

A Quick Reference Guide to Buying Oriental Rugs



Sources: *GoodWeave.org, 2012; Wall Street Journal, 2010.*

General Considerations

While some irregularity is part and parcel of being hand-made, a good rug lies flat and straight on the floor and is reasonably regular in its shape. It has lively, lustrous wool or fiber. Its colors are in balance, having neither faded nor bled. It has been intelligently “finished” so that it is not washed out, unnaturally shiny, or unpleasantly bright and harsh. Above all, the rug has a certain sophisticated quality, an *elan* that speaks of its having been designed and woven by skilled artisans.

How to Find a Quality Rug

Perhaps the single most important step in buying a good rug is to find a rug dealer you can trust. The best rug dealers are born educators who love to share their knowledge with you and guide you without bullying. They will encourage you to take rugs home on approval without obligation. They are very concerned about child labor in the rug industry and carefully avoid rugs made under suspect conditions. Trust yourself. If you feel uncomfortable with a dealer, move on.

Do Prep Work

First, measure the area the rug will cover. Remember, you should probably have a border of flooring all the way around the rug. Allow for a range of sizes; the greater the range, the more choices you will have. Consider whether you prefer traditional rugs or those with contemporary designs. To guide your decision, one option is to retain an interior designer. Designers can be wonderful allies in finding the right rugs. But remember, their focus is likely to be on “the look.” The rug dealer’s focus will be on quality. Yours will be on what you like. Listen to all, but mostly to yourself.

Buy Rugs Made By Adult Artisans

The rugs most likely to have been made from child labor are the cheapest Indian, Nepalese and Afghan rugs. Rugs of exceptional quality are the least likely to have been made with child labor.

Are Finely Knotted Rugs Better?

Rugs are available in myriad densities, typically ranging from up to 30 knots per inch (very coarse) to 290 knots per inch (very fine). Finely knotted or finely woven rugs are usually the most desirable. Curved lines in a rug’s design can be “drawn” more smoothly and gracefully in a rug with many knots per square inch, just as a lot of pixels in a television screen allow for more natural looking lines. And rugs that are very

finely knotted have such dense surfaces that light is attractively reflected from them.

Modern or Traditional?

If you’re interested in traditional Persian or Tribal rug designs, you may consider purchasing an antique rug through a respected dealer. You may also find new rugs that look old, at a lower price. Contemporary designs are widely available, many of which have been adapted from old techniques and styles.

Hand-Knotted, Hand-Tufted or Flat-Weave?

Hand-knotted rugs tend to be higher in quality because of the intensive labor required. Hand-tufted rugs, which involve stenciling a pattern on the backing of the rug and then threading yarns into the design, are less expensive. Flat-weave rugs are also less expensive because they require less labor.

Natural or Synthetic Dyes?

In antique rugs, natural dyes are more desirable than synthetic. Natural dyes add roughly 30 percent to the cost of a rug, but they also add to its charm and its value. However, the synthetic dyes used today are available in an infinite array of colors and shades and hold their color well over time. It is impossible without expensive laboratory analysis to be certain.

Hand-Spun or Machine-Spun Wool?

Though some prefer the uniformity of machine-spun wool, most collectors and connoisseurs value the effect produced by hand-spun wool. When spun by hand, yarn absorbs more dye where it is loosely spun and less dye where it is spun tightly, thus producing pleasant variegation in the colors of a rug.

Can You Judge Quality by Height of the Pile?

Inexperienced rug buyers sometimes mistake a thick pile for quality. In fact, the finest rugs often are the thinnest. Still, if a rug is going to take significant traffic, it should have plenty of body.

Buying Oriental Rugs: Quick Tips from the Wall Street Journal

AGE

The older the rug, the higher the value is the general rule of thumb. Like a favorite T-shirt, antique rugs get more malleable over time. The corners of rugs hand-woven in Turkey, Iran and Central Asia a century ago or more tend to “flop around” more readily than newer, machine-made models, says Kurt Munkacsi, an expert on tribal rugs. When shopping, grab a corner and see how easily it bends.

COLOR

The key factor in determining a rug’s value is whether it’s made with natural dyes or synthetic ones. Collectors who might pay \$12,000 for a rug colored with dyes from mashed vegetables and insects won’t pay more than \$200 for the same style dyed with chemicals that more easily fade, Mr. Munkacsi says. Make sure the rug’s surface isn’t lighter than its roots—“tip fading” is a telltale sign the dye isn’t natural.

CONDITION

Ancient weavers primarily used wool, so pricier rugs tend to boast lustrous, silky fibers pulled from well-fed breeds like the fat-tail sheep. Mughals sheared pashmina goats, and camel hair was popular among desert tribes. Run your hand over the carpet to check the evenness of the carpet’s pile. Lumpy sections or bald patches will hurt its value: “I walk on my rugs, but only in slippers—no leather shoes allowed,” Mr. Munkacsi says.

WEAVE

Retail rug salesmen may revel in their rugs’ high knot counts, boasting of 1,200 knots in a single inch, but ancient weavers weren’t so particular. Some Caucasian rugs only have 50 knots per square inch, and 400 knots is a common figure. This Kurdish Bidjar rug has around 80 knots per square inch. Rather than focusing on knot count, novice buyers should instead inspect the rug’s design for crisp lines with no blurring. Quirky design inconsistencies also give tribal rugs their folk-art appeal.

IMAGERY

The symbols woven into antique rugs offer clues to the pieces’ origins and rarity. The fan-tailed peacock pictured below was the signature design of the Akstafa, a single group of Kazak weavers living southwest of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Common symbols include stars and medallion shapes, often representing heaven and earth; flowering vases and seed pods symbolize prosperity. “Every region had its own weaving language, so the rug’s design is actually recording its history,” says Mr. Munkacsi.

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