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This brochure was brought to you by *The Most Beautiful Rug* – RugMark’s campaign to end child labor. With nearly 300,000 children exploited as child labor in the carpet industry, RugMark is the international organization devoted to building the schools, programs and opportunities to give children back their childhood. It’s working, from Pakistan to India to Nepal, and you can help. By following the recommendations in this guide and looking for the RugMark, child-labor-free certification, you can be sure your rug purchase will be beautiful inside and out. For more information visit www.rugmark.org.

Presenting sponsors of *The Most Beautiful Rug* include *California Home + Design*, *Dwell*, *Metropolis*, Modern Luxury Publishing Group, and The Skoll Foundation.

RugMark thanks Emmett Eiland for writing this guide. Emmett Eiland has operated an Oriental rug business in Berkeley, California since 1969. He has staged exhibitions of Oriental rugs, made films on the art of Oriental rug repair and on rug weaving in Afghanistan, traveled extensively in Central Asia, published a book on Oriental rugs, and written a number of articles for Oriental rug journals.

More in-depth information on these and other issues surrounding the purchase of Oriental rugs may be found in Eiland’s book *Oriental Rugs Today* (Berkeley Hills Books, 2003).



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how to select the most beautiful rug RUGMARK’S GUIDE TO BUYING A HANDMADE RUG

Rug making is an ancient tradition. The technique of hand knotting rugs dates back at least three thousand years to when handmade rugs were used in Asian cultures for prayer, to add warmth to the home, for adornment, and even to cushion horse saddles. Today, master craftspeople create works of art ranging from patterns that have been passed down through the centuries to the diverse styles of contemporary designers.

Purchasing a handmade rug can be daunting, yet those who succeed in buying beautiful Oriental rugs are richly rewarded. So how can you choose well? Where will you find rugs of outstanding quality? And how can you judge the value of Oriental rugs? Here are some guidelines.



I. THE PORTRAIT OF AN EXCELLENT ORIENTAL RUG

A good-quality Oriental rug, which can spend upwards of three months on the loom, is one that lies flat and straight on the floor and is reasonably regular in its shape. It has lively, lustrous wool. Its colors have neither faded nor bled. In fact its colors, whether of natural or modern synthetic dyes, are harmonious and in balance. Often there is a pleasant variegation in the colors of an excellent handmade rug and a feeling that the rug has personality or character. Luminescent silk might be used to highlight its design. It has been intelligently “finished” so that it is neither washed out, nor unnaturally shiny, nor unpleasantly bright and harsh. The elements of the carpet’s design seem to fit naturally together. Above all, the rug has an X quality, a hook, a spirit that speaks of its having been designed and woven by a skilled adult artisan.

2. HOW TO FIND A QUALITY ORIENTAL RUG

Perhaps the single most important step in buying a good rug is to find a rug dealer you can trust. Why? First of all, good dealers know very well which rugs are good and they have large selections of them. The best rug dealers are born educators who love to share their knowledge with you. They guide you without bullying, teach you without being dogmatic. They are very concerned about child labor in the rug industry and carefully avoid rugs made under suspect conditions.

Look for well-established dealers. Forget the stores that have endless “going out of

business” sales. Research a store’s reputation. Surf the web for clues. Some of the finest, most ethical dealers in the country can be located by zip code through RugMark’s website at www.rugmark.org. Ask friends where they bought their Oriental rugs. And finally, trust yourself. If you feel uncomfortable with a dealer, move on.

3. DO SOME RESEARCH

- 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: for instance, between 8 and 9 feet wide by 11 to 12 feet in length. The greater the range, the more choices you will have.
- If possible, gather samples of drapery and upholstery fabrics and bring them with you to the showroom.
- Consider whether you prefer traditional Oriental rugs or those with contemporary designs. **Traditional designs** draw on thousands of years of rug history and are always fashionable. **Contemporary designs** spring from the inspiration of artists with a sophisticated understanding of today’s



fashions. RugMark can help introduce you to the work of some of the best contemporary rug designers (www.rugmark.org).

- 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 you.

4. BUY RUGS MADE BY ADULT ARTISANS

- As you focus on buying a rug made by adults and not by children, remember that the rugs most likely to have been made from illegal child labor are the cheapest Indian, Pakistani and Nepalese rugs.
- The rugs least likely to have been made with child labor are those that are of exceptional quality. Almost by definition, quality carpets have been woven by experienced, adult craftsmen, another compelling reason to buy a rug of excellent quality.
- Rugs with the RugMark® label are independently certified to be free of illegal child labor. RugMark certified rugs are widely available and may be easily sourced through www.rugmark.org.

5. TRUST, BUT VERIFY

Good rug dealers will encourage you to take rugs home on approval without obligation. To best take advantage of this buying tool, arm yourself with some basic information.

- Good rugs lie flat on their backs, without ripples along their edges. Rugs with wrinkles, curled edges, etc., disturb the

eye and cause premature wear. Still, don’t seek perfection. Some irregularity is part and parcel of “hand made.”

- Some rugs are misshapen. They came off the loom wider on one end than the other, or with bowing edges or an hour-glass figure. All else being equal, a regular, geometrically-correct shape is preferable to a visibly distorted one.
- Some folks love rugs that have faded into a low key, innocuous absence of color, but they should not be surprised when their beloved rug is spurned by others. Good rugs have colors that resist fading in normal light and resist bleeding when exposed to water.
- Rugs in good condition are prized above those in bad condition. Moth damage, holes, rips, stains and missing edges are tolerable to most people only when rugs are really old.
- Quality wool makes a difference. Good wool has a noticeable glow. It feels fleecy, perhaps a little oily, and soft. It absorbs dye well and takes heavy use. Inferior wool is full of kemp and hair and is scratchy, dry, lusterless and incapable of properly absorbing dye. Good wool is obviously preferable.



6. POINTS TO CONSIDER

Besides the considerations above, there are also questions that are more controversial, more subjective or more difficult to answer.

Are Finely Knotted Rugs Better? Rugs are available in myriad densities, with knot counts ranging from 30 knots per inch to over 1,000. Most often, finely knotted or finely woven rugs are most desirable. There are several reasons why. For one, 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. But fine knotting alone does not make a rug good. In fact, a fine weave simply is not appropriate in certain kinds of tribal rugs.

Natural vs. Synthetic Dyes. Antique Oriental rug collectors agree that natural dyes, such as reds from madder root or pomegranate peel, browns from walnut shells, or blues from the blue indigo plant, are more desirable than synthetic. Natural dyes add roughly 30% 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 whether a given dye is natural or synthetic. There is so much to be said on this subject that we cannot tackle it here.

Hand Spun vs. Machine Spun Wool. For thousands of years, weavers spun wool by hand to create the yarn that makes up the

pile of Oriental rugs. By about WWII, nearly all wool was spun by machines. Now, since about 1985, a small but appreciable number of weavers are again spinning wool by hand. 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.

Is the Finishing Process Important?

At the very end of the production process, rugs are washed in substances that subtly tone down the relatively bright colors of a new rug. When the finishing process is mismanaged, rugs can be bleached to death and even muddied up with gunk. Look for rugs with a healthy, natural glow.

