

TAKING THE MAGIC OUT OF CARPETS



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Jalil Hossein Zadeh is the leading expert on Iranian carpets in the Gulf. He puts his decades of experience in perspective thus: "Instead of joining my uncle Ali Asghar in the family carpet business when I was fifteen, if I had joined the army, worked as hard and gained as much knowledge, I would have retired as a general." In the coming weeks, with 'general' Jalil, and his son Dawood's help, we shall be taking you on a magic carpet ride of the world's most precious carpets. Meeting along the way the good, the bad and the downright ugly people who trade in them. The fledgling collector can learn how to tell one carpet from another, how to tell good from bad, and more importantly, know how much they should pay for them

by Joan Van der Merwe
Pictures by Abdul Rahman

Today," says Dawood Hossein Zadeh, "Iranian carpets are within the reach of so many more people, it is a buyers' market for several reasons. First, the exchange rate for Iranian currency is very favourable for those in the Gulf who have dirhams or dollars.

"The US put an embargo on trade with Iran in 1987, and this still has not been lifted, so there has been a vast market loss here, but the current economic climate in the U.S. shows an easing of sanctions, and there is a big market out there just waiting.

"Because of recession in Europe and Japan, less carpets are being made, which means that when the demand gets back to normal there will be a shortage. So those who buy now will benefit from all these factors. In fact the serious buyers at this time are the brokers."

So now is a good time for us to buy our magic carpet, but for the first time buyer, the road to that dream rug seems beset with potholes. If we do decide to invest in a rug, I asked Jalil and Dawood, where can we begin?

"You start by looking. Then looking and looking again, and always look at the best, that is how you learn. In a society like Iran for instance, your relationship with the dealer will have been built up through generations, carpets bought for weddings, carpets bought for the new babies, a mutual trust is there. If a dealer loses his reputation his business is finished.

If you are serious about collecting rugs, you will must find your own special dealer, and eventually he will help you become your own expert. I have seen so many people come to this part of the world, and over the years gain great knowledge, but this takes time. There are some excellent books to help you." (Next week we shall publish a list of books Dawood has recommended).

"A reputable dealer is interested in making a profit of course, that is his living. But if he is wise, he knows that a customer who builds up a trust over time, goes on buying carpets from him, so he will look after their interest as well as his own, he has to if he wants to keep his place in the market.

"If you know someone who is a serious collector, ask them to recommend a reputable dealer, then visit the showrooms, and just keep looking, ask the price. Don't be

nervous or intimidated, a good salesman, even if he does not speak great English, will show you the carpets, and tell you what they are. He knows that if you keep coming back to look at the carpets eventually you will buy.

"Never buy with the company flat in mind, your carpet will be with you longer than the flat, and never go looking for a rug to match your colour scheme, or any other changeable factors. You must buy the rug for its own beauty and the pleasure it gives you. Once you start to collect, you will be matching your interior to the carpets.

There are four main factors to check when you buy a carpet.

- Design. The delicacy and intricacy of the pattern.
- Colour. The fastness of the dye, the balance of the colour, avoid the very pale, they may have been bleached to make them look older. Avoid very strong colours, they will almost certainly 'bleed'.
- The material, the silk and the wool. Today some of the silk yarn the carpets are made from, has been mixed with synthetics, it is hard to detect, and again we come back to

trusting your dealer.

- The number of knots. The more knots to the square centimetre the finer the carpet. Learn to judge the number of knots for yourself by turning the carpet over, fixing a sq. cm. in your mind then counting the knots across and down, multiply those two figures and you have the number of knots for the sq.cm. You will soon learn. Get a knack of it.

While you have the carpet turned over, check the workmanship on the back of the rug, there should be no loose knots. ➔



Top: Jalil Hossein Zadeh, with a pictorial carpet from Tabriz

Above: How to count the knots? Using a standard square, count the knots at the side then at the bottom and multiply the two. This will give knots per sq cm



A simple price guideline for first time buyers

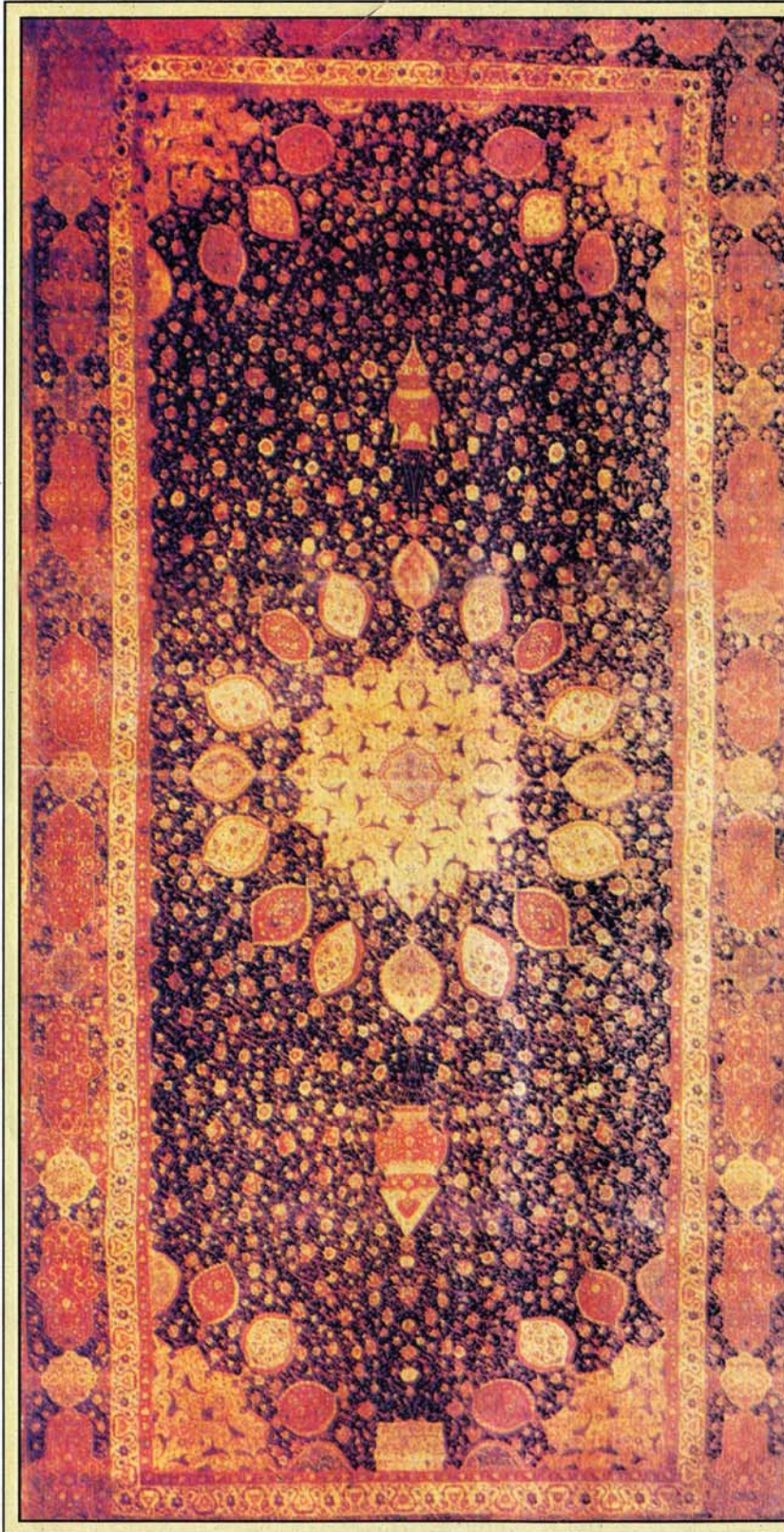
Whatever carpet you choose, the price depends on the size, but most people will start with a *Zaronim*. This is a rug approximately one metre by one and a half metre. The price is established by quality and where it comes from.

A *Zaronim* from Ghoom will be made from pure silk, and will be one of a kind. Because of its delicacy and beauty, it is frequently bought to be used as a wall hanging. It will cost between three and seven thousand dirhams.

A *Tabriz Zaronim*, from the north region of Iranian Azerbaijan, a legendary source for carpets, will be made from a mixture of wool and silk, it is exceptionally hard wearing and a good quality *Zaronim* Tabriz will cost from one thousand dirhams and will never lose its value.

Isfahan produces some of the very best carpets being made in Iran today, in silk and wool and they cost around the same price as the pure silk from Ghoom. The *Zaronim* changes its size to approximately 2.2m by 1.10m when it comes from Naein in the southern central part of Iran. The Naein are sought after by those who prefer the more gentle colours and the *Zaronim* price starts around Dh 1,800 to Dh 5,000. ■

Clockwise from top: Tabriz, Isfahan and Ghoom collection from Iran



THE STORY OF ARDABIL CARPET

The large sums of money involved in Iranian rugs will always attract those trying to make a fast dollar, and this has been so from the time the world discovered the joys of these hand-woven treasures. Jalil Hossein Zadeh tells a lovely story about a carpet that was made in the 16th century. The Ardabil Carpet.

The 16th century was the great renaissance of the Persian carpet, during the Safavid dynasty, when Shah Abbas was one of the great emperors. A talented painter himself, he fostered art and art works.

He brought all the best carpet weavers into his court, and ordered them to start producing carpets that were works of art. They must make him the greatest carpets the world had ever seen. Failure to comply was too dreadful to contemplate.

These carpets would not be just for his own palaces, but they would be used as diplomatic gifts to other powerful rulers. This edict was the source of many famous carpets which can be seen today in museums all over the world.

One of the famous royal carpet weavers was Maqsd Mansoor, but some misdemeanor made Maqsd fall foul of the royal favour and the poor man was so terrified that he fled from the palace and took refuge in the Sheikh Safi mosque in Ardabil. There he lived out the rest of days. During his time in the mosque, he made a carpet, copying the design of the mosque ceiling, and into the design he wove:

"This is the work of Maqsd. I have no refuge in the world other than thy threshold. There is no protection for my head other than this door. The work of the slave of the threshold, Maqsd of Kashan in the year 946."

For centuries this carpet lay on the floor of the mosque, until 1893, when an Armenian called Galapak Malik, an agent for a German carpet consortium, Zeigler, entered the mosque and saw this carpet among many other old, but worthless carpets.

Out of the "Goodness of his heart" Zeigler offered to buy a whole set of new carpets for the mosque." (Sounds like a script for Aladdin and his lamp?

Could this be where that story came from?

Zeigler took possession of the Ardabil who eventually sold it in to an English collector called Vincent Robinson. If you doubt the authenticity of this story, you can check it out for yourself. Today it is part of the Persian carpet collection of the Victoria and Albert museum in London. Dawood Hossein Zadeh has been to Britain ten times just to see it.

Jalil says about Malik, "Yes it was a dishonest thing he did, but in so doing, he has enabled hundreds of thousands of people to see this unique labour of love, so maybe he should be forgiven". ■

The famous Ardabil from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London,