

Persian Rug & Carpet

The Precious Beautiful Handicraft

Introduction & History:

According to an internet survey: "Carpets were probably first made by nomadic peoples to cover the earthen floor in their tents."

It is quite possible that many peoples, none of whom were in contact with each other, began to make carpets at about the same time. We can be sure however, that by the fifth century BC carpet making had

reached a high artistic level. Throughout history Iran has remained the epicenter of the carpet making craft, where it has developed into an art form.

When Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 BC, he was struck by its splendor, and it was probably he who introduced the art of carpet making into Persia. It is said that the

tomb of Cyrus, who buried at Pasargadae (Persepolis), was covered with precious carpets. Even before his time, it is very likely that Persian nomads knew about the use of Knotted carpets. Their herds of sheep and goats provided them with high quality and durable wool for this purpose.

The first documented evidence on the existence of car-

pets came from Chinese texts dating back to the Sassanid Dynasty (AD 224 - 641). In AD 628, the Emperor Heraclius brought back a variety of carpets from the conquest of Ctesiphon, the Sassanid's capital.

The Arabs also conquered Ctesiphon in 637, and among the spoils brought back were said to be many carpets, one of which was the famous garden carpet, the «Spring time of Khosrow». This carpet has passed into history as the most precious of all time. Made during the reign of Khosrow I (531 - 579) the carpet was 90 square Feet. The Arab historians' description is as follows: «The border was a magnificent flower bed of blue, red, white, yellow and green stones; in the background the color of the earth was imitated with gold; clear stones like crystals gave the illusion of water; the plants were in silk and the fruits were formed by color stones» However, the Arabs cut this magnificent carpet into many pieces, which were then sold separately.

After the period of domination by the Arab Caliphates, a Turkish tribe, named after their founder, Seljuq conquered Persia. Their domination (1038 - 1194) was of great importance in the history of Persian carpets. The Seljuq women were skilful carpet



makers using Turkish knots. In the provinces of Azerbaijan and Hamadan where Seljuk influence was strongest and longest, the Turkish knot is used to this day.

The Mongol conquest and control of Persia (1220 - 1449) was initially brutal. However, they soon came under the influence of the Persians. The palace of Tabriz, belonging to the Ilkhan leader, Chazzan Khan (1295 - 1304) had paved floors covered with precious carpets. The Mongol ruler Shah Rokh (1409 - 1446) contributed to the reconstruction of much that was destroyed by the Mongols and encouraged all the artistic activities of the region. However, the carpets in this period were decorated with simple motifs, which were mainly geometric in style.

Perhaps the most important time in the history of Persian carpets came with the accession to power of the Safavid dynasty (1499 - 1722). Indeed the first concrete proofs of this craft date back to this period. Approximately 1500 examples are preserved in various museums and in private collections world-wide. During the reign of Shah Abbas (1571 - 1629), commerce and crafts prospered in Persia. Shah Abbas encouraged contacts and trade with Europe and transformed his new capital Isfahan, into one of the most glorious cities of Persia. He also created a court workshop for carpets where skilled designers and craftsmen set to work to create splendid specimens. Most of these carpets were made of silk, with gold and silver threads adding even more embellishment.

The court period of the Persian carpet ended with the Afghan invasion in 1722. The Afghans destroyed Isfahan, yet their domination lasted for only a short period and in 1736, a young Chieftain from Khorassan, Nader Khan became the Shah of Persia. Through the whole course of his reign, all the country's forces were utilized in campaigns against the Afghans, the Turks, and the Russians. During this period, and for several turbulent years after his death in 1747,



no carpets of any great value were made, and the tradition of this craft was continued solely by nomads, and craftsmen in small villages.

In the last quarter of the 19th Century and during the reign of the Qajar rulers trade and craftsmanship regained their importance. Carpet making

flourished once more with Tabriz merchants exporting carpets to Europe through Istanbul. At the end of the 19th Century some European and American companies even set up businesses in Persia and organized craft production destined for western markets.

Today, Carpet weaving is by

far the most widespread handicraft in Iran; it is also the best-known one abroad. Persian carpets are renowned for their richness of color, variety of patterns and quality of design.

Persian rug & Carpet:

How to tell a genuine Persian carpet from a run-of-the-mill rug? Experts examine the merits of various types of the products of the fine art of weaving Persian carpets from the slopes of Zagros Mountains to the land of Turkman tribeswomen.

Iran is the world's leading carpet producer. Persian carpets are in great demand everywhere across the world in spite of the existing challenges in the global carpet market.

Five basic factors, namely pile material and construction, design and color composition, border design and foundation threads, determine the quality of a carpet while characteristic such as the size of the carpet and its knot density are also among the factors that determine a carpet's value,

Wool, silk, goat hair, jute or camel hair may be used as pile material, but a good wool carpet will far outlast one made from the other materials. However, silk carpets are very desirable owing to their light weight and dense pile con-

struction which often exceeds 1000, knots per square inch.

The last Persian carpets which manifest the highly developed artistic craftsmanship of the Iranian people are usually woven in Tabriz, Isfahan, Keshan, Nain, Qom, Mashhad, Kerman, Arak (Sarough), Hamadan and Turkman Sahara; while the art of carpet widely appreciated and practiced in almost every other part of the country.

Tabriz

Carpets sold in the Tabriz market can be subdivided into five categories and each will be discussed individually. Tabriz carpets exhibit a short pile, the Turkish knot,



and a cotton warp and weft. The newer rugs are larger, generally 7x10 ft., and feature the symmetrical design of set, angular, mechanical patterns which have little appeal to the western buyer.

The modern Ardebil rug comes from the Tabriz district. A cotton warp and a wool nap are characteristic of these rugs which are woven in a medium dense pile of average thick-



ness. The standard sizes are 2x4 ft. to 5x9 ft. These carpets are characterized by a geometric design with a red or ivory field which is comparable to the old Caucasian designs.

The Sarab rug has a thick, tightly woven pile, and more often than not is constructed of camel hair and comes mainly in runner sizes up to 3x4 ft. usually the natural camel hair provides the color for making the eight-sided Caucasian designs common to these rugs.

The Herez is the last carpet included in this group and is woven in several sizes including a 9x12 ft. Wool quality is good, and the pile is of average thickness and density. A geometric design is utilized in a field of various shades of red. Occasionally a stiff, angular floral design surrounding a large blue medallion with blue borders is woven in Heriss.

Isfahan

Modern Isfahan carpets along with Nain's are probably the best woven and most expensive modern rugs produced in Iran today. They exhibit a short dense pile with knots often exceeding 600 per square

inch.

These rugs usually have a cotton warp but lately a silk warp has begun replacing cotton. The newer Isfahan's with a silk warp are much improved over earlier types. Almost without exception, Isfahan carpets have an intricate sweeping floral design. The tendrils and stem bursts from an arabesque around a center medallion. Isfahan rugs range in size from 3x5 ft. to 11x16 ft. and the light background generally exhibits pleasing pastel shades mixed with mild tones of red and blue.

Qom

Some of the finest modern rugs in Iran are currently be in Dark background. A center medallion, woven in Qom. Most of these rugs have a medium to thin pile thickness and an average knot density exceeding 300 knots per square inch. Qom carpets are woven in sizes ranging from 4x7 ft. to 7x10 ft. and exhibit the Persian knot. Usually the carpets have a cotton warp, but some modern superior quality Qoms have silk warp threads.

Modern Qom carpets feature traditional floral sprays in a contrasting overall paisley design, and set square patterns are the other characteristic peculiar to Qoms.

Due to their dense construc-

tion, high quality materials, and excellent workmanship, Qum carpets sell for higher than average prices.

Kashan

Kashan carpets utilize the Persian knot and exhibit a short, velvet-like pile woven of the finest wool. These carpets come in medium and large sizes. The average Kashan is woven with Shah Abbas rosettes or an attractive center medallion encased in an intricate floral design surrounded by a red field. Recently – made Kashan display a center medallion in an open red field with delicate scrolls in the border. However, some appear without a center medallion.

Mashhad

Mashhad carpets are medium to heavy in pile thickness and weft threads of cotton. They exhibit the Persian knot and are unique in that more often than not they are woven in square sizes. Mashhad carpets are embellished with soft pastel shades employing a large intricate floral design outside the center medallion. Although the principal field colors are shades of red, sometimes blue is interspersed for contrast.

Mashhad has long been popular in export trade due to their reasonable prices and mellow colors.

Kerman

Kerman carpets, due to their desirable design and reasonable prices, are some of most popular rugs exported from Iran.

They are tied with Persian knots, usually have warp and weft threads of cotton, and appear in sizes ranging from 2x3 ft. to 11x14 ft. Kerman's are of medium density and possess a heavy nap.

The colors employed in Kerman medallions are usually light pastel shades in an open field of ivory, cream, or blue. The large center design stands out as a paramount feature. These Oriental carpets have a distinct border design which is characterized by the border and filed design flowing together.

Shiraz

Shiraz carpets occur in many designs and qualities as well as pile densities. The number of



knots can vary from 40 to 300 per square inch. Shiraz carpets are made outside the city on village smaller sizes, 3x5 ft., 4x6 ft., 5x7 ft.

A distinguishing feature of the Shiraz carpet is the traditional rectangular Caucasian design. A pear or paisley pattern surrounded by a checkerboard design within the border is typical of the modern Shiraz. These carpets are easily recognized by their wool warp, geometric pattern, and stiff back.

Hamadan

Saraband. The Hamadans are by far the most important and deserve the initial discussion. These carpets are tied with a Turkish knot and the warp and weft threads can be cotton, wool, or camel's hair. A large percentage of Hamadan rugs are woven in runner sizes ranging from 2x6 ft. to 3x 10 ft. They exhibit thick to heavy pile construction, coarse wool, and a density not exceeding 225 knots per square inch. The use of the geometric and Herati design in a field of red circumscribed by borders of angular vines and paisleys is typical of Hamadan carpets. Carpets woven in Hamadan can be subdivided into Hamadan and

Sarough

Prior to 1960 most Sarough carpets bore a traditional floral pattern inscribed in a red field flanked by floral arrangements

in the border. These rugs were woven with a medium dense pile consisting of 100 to 225 knots per square inch. Most of the modern Sarouk weavers concentrate on all-over design which eliminates the significance of a center medallion. These newer Sarouhs are available in a dense nap, which results in a finer carpet with a shorter pile thickness.

Sarouh carpets come in all sizes, but 41/2x61/2 ft. are the most prevalent. The foundation threads of the carpet are either cotton or wool and the pile is tied with the Persian knot.

Sultanabad carpets, also woven in the Sarouh district, are generally large, coarsely woven, have a medium thick pile, and are considered durable.

Nain

Nain carpets have an old history. Today they approach Isfahan rugs in quality and price. Medium sizes are the most common. The quality carpets have a cotton warp tied in a thick pile exceeding 600 knots per square inch. Generally, Naiins have good to superior quality wool, a short nap, and more than 350 knots per square inch.

These carpets utilize the Shah Abbas design in a field of ornate flowers, flowing vine tendrils, and short stems. Usually the background is a light

cream, beige, or dark blue which accentuates the intricate final sprays. Numerous bright shades are used for the floral



arrangements, often cordoned in red and blue spray borders.

Turkaman Carpets

Of all Oriental carpets produced today, none are as strict in conformity of pattern as the Turkaman carpets. The rugs are tied with Persian knots, the foundation threads are wool or goat's hair, and the pile varies from medium to thick. They exhibit a medium knot density not exceeding 300 knots per square inch.

The major design characteristic of a Turkaman carpet is an emblem called a «gul» or elephant's foot which can be either a four-, six-, or eight-sided polygon.

Red and black are the predominant colors. Different shades of red are dispersed within the «gols» while thin black or white lines are utilized to highlight the polygons. Natural dyes are still used in these areas. The red dyes come from

the madder plant and the blue dyes from tree bark.

Klardasht

These carpets are rather unusual, but very well-known from several antique paintings. The village, Klardasht, is situated in the north of Iran, south of the Caspian Sea, near the Alborz mountains and is one of most famous summer resorts area of Iran.

The motifs on these carpets normally consists of a hexagon surrounded by white primitive lines and sometimes even a scarab in the middle. On the central part of the carpet, and on the border, there are decorative figures of more simple types together with flowers. The background colors are often brick red with dark blue and brown as dominating colors. The pile is made of thick, soft wool; the warp of cotton and the knots is Turkish. The carpets are very durable and very long-lasting.

The quality of these carpets varies, before 1960 they were very good. Between 1965-1980 the quality sank when western collectors forced the weavers to modify their patterns and colours. After the revolution in 1979 the quality began to be better and today the quality is the same as it used to be in the olden days, both when it comes to design and colours.