

Persian Rugs

Pride of Persia Rug Co.



For more than a decade, Mehdi Abedi and Lisa Slappey have taught “The World of Persian Rugs” through Rice University’s Glasscock School of Continuing Studies. They are the owners of Pride of Persia Rug Co., which specializes in older Persian rugs along with high-quality newer rugs from around the world.

What is the mahi design?

Mahi, which means “fish” in Farsi, is a pattern easily recognized and readily available. The more appropriate term is “herati,” named for the city of Herat in what is now Afghanistan. The mahi/fish/herati motif is one of the most common patterns found in Oriental rugs in general and in Persian rugs in particular. It is a repeating design, usually small-scale, of rosettes surrounded by lancet leaves. The mahi rug may feature a central medallion or an overall motif, and the general appearance suggests fish in a pond. Persian rugs with this design are woven in Hamadan (Hosseinabad), Sarab Meshayekhi, Tabriz, Bijar, Saroukh and many other places. What is nice about this repetitive design is that even though the basic idea is very simple, the weaver can still be quite innovative. This type of rug can often be a problem solver for designers. The mahi rug is ideal for those who don’t like large bold, floral or geometric patterns; it is a compromise between curvilinear and angular designs. Some clients report that the small fish design is so busy that it is not busy at all.

Almost every rug-weaving country has copied the mahi pattern. The Indian version, especially the Indo-Bijar, is somewhat notorious. Be certain to find out the provenance if you are considering purchasing a mahi rug. Perhaps the best known of the Persian mahi rugs are woven in the city of Tabriz. If there is one type of rugs in which the number of knots per square inch counts, it is in the Tabriz fish design. The tighter weaves of Tabriz are commonly referred to as Maralan. Tabriz usually has silk highlights, which the seller may suggest justifies a higher price, but the better gauge is in tightness of weave.

What is the difference between Persian and Oriental rugs?

Although they are often used interchangeably, these terms are not synonymous. The term “Oriental” is a much

more general designation and is commonly used when the speaker cannot identify the specific origin of a rug. Orient is a colonial term used to distinguish the peoples and cultures east of Constantinople (Istanbul) from those of the Western world, or the Occident. It means “non-European” or “not us.” When we speak of a rug as being Oriental, we may mean that it is from Turkey or China or anywhere in between.

Persia was the European name for Iran until it was changed under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1935. For a rug expert, a Persian rug is any rug woven in Iran. This term also has its problems because Iran is a county of multiple ethnicities. For example, Kurds, Turks, and Belouchis living within the borders of Iran do not consider themselves Persians, yet their rugs are classified as Persian.

Are any types of Oriental rugs made in America?

Yes, but these are machine-made rugs that replicate Oriental designs. Although they lack the artistic merit of handwoven rugs, some of these machine made rugs (referred to rather euphemistically as “power loomed”) are very good pieces. When Europeans and Americans decided that rather than importing rugs they should make their own, they designed machines capable of looping rugs. Belgium and Germany produce many Oriental-style rugs, and some of the older ones are collectible. American companies such as Karastan (based in North Carolina) and Dalton (Georgia) make very good pieces. Karastan was established in 1928 and has since been an overwhelming success. These machine-made rugs are especially appropriate for those consumers who are bothered by the irregularities common to handwoven rugs. If you do buy machine-made rugs, make sure they are made of wool, as polyester gets out of shape very fast.

What is abrash?

Abrash refers to an abrupt change in color. Most often this color change appears as a horizontal line across the rug. This is due to a change in dye lots. Although the color probably seemed quite consistent as the weavers were working, over time the dye has faded at different rates during washing or under the sun. In older rugs from the villages and the tribes, it is a typical attribute which can add beauty and character. We are less forgiving, however, when rugs from the cities show abrases because this suggests a lapse in supervision during the weaving process. Many of the new non-Persian rugs incorporate intentional abrases to give the look of older Persian rugs.

What is the weft?

A rug’s weft is the longitudinal (horizontal) line of the foundation. It is part of the base of the rug and its function is to separate two rows of knots while connecting strands of warp. Rugs could have a single weft, double wefts or even multiple wefts. Saroukhs and Bijars usually have double wefts; Hamadan and Bakhtiari rugs are most often single-wefted. Kurdish and Lori rugs may have many wefts. Although the weft is often partially visible from the back of the rug, it should not be visible from the front. Mahals often look blue from the back because so much of the blue cotton weft shows. Other rugs may have red or pink cotton for weft lines. Wool foundation rugs may show lines of brown on the back. ■

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