William Moorcroft, wandering in the Himalayas early in the nineteenth century, concealed his spirit for adventure behind a sober rationale. Climbing a mountain “Because it is there,” in George Leigh-Mallory’s famous phrase, may be reason enough in the twentieth century, but to Moorcroft and his Anglo-Indian contemporaries it would have seemed an inadequate and frivolous motive. No lesser cause than England’s welfare had to be his justification.

He went to Bengal in 1808. As veterinary surgeon and superintendent of the East India Company’s military stud, Moorcroft made his first trans-Himalayan trip in 1812 to obtain some Turkman horses. Failing in this, he acquired valuable geographical data instead (he explored two sacred Hindu lakes and charted the upper courses of the rivers Indus and Setlej), and fifty mountain goats. The fleece of this species of goat, which dwelt in Tibet and Central Asia, had been exported for centuries exclusively to Kashmir, and there converted into its celebrated shawls. So fashionable had these shawls become in the West by 1800 that the English, and the French somewhat later, made efforts to imitate the Indian product. Unable to import the wool because of a Kashmiri monopoly, they tried to naturalize the goat, and Moorcroft focused on the problem his professional attention. His herd of goats embarked for England, the males on one ship, the females on another, a scheme

that proved a blunder, for the ship carrying the females was wrecked with no survivors. French experiments also resulted in failure, for the two or three hundred goats that survived the journey, sensing the difference between the Pyrenees and the Himalayas, languished and died.

Although Moorcroft was defeated in his venture, he was convinced of the advantages for India and England from further commerce with Central Asia. He wanted to provide Ladakh and Turkestan with hardware from Birmingham before enterprising Russian merchants supplied it from St. Petersburg. Although British officials were skeptical of his claims, he wrung from them a reluctant consent for another trip to Central Asia. Furnished with merchandise most likely to be in demand, his large and burdened party set out in 1819 for Bokhara, now in Uzbek S.S.R.

Moorcroft's notebooks of the six years' journey, which are preserved in the former India Office Library, now Commonwealth Relations Office, London, were summarized and published posthumously in 1841. They reveal a man of genuine respect for the people whose path he crossed and one who justly appraised their capabilities. Despite delays, neglect, and obstruction, he was sustained by the belief that he carried out a duty to king and country. Corresponding with friends in England, he advised them about local products (the Purik sheep was recommended as "an

1. “Color Zurdee Kaphooree [yellow and betel color] [No. 9]. By order of Mahummud Azeem Khan, Russia. William Moorcroft Kashmeer 1823.” 14¾ x 5½ inches. The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 62.600.235(4)

invaluable appendage to the cottage”), and sometimes included specimens of native flora: seeds of a plant called prangos for use as fodder; a tree called sarsinh (previously unknown to European botanists), which became Elaeagnus moorcroftii; rhubarb (“Some of the finest rhubarb I have ever seen,” wrote a naturalist friend, “was sent by Mr. Moorcroft from Ladakh.”).

Moorcroft had planned to travel via Yarkand, but after waiting in vain for permission from the Chinese authorities, he relinquished the route and turned toward Kashmir. He arrived there at the end of October 1822 and quartered himself for the next ten months. He examined in particular the manufacture of shawls, which was the chief industry, employing about 120,000 persons, and his earliest detailed account of the subject is quoted by all subsequent writers. Clearly he was informed on the British shawl industry. He became, in fact, obsessed with the subject. In his zeal to make British shawls supreme over all competitors, he campaigned to promote the emigration of whole families of Kashmiri shawl manufacturers to Norwich and Paisley. And, to stimulate and inspire further those English friends engaged in shawl manufacture, he commissioned a native painter to copy from executed Kashmir shawls the characteristic cone motif and sent thirty-four of these patterns to England. The only eight that appear to have survived have recently been acquired by this Museum.

According to nineteenth century Kashmiri tradition, the shawl industry was begun there during the Mughal period at the instigation of the local ruler, Zain-ul-Abdin (1420-1470), who imported Turkestan weavers for the purpose. But a sixteenth century document from the reign of the Emperor Akbar records that shawls had already been made in Kashmir before the Mughal conquest. They were at any rate a popular object of attire during the emperor’s reign and after. They were in general worn singly around the shoulders, but Akbar fancied them so much that he introduced the fashion of wearing two, stitched back to back. Esteemed as objects of value, fine examples were sent as gifts and offered as bribes. The English ambassador to the Mughal court in 1616 recorded having indignantly rejected one such offer. The sultan at Constantinople accepted in 1739 a conspicuous number of shawls among fifteen elephant loads of presents sent by Nadir Shah, the Persian invader of India. Moorcroft himself, on his departure from the court of Ranjit Sinh, the Sikh ruler of Kashmir, was presented with some of these valuable goods.

As no examples from before the end of the seventeenth century survive, the origin of Kashmir shawl weaving cannot be resolved. But the tradition that credits Turkestan weavers with the introduction of the craft into Kashmir is supported by the fact that the shawl-weaving technique has parallels with Persian and Central Asian weaving but is unlike that of India proper. Called in the West the twill-tapestry technique, it consists of weaving the weft threads, which form the pattern, around the warps only where each particular color is required by the design. The weft is passed alternately over two and under two warps. To eliminate the line of holes at the corner margins, the adjacent wefts are interlocked. The borders, or heads, of a shawl were woven separately from the large, plain center field, then sewed together and bound by narrow side borders usually woven of silk. When especially intricate patterns were on the loom, a weaver could be occupied with the production of a single shawl for a year and a half. Early in the nineteenth century, in the interests of economy, the practice was introduced of weaving the end borders in frag-


ments on several looms. Pieces as small as twelve inches long and half an inch wide were woven individually, and stitched together in an overall pattern to form a patchwork shawl. Whether the large patterned border was a patchwork or woven in one piece, an embroiderer repaired defects in weaving and sharpened details by outlining forms with threads of silk or wool.

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the end borders of shawls were comparatively shallow, but suddenly they became enlarged, kept expanding, and, after 1850, consumed the center field.

Shawls constituted Kashmir’s chief source of revenue, and Moorcroft recorded that they were sold to merchants from Turkey, Armenia, Persia, Afghanistan, Uzbek, and Chinese Turkestan, as well as India and Europe. Middle Eastern, Asian, and European agents in fact commissioned shawls that differed in quality and pattern to conform with the differing tastes of the markets for which they were intended. Owing to a decline in the fortunes of Indian courts due to the English, and to other unfavorable political circumstances, trade with India, Persia, and Turkey had fallen off, but because of the expanding demands of Russia, trade with Turkestan was increasing. Russia imported more than two million rubles worth of Turkish and Kashmir shawls in 1825–1826.

The Kashmir shawl was presumably introduced into England about the middle of the eighteenth century by Anglo-Indians returning from the East. Quickly becoming an article of high fashion, it remained prohibitively expensive until the English decided to produce a domestic copy. Norwich in 1803 was the pioneer European center of shawl weaving in imitation of Kashmir patterns, and remained in the lead for the next twenty-five years. The earliest exact imitations of Kashmir shawls, however, came from Edinburgh, where the weavers sought to duplicate both the Kashmir’s texture and style, employing a brocading method similar to the twill-tapestry technique.

Paisley gradually eclipsed both Edinburgh and Norwich. In 1812, in Paisley, a device that allowed five shuttles to be held on the loom
simultaneously was introduced, which greatly facilitated the weaving of multicolored designs. To ensure that the latest Indian designs reached Paisley first, agents in London copied shawls as soon as a ship arrived from the East, and promptly sent the drawings on to Scotland. Paisley also pirated successful Norwich patterns, and by 1830 Norwich was beginning to suffer from the competition. Paisley gave Norwich its *coup de grâce* by being the first to adopt the most important of all technical advances, the French-invented Jacquard loom, which, while permitting very elaborate patterns, greatly simplified the weaver’s task. When Paisley took over the French machine, it began to look to France for models of shawl designs as well. From the 1840s, Parisian pattern books instead of genuine Kashmir shawls governed the English styles.

Original Kashmir designs were still the inspiration, however, when Moorcroft sent his thirty-four drawings to England. The surviving eight are painted on paper in brilliant colored gouache, and varnished. Each is somewhat over a foot long and about six inches across, and show a stylized cone set in a field. All are signed on the verso “William Moorcroft, Kashmeer, 1823,” numbered, inscribed with the color of the ground in Kashmiri vernacular, and, on all but two, with the name and country of the person who commissioned the original shawl. Several of the inscriptions are partly illegible, but can be reconstructed from a memorandum among Moorcroft’s papers in the Commonwealth Relations Office. Three of the eight shawls had been made for the Russian market, three for the Persian, and two for India proper. The designs for Persia, of which Color Plate 1 is an example, have in common the lyrical linear emphasis of Persian miniature painting, and contrast with the fat, more naturalistically painted flower bunches of the Indian cones (Color Plate 2), and differ yet from the Russian patterns, which have highly stylized flower and leaf motifs (Figure 1).

Kashmiri dyers professed to be able to dye shawl wool sixty-four tints. The ground color Moorcroft has indicated for Color Plate 1 is *mooshkee*, i.e., elephant color; for Color Plate

2, gooleeanar, or pomegranate; for Figure 1, zurdee kaphooree, or yellow and betel color. Figure 5, another of the Russian patterns, on a ground of zunga (green), is dense with flowers, leaves, and coral-like stems all seemingly in scarlet, yet shapes of black, blue, violet, white, and ochre are so harmoniously integrated as to enrich the design without obtruding their form. It is perhaps this pattern that inspired the simpler Norwich shawl of about 1835 (Figure 4).

All three of the Russian designs were presumably made for a man named Mahummud Azeem Khan (all but the “Khan” is torn off on the third). Two of the Persian designs were for a Shah Zuman; the third inscription is illegible. No names are given on the Indian patterns.

These exquisite paintings are more highly finished than the preparatory drawings that formed the basis for actual weaving. In Kashmir, preparatory drawings, made by the pattern drawer—the most important and highly paid of all the shawl industry craftsmen—were usually in black and white outline and were rarely colored. The choice and distribution of the colors was generally left to another specialist, the color caller, who called out each color and the number of warps along which it was to extend. His directions were taken down in shorthand for the use of the weavers.

In England, by contrast, colored designs such as Moorcroft’s would probably have been translated to graph paper for the guidance of the weaver. Each square would represent the point at which a weft and a warp thread crossed. As there might be 150,000 weft threads in one shawl, the graph paper often covered the floor space of a good-sized room.

The so-called cone shape, the characteristic motif of Kashmir shawls, was influenced in all stages of its evolution, except in its decadence, by Persian design. The first type, seen in the earliest surviving shawl fragments, which date from the end of the seventeenth century, con-
sists of a naturalistically drawn plant with roots. After 1700, the plant acquires more flowers, and, often retaining its roots, is placed in a vase. In the course of the century, the sprawling flowers begin to contract their stems and the bouquet takes on the formal shape that becomes known as the cone. Only then does the cone begin to look like the slender cypress tree, its tip bending in the wind, with a flowering almond in front of it, which is frequently proffered as the derivation of the motif. In the final stage of development, stems and flowers are transformed into an elongated, serpentine abstraction.

The decade between 1850 and 1860 was the final prosperous one for the Kashmir shawl industry. The quality of the shawls declined thereafter, and could not compete with the superior Lyons and Paisley products. The Franco-Prussian War cut off the remaining French imports from Kashmir. But most important of all, fashionable taste was glutted with the Kashmir shawl, and it swiftly fell from favor.

Alas, poor Moorcroft never saw his schemes for the British shawl industry mature, for he perished in 1825 shortly after reaching Bokhara and turning for home. His was a luckless fate. His other projects disintegrated. He had ardor and dogged perseverance but lacked the qualities of a legend.

NOTE

I would like to thank Jean E. Mailey for so generously putting at my disposal her accumulated data on the subject of Kashmir shawls. John Irwin’s book Shawls, published by the Victoria and Albert Museum (London, 1953), was an invaluable reference. A summary of Moorcroft’s journals was published as Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Panjab; in Ladakh and Kashmir; . . . by Mr. William Moorcroft and Mr. William Trebeck, from 1819 to 1825 (London, 1841), 2 volumes.