

PRICELESS IN PERSIA



C.O.I.C



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This is the last in this fascinating series of magic carpet stories, and today we look at the fabled "Persians," the collector's items that books are written about. Can we see them here? How good are they as an investment and how can you be certain if you do buy one, you are getting what you paid for?

by Joan van der Merwe
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The first thing I wanted to establish was what exactly was an "antique." Dawood Hossein Zadeh explains, "A valuable antique Persian carpet will be more than 100 years old, and have documentation to prove it. The workmanship will be fine and it will be in excellent condition.

"Never confuse old with valuable; remember it were market forces that created the great demand for Persian carpets 100 years ago, and not all the carpets made were good. A bad antique will always be less valuable than a fine new piece of the same design and size.

"But those antiques that were also fine work are today's 'precious' pieces. No matter how beautiful a new carpet is, nothing can simulate the oxydation of the years; the colours that have become mellow with age.

"Many have tried to emulate the mature colours and again market forces can be one of the guilty parties. In the '50s, antique carpets were exempt from taxation in Germany, so there was an instant market and an instant temptation to provide what the market wanted.

"This was the opportunity to get rid of a lot of old carpets that were not particularly good, and to artificially 'age' the carpets. I remember as a child seeing new carpets left in the middle of the road for traffic to run over them to make them look older.

"There was a lot of experimenting with chemicals to hasten the oxydation process, to achieve in three days, what normally would take a hundred years. But most of all there was an eager market tempting many people to provide. These carpets are seen regularly offered for sale and anyone who is not an expert must take advice before they buy such a carpet.

"In Farsi, we have an expression: *As good as an old Persian carpet.* This can be about anything, from the state of your health to the state of the economy or a personal compliment on how you are looking.

"Although we never think about Tehran as a great carpet producing region today, it is in fact the commercial heart of the trading centre and some of the world's most famous antique carpets were made in Tehran. The Carpet Museum in Tehran is awe-inspiring, and anyone who might have the opportunity to visit should definitely do so.

"In the past two years, the government has organised annual seminars on carpets, inviting the curators of all the world's great museums to participate. The seminars were on a huge scale, and well planned and the response was tremendous. It also generated an increased interest in the antique carpets."

How then can we, the uninitiated, ever begin to buy an antique? How can we tell the good from the bad?

"In the same way you would buy a new carpet. You will look and look again, read as many

books as you can, then have an expert check it out for you. To determine first of all if it is a genuine antique, and then to determine the quality of the workmanship.

"If you keep on looking you will eventually become your own expert. Parting the pile to see if the bottom of the pile is a harsher colour than the top; checking the back to look for chemical fading, counting the knots; recognising the colours.

"Do not dream that you will stumble across a precious carpet in an attic and buy it for peanuts. This only happens in legends and then usually only to dealers who know where to look. If you genuinely want to buy an antique, go to a reputable dealer, tell him what you would like, tell him how much you can spend, and let him do the searching for you."

Is it possible to buy an antique carpet purely as an investment?

"I only advise this as a long term investment. The first thing you should buy your rug for is pleasure and if you have bought wisely, should there come a time you need to raise cash, you will almost always be able to sell for a profit.

"To buy purely for investment, to take back to your own country to sell is about the same as taking back gold, the price can fluctuate. However, if you buy wisely for the market you are going to, have checked your selling market to see what is wanted and what is being paid, you should then sell privately rather than through a dealer and it would be hard not to get more than you paid."

How much do we have to pay for a genuine antique; one that is old and good? Dawood was not particularly happy about this line of questioning, not because he had anything to hide, but because he obviously feels that first and foremost you must buy your rug for the pleasure it gives you, not as a commodity. But pushed for an answer he said, "Again we talk size, and because we have started with the Zaronim, the 1.5m. x 1m. we will start there again. If you are careful and spend time looking, you can buy a fine collector's piece for as little as US\$5,000. Then you could pay anything, there is no limit."

What about those 'If you have to ask the price you cannot afford it' carpets that are traded for millions of dirhams? Do any of these ever come into your hands? "Most of our antique and

precious carpet dealing is done on consignment, selling on behalf of private collectors. We often have carpets with us that are very valuable.

"Currently we hold some exquisite 'precious' carpets for consignment sale. These include a matched pair of the turn of the century Kashan, the colours and intricacy of the workmanship in these carpets has to be seen to be appreciated.

"We have a Tehran, 140 years old, the design is the traditional vase of flowers with arch, signed by the weaver, Sadigh Khan, part of a private collection which is in the market for the first time in the UAE.

"Another extremely valuable 'pair' is *The Signing of the St. Petersburg Treaty*, made in Kerman 150 years ago by the weaver Hamzeh, showing the three figures involved in the treaty, Nader Shah, Peter the Great and Mehdi Mohammed, a Persian minister.

"One of the most precious pieces we have today is the Isfahan Seirafian, which though only 50 years old, is famous throughout the carpet world. It is a precious piece of museum quality, which Sothebys would dearly love to auction. It belongs to a private collector who does not want it auctioned, and has asked us to sell it for him privately."

The family has its own private collection, some of which is always on show in their offices. Jalil Hossein Zadeh said that if he had been able to keep all the carpets he loved that had passed through his hands in the last 50 years, he would possibly be the richest man in the world.

He may not be the richest man in the world but Jalil and his son Dawood live in a constant world of beauty that few rich men achieve, and I would like to thank them both for their endless patience and humour. I have enjoyed every warp, weft and knot. ■



Above: A Tehran, 140 years old. Signed by the weaver, Sadigh Khan





Above: A Tehran design about 40 years old. This is a collector's piece because the colours were made by Iran's most famous dyer who died five years ago, taking with him to the grave the secrets of his dyes. It is in the private collection of the Hossein Zadeh family in Abu Dhabi

Below: A turn of the century Kashan, one of a valuable pair



If you would like to make up a small group to learn at first hand more about this fascinating world of rugs and those who make them, you can contact Dawood at the Centre of Original Iranian Rugs in Abu Dhabi which is a treasure trove of modern, antique, historic and precious carpets. If you give him enough notice, he will arrange to take you on your own personal magic carpet tour.



Above: A very rare Tehran, 30m. sq. More than 120 years old; in perfect condition. From a private collector, on consignment for Dawood to sell
Right: The Isfahan Seirafian, which though only 50 years old, is famous in the carpet world. It is a precious piece which Sothebys would dearly love to sell