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In love with the fabric of life

By BB Timberlake

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Explaining love is difficult, so I'll start at the beginning. I first became infatuated with rugs last summer in a small town by the Iraq-Iran border, where I was making a film for Sky News.

It was a remarkably odd time to undergo an aesthetic awakening. I had been accompanying some Serbian mercenaries and Ivan, their leader, invited me to join him on a shopping excursion. As his men stood guard outside the bazaar, we drank lots of sweet tea, examined countless rugs, or carpets as they call them, and haggled with the dealer. My defining image of the day is kneeling on the floor with this trained killer as he enthused about knot-count and rare dyes that made up the blues of an intricate Nain rug. He bought it for his mother. Serb men, even Serb mercenaries, are notorious mummy's boys.

I left Iraq with several tribal Qashqa'i rugs and a desire to know more. Back in London, I phoned up Essie Sakhai, one of Europe's foremost rug dealers, and asked him for some work experience.

Sakhai has spent a life in rugs. He comes from a family of Tehran Jews and has that bewitching contentment of a man lucky enough to have made a living from his passion. He has written numerous books on rugs and advises many museums and collectors. His main store is on Piccadilly overlooking St James's Palace.

The word store gives the wrong impression – it is more like an art gallery where friends meet. There are no "sale" signs in the windows and no "stack'em high, sell'em quick" attitudes inside. Would you buy piled-up oil paintings advertised as 75 per cent off? Working with Sakhai, I realised that the most important thing for would-be rug buyers is to find a good dealer. He seemed just as happy to share his knowledge as to make a sale.

The apprenticeship also made me ask myself why I care for rugs. The answer is simple really. As a journalist I love storytelling and rugs do just that. Each piece is a testimony to the weaver's origins. Some designs are common to whole cities and tribes, while other motifs might be exclusive to a particular family.

Look closer at the individual knots and the patterns they make. These simple sequences – such as one blue, three red, five green – are passed orally down the generations. They are like musical notation to songs, a sort of a genetic code of a culture.

Rugs form an integral part of life for a vast swathe of humanity from the Mediterranean to the edges of China. People are born on them; they barter with them and eat off them; rugs form dowry payments and are investments for people without banks. Covering wars and disasters, I have seen refugees fleeing for their lives through mountain passes. They always carry their rugs with them.

Rugs are not merely the fabric of life but of religion as well. Islamic culture has no separation between art and religion as the west does today. In the world of Islam, rugs are not merely works of art but aids to contemplation. Peering into the dense imagery and symbolism of my own rugs, I am reminded of the most beautiful examples of illuminated medieval manuscripts in the British Library, dating from the times when art was the servant of the Christian church.

For Sakhai, picking a rug is one of the most important decisions people make about their homes. “A good carpet makes a room and gives soul to a house. It is not merely an object of great beauty but an investment that can give you enormous pleasure on a daily basis. Decide what size you need and then follow your heart. It is about what attracts you.”

There is a rug to suit every style of decoration. The bold, geometric Quashqa'i one I bought in Iraq suits the modern, minimalist room where it sits in my home. Yet another ornate and intricate rug I bought for a friend sits perfectly in her house cluttered with antiques, books and icons.

There is no single indication of a rug's quality or value. Too many people give importance to knot-count but that's like judging a suit solely by its thread-count or a digital camera by its pixel count alone. What is important is how the many factors of design, materials and the skill of the artist work together. A good rug is like a good view – what would you like to gaze at each day?

Another factor is how much wear your rug will receive. If it is for the hallway, pick a rug made of sturdy wools; a silk piece might live more comfortably in the bedroom. A good dealer will guide you to the appropriate quality and design for the right place and ensure you have the best example of a particular style.

He or she should also tend to you and your rugs long after the point of sale. Sakhai, for example, has the Carpet Club, offering customers ongoing advice and services. Every so often rugs are collected, cleaned and examined, and a written report about them is prepared. Sakhai also handles valuations and deals with insurance companies, including maintaining photos of customers' rugs. Anyone who decides to sell can also ask to have those photos transferred into a virtual showroom online – owners can make their rugs available to buyers while still enjoying them at home.

In recent years, Sakhai has come across two misunderstandings that are worth noting. The first concerns child labour: these Persian rugs can only be produced by skilled weavers. Children are no more capable of weaving a fine rug than they are of producing a Chippendale cabinet. Second is allergies: good rugs are made from the finest wools and silks and have none of the synthetic fibres and glues loved by dust mites.

Speaking from experience, I must warn that mites seem less dangerous than being bitten by the rug bug. Anyone who spends a day with a good dealer should expect to start revelling in walks through floors filled with rugs, flushed with the joy of finding a particularly interesting example. You start to judge friends by what's on their floor. Indeed, you may never look up again.

Every day, as I cross my study, I tread across a garden of Eden of naïve animals and birds, and not a week goes by without my noticing something new in that bright tangle of design and meaning. This week I spotted a reindeer. He has no business among the peacocks and other Persian animals, so I can only imagine that he leaped from satellite TV into the weaver's mind and down on to the loom. That reindeer is yet another new character in a never-ending story.

Meanwhile, my affair with carpets is just beginning. And I am smitten.