.' Another attraction for Aalto and his contemporaries were the designs themselves. Just as modern architects were struggling with new conceptions of space, whereby rooms flow sensuously between inside and out past moveable screens and transparent walls, so Beni Ouarain designs often seem to run beyond the physical limits of the rugs themselves. Their jumps in pattern and scale suggest a dynamism and fluidity which chimes harmoniously with Modernist ideas of space.

The individual motifs are often as ambiguous and enigmatic as the overall patterns, but where they can be interpreted they deal with that most fundamental concern of human existence – fertility. Most common is a zigzag line in black wool woven into the white background which might represent a snake, an age-old symbol of male fertility, though placed alongside a second zigzag line they make a series of lozenges which could also stand for a female symbol. Occasionally more literal figures appear, such as animals and objects, and many rugs are believed to have prophylactic qualities against disease or the evil eye. Playing around with symbols of such basic human concerns seems to be an enjoyable way of whiling away the winter, and for the weavers, who are all women and make them for their own use, a unique opportunity to express their preoccupations.

Modernists, too, recognised such primal human concerns, though fertility was perhaps more important than warding off the evil eye. With his chaise longue in the main bathroom of the Villa Savoye, Le Corbusier was able to refer more explicitly to the sexual act, whereas the rugs only alluded to it. Other modern artists adopted similar forms for their own ends. In the various versions of his *Endless Column* – which continue seemingly beyond their physical limits – Brancusi produced a series of lozenge-like shapes uncannily similar to those on the rugs.

To Modernist architects, Beni Ouarain rugs offered a seductive balance between the familiar poles of form and function. Simultaneously exotic and enigmatic, soft and functional, they invited appropriately informal behaviour. Who could imagine parents and children romping together on a pristine Persian carpet, or a Marion Dorn design adding the 'pattern' to a carefully contrived interior ensemble? Rietveld claimed their 'delicate nuances' made buying new furniture inessential. Even Frank Lloyd Wright – who betrayed his attitude to furnishings when he told a client who complained that the roof leaked to move his chair – sanctioned their use in his greatest house, Fallingwater, where they add a trace of artifice to the living rock and waterfall. And beneath these practical and aesthetic points lurked a distant reminder that life demands more than perfectly designed interiors – something that Modernists would never admit in anything as concrete as words ■

Beni Ouarain rugs are available from Larusi Moroccan Tribal Art, priced from £500. Ring 020 7263 6596