

History and Purpose of Rugs **Throughout History**

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Rugs are oblong-shaped pieces of thick fabric woven to protect the body from cold, as well as used to cover tables, walls, couches, beds, hearths, floors, and thrones. Although wool is the traditional choice, other fibers such as camel or goat hair, silk, cotton, or jute (an Indian plant fiber) can also be used. Some use the words "rug" and "carpet" interchangeably. However, to those in the real estate industry, a carpet is larger than a rug, covers floors exclusively, and is tightly affixed to the floor, whereas a rug lies loosely. A kilim is a common form of flat, hand woven rug made by women in nomadic tribes and rural areas in Asia, Central Europe, and northern Africa. Originally, the artisan worked on a handloom consisting of two horizontal beams on which the warp (the vertical threads) was stretched. The basic weaving method consists in passing the crosswise threads of the weft (horizontal threads) under and over the lengthwise threads of the warp. An ancient craft, the weaving of rugs is a vital branch of the textile industry and evolved for pragmatic reasons, replacing the use of furry hides or sheepskins. By shearing sheep or other animals and then weaving the rugs out of the wool, one need not kill such animals just to have a rug. It was then noticed that, whereas one could dye hides only in one color or broad strips of color, one could weave an infinite

number of designs into a woven pile rug. Rug weaving thus became an art form. In Europe, the hand woven rug was a status symbol reserved to the rich and deemed—until the eighteenth century—too precious to place on the floor, except in churches or royal palaces. Hand woven carpets may have existed as far back as 2500 B.C.E. On the rock tombs of Beni Hassan, Egypt, men are depicted with implements of rug weaving. Drawings on the palace walls of Nineveh, a city in ancient Assyria (Iraq) depict the use of rugs. The oldest hand-knotted pile carpet (the “Pazyryk Carpet”) was excavated in 1949 by the Russian archaeologist Sergei Ivanovich Rudenko from a Siberian burial ground. Carbon dated to the fifth or fourth century B.C.E., the rug is believed by textile scholars to have been imported by Altai nomads from either the Iranian Scythians or the Persian Achaemenids. Some believe Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great) introduced rug weaving during his reign of the Persian Empire in 529 B.C.E. The art of carpet weaving reached its height early in the sixteenth century C.E. throughout the cold mountainous regions of the East, extending from Turkey through Persia and Central Asia into China. The Shia dynasty, Safavid (1501–1722), established weaving workshops employing the best artisans and materials from the empire. Oriental carpets first appeared in Europe after the Crusades (eleventh century). The international rug trade expanded with Europe’s discovery of sea routes to the Middle East and Asia; improvements in ship construction and navigational techniques; and the founding of the Dutch, British, and French East India companies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. After France’s defeat (1763) in the Seven Years’ War, Britain became the primary European trade power in India, from which rugs, sugar, and indigo were exported. Meanwhile eighteenth-

century weaving and spinning inventions (John Kay's flying shuttle, 1733; Edmund Cartwright's power loom, 1785) marked the transition from the old era of domestic craftsmanship to the mechanized, organized industry of today. As Western demand for carpets boomed, entrepreneurs from the Ottoman Empire, beginning in 1840, tried to adopt machine-made wool yarn to solve the labor problem. By the 1890s yarns more suitable for carpet knotting could be machine made. Moreover, between 1850 and 1870, rug makers started using synthetic dyes for coloring wool. Not only did this enable them to avoid the labor bottlenecks of naturally produced dyestuffs, but it also allowed them to obtain an unlimited number of colors to suit the tastes of Western customers. In 1858 the East India Company was dissolved, but British firms such as Ziegler and Company, P. Hotz and Company, and Oriental Carpet Manufacturers of London invested heavily in the export and marketing of rugs, expanding operations from Turkey into Persia and India. Rapid industrialization in Europe and the United States created a large wealthy class. These newly prosperous consumers wanted the traditional status symbols of the rich, including luxuriant carpets, but preferred less complex designs than the motifs popular in Islamic cultures. Western carpet importers thus worked with Eastern producers, creating modified designs such as the "ziegler." After the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949, the Chinese began mass-producing rugs in factories, copying the traditional Persian, Turkish, and Indian designs. This reduced the revenues of the other leading carpet exporters in the world market, such as Iran, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Turkey. Iran, in particular, was further penalized by a series of U.S. sanctions on the purchase inter alia of Persian carpets, beginning in 1980 in the wake of the

Iranian Hostage Crisis, renewed in subsequent years by presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush in light of anti-American terrorist bombings and reports of Iran's development of nuclear weapons. Initially, Pakistan benefited directly from its competitor's misfortunes, and even more from the massive influx of carpet-weaving refugees from Afghanistan as a result of the Soviet-Afghan war (1979–1989) and Afghan Civil War (1989–1992). Today, however, the Afghan refugees are leaving Pakistan. The United States is actively helping to rebuild the Afghan economy, in which the carpet-weaving business plays a large role. Meanwhile, exports of carpets from India and Nepal have declined because of squalid living conditions that have sparked labor strikes.

Today's modern weaving machines are very quick; water or air jets now carry the weft across the warp at one thousand picks per minute. Nevertheless, since the 1990s, there is growing consumer interest in traditional, hand woven carpets using natural, environmentally friendly dyes made from vegetables. The countries producing hand woven carpets and kilims need new marketing approaches, including use of the internet, to "reposition" their products as "organic" tokens of heritage. A major challenge they face is growing consumer concern about intensive labor practices, especially involving children. By definition, the handmade carpet industry is extremely labor intensive. The countries leading the world's market depend on child labor. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported that in Pakistan alone, at least 90 percent of the 1 million workers in the carpet industry were children, many of whom began working in the carpet industry before age ten. These children suffer injuries, earn minimal pay, and remain uneducated.

Human rights organizations such as “Rugmark” have launched campaigns in recent years to discourage the purchase of carpets made by children.

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