

Focus On: Rugs

Rugs vs. Carpet

The words “rug” and “carpet” may be used interchangeably in conversation, but there is a difference in regard to size. Carpets run in standard sizes: The smallest is 6 feet by 9 feet; the more popular, larger sizes are 9 feet by 12 feet, 12 feet by 18 feet and 11 feet by 15 feet, ranging from 3 feet by 5 feet to 4 feet by 6 feet by 7 feet. The value of a piece does not necessarily increase with its size.

Rug Basics

Various techniques exist in rug making. There are pile techniques (they are furry); flat woven techniques (tapestries, brocados, needlepoints) and hooked rugs. Carpets, in general, are constructed of two or three fibers: cotton, wool or silk (dyed and undyed), and occasionally jute. This foundation is comprised of a series of “warp lines” (run vertically) and “weft lines” (run horizontally and hold the alternating lines of colored knots in place).

The materials used in the foundation will affect the carpet greatly. For example, if the warp and weft lines are thick, you will not have a fine carpet. If they are made from a single strand of silk, you will have a very fine carpet, but it will be terribly fragile.

Pile may be short or long. The foundation and pile materials (wool, silk or cotton) are important to recognize, because they determine how the carpet will age and wear.

The concept of “knots per square inch” is actually a measure of how much labor, time and material were expended in weaving each square inch of a carpet, and in that respect reflects its value. Turn the rug over when inspecting it and count the knots in one square inch.

“Weave” is the distinctive arrangement of warp/weft knots. Particular weaving patterns, along with other elements, help attribute rugs. As you observe more rugs, you will begin to recognize the similar qualities in the products of a particular region.

Inspection

Photograph both the front and back. Since it is difficult in most cases to capture the image of an entire rug, try for a one-quarter section of the front as well as a view of one corner.

“A good close-up shot of the back of the rug will help to assess the weave, as well as reveal any repairs or reweaving,” advises Rosalind “Posy” Benedict, an independent consultant and appraiser of Oriental carpets and textiles. “And studying your photographs with a magnifying glass will expose a great deal”

Examine Wear

When inspecting a carpet – even if it is in someone’s home – it is not impolite to get down on your hands and knees to examine it or to move potted plants or furniture to see whether they have been moved in years, checking the condition of a carpet, underneath. However, in determining the condition of a carpet, what you see is not necessarily what you get.

What qualifies as “good condition” will vary with the age and type of carpet you are examining. A piece may appear to be shabby, with loose threads hanging on the outside, but still be in very good condition. “Even, overall wear is preferable to localized wear,” says Mary Jo Otsea, senior vice president of the rugs and carpets department at Sotheby’s New York. “A pile carpet is created with knots, and the pile itself is composed of threads that have to be combed out. The base of the pile, therefore, is a series of knots. A fairly considerable state of wear would begin to reveal these knot collars.” But she believes that this is not a fatal flaw. “If the knot collars are there, you may not have as much pile as you would like, but basically the design is still intact. And in very old pieces, this even, overall wear may be as good as it gets.”

Localized wear is a more serious problem. In the case of rugs that have been used in dining rooms, for example, you may find that the medallion at the center is in magnificent condition, while there is extensive peripheral wear from chairs being moved backward and forward. As the pile wears down, the warp knots will become extruded may dealers are fond of pushing these knots inside, cutting them off or even painting them to disguise the wear.

Check for Reduction

It is important to determine if tug has been reduced in some way. “While there are several forms of reduction, the most frequently used is border reduction, in which a portion of the primary borders may have been removed,” Benedict says. “Some dealers have been known to ‘fringe out’ carpets: By pulling out groups of knots and letting the warp strings hang loose they create a new fringe.” In some cases, she adds, there has been field reduction; if the carpet has been cut across so that it slices through ornamentation, this is a major problem. If you find an Oriental carpet with perfectly square measurements, it is very likely that some surgery has been performed.

Structural Problems

“Puckering” and “curling under” on Persian rugs is a structural problem. Do not mistake this for wear. A dealer may excuse this flaw by declaring it to be a “tightly woven rug.” True, but it is an unsuccessfully tightly woven rug. In some cases, having the rug properly blocked will alleviate the problem, but not always. If you discover a “hard area” on a fine Persian rug, examine it carefully. This is foundation damage and is serious.

Other Damage

Geoffrey A. Orley, a noted carpet expert and co-owner of Geoffrey A. Orley & Shabahang Persian Carpets in Palm Beach, Florida, believes that just as “location, location, location” is all important in real estate, “condition, condition, condition” is vital to a carpet’s value. “The expertise and skill employed in repairs is crucial. Restoration can be achieved at a spectacular level, so that you have difficulty in finding where the work was done – provided that the right quality materials and techniques are applied to the problem, and depending on the talent of the artist or weaver who is doing the work.”

Orley’s partner, Bahram Shabahang, stresses that “a beautiful rug is like a painting, and it is affected by damage much as a work of art would be.” He recommends that a purchaser look for a pristine rug. With older carpets (150 to 200 years or older), flawless condition is not essential - if they are to be part of a collection. But he cautions, “If a carpet will be used on the floor and is viewed as an investment, you want to buy a perfect carpet. Not restored perfect condition, but original perfect condition.”

Elsie Nazarian, a Washington DC-based rug dealer whose family-owned business has specialized in carpets and tapestries since 1920, cautions that moth damage may attack the knots at the back of the carpet, in which case the surface would appear to be normal. “Or they might eat through both front and back, leaving viewable holes,” she says. “Repair depends on the location and quantity of the damage, but unlike rot, there is solid carpet around the affected area on which to build.”

If you notice sagging and wavy lines in any hanging textile, suspect extreme humidity. The edge of a piece may be collapsing, but may not look endangered, so feel it carefully.

Almost without exception, rug experts believe that urine stains are deadly for a carpet. Once urine has gotten into the rug, it is virulent enough to alter the dyes and corrosive enough to rot through the foundation. Nothing can be done to reverse these color changes. In addition, Art Deco carpets from the 1920s, ’30s and even ’40s and ’50s, which are rising substantially in value, have been known to bleed badly. Especially notable for this flaw

are the dark browns in the renowned and expensive works by Da Silvia Bruhns. Many dealers will claim to be able to remove “blush” (the polite term for bleed), but it is extremely difficult. And while these blotches may not seem aesthetically repugnant, they will reduce the value of the carpet greatly.

Reweaving and Cleaning

Reweaving may unintentionally harm a carpet. It is important to establish the archaeology of old repairs and restorations. “While cleaning a carpet properly cannot damage it per se, you might find that its flaws have been greatly accentuated,” advises Sylvia Leonard Wolf, a fine art appraiser and former president of the Appraisers Association of America. “Exposed warp knots are much more visible in a dirt-free carpet. If they had been painted at one time with pelican inks, which are water-soluble, or with felt-tip pens, which destroy fiber, the carpet actually could return looking worse than when it went out.”

Such well-intentioned repair often creates problems. “Latex,” a common fix-up material, cannot be removed once it is applied. It will thicken the damaged area so that a needle will be unable to penetrate it if a reweaving is necessary. Silver duct tape, which leaves a gray residue, will strip all the knots that it covers if you attempt to remove it. Auction results have proven that, while repairs do factor into the value of a carpet, a piece that has been expertly restored despite prior problems, often sells at its estimated price or higher.

