



Magic Carpets

by Jenna Kern-Rugile
Photography by Elizabeth Glasgow

Piles upon piles of the finest handmade Oriental rugs, both antique and modern, are carefully laid out on the showroom floor. Even the walls and windows serve as display space for the rugs, one more intricate and colorful than the next. Aubussons, Persians, Indians, French, needlepoints, silks . . . the list is virtually endless, with every

John Khalil of Khalil Antique & Oriental Rugs in Huntington uses a miniature loom to explain the process of creating fine Oriental rugs.

piece handwoven. And the quantity? John Khalil, owner of Khalil Antique & Oriental Rugs in Huntington, smiles shyly, saying, "I really can't put a number on it." But when prodded, he makes a guess of at least 20,000, maybe more.

Khalil's passion for the ancient art of weaving Oriental rugs is palpable. As he guides visitors around his eponymous store, he points out one carpet after another. "Feel this one," he urges. "It's pure silk and took at least four or five years to make." Touching another, he says proudly, "Look at the incredible choice of colors here. It takes magnificent artistry to have designed this." Quite obviously, here is a man who joyfully lives and breathes his business, who understands every aspect of the rugs.

Khalil developed his love for Oriental rugs in his native Iran, where the rich tradition of hand-weaving rugs began thousands of years ago. Working alongside his father and grandfather practically from the cradle, he absorbed their wide-ranging knowledge. Today, he relishes the role of teacher, sharing his expertise with C.W. Post students, some of whom are interior designers, while others are simply Oriental rug aficionados who come to his in-store classes to learn everything about the rugs, from design considerations to care, restoration and appraisals.

Indeed, caring for and restoring the rugs he so adores is a considerable part of Khalil's business, which he runs with his wife, Manejeh, who shares her design savvy with the store's clientele. "We know that our rugs become part of a family's treasured collection," says Manejeh Khalil. "We take the utmost care to keep their heirlooms in pristine condition."

The magic of Oriental carpet restoration takes place toward the back of Khalil's showroom, where he oversees a team of expert restorers as they painstakingly reweave rug foundations, repair holes and worn areas in the pile and remove stains. "The most common reasons for restoration are water damage, moths, dog and cat bites, spills, and color bleeding from improper washing," he explains. "Fringes and bonding, which are less dense than rug pile, typically wear out first from ordinary use or from being caught in vacuums, and they're the easiest and least expensive to repair." Old fringes are simply

The repair and restoration of Oriental rugs requires a high level of craftsmanship. Repair of a worn area or hole in a rug begins with a thorough cleansing. Often yarns must be carefully dyed to match the original colors before the process of reweaving the wool or silk rugs can begin.





removed and replaced with new ones, and bonding is rewoven.

But holes, tears, fading and extreme wear of the actual pile require the skills of master craftsmen, as talented as the artisans who created the original piece. Khalil contracts specific craftspeople for different types of damage, each with their own specialties, from color-matching wools to weaving and replicating intricate patterns.

Pointing to a hole measuring about two-by-four inches, caused by moths, Khalil describes the repair process: "First, the rug is cleaned [with water and special detergents] so the color is true. Next, we weave the foundation, almost always cotton-based, in the same manner as the original carpet maker did, starting three or four inches beyond the hole's border, and connect it to the original foundation."


After the foundation is rebuilt, the yarn (usually made of wool but sometimes silk, depending on the original material) is woven to match the original pile, one small strand at a time. It's a time-consuming and intricate process, requiring the exact replication of color and design. "It's especially difficult to find perfect yarn matches with older rugs," explains Khalil. "We can spend hours mixing dyes to create the right color."

It's no surprise that such detailed work doesn't come cheap. "About 25 percent of the time, I advise people that their rug just isn't worth repairing," he says, the sadness clear in his voice. "It's not that we can't repair it, but if the piece is worth \$700 or \$800 and the repairs would cost \$1,000 or more, it just doesn't make sense. It costs the same to repair a two-inch hole on a \$500 rug as a \$20,000 one."

As an example, Khalil pulls out a severely worn antique Indian Aushak rug. "This one needs \$10,000 worth of repair," he says. "We can certainly do it, but whether it should be done is up to the customer." Khalil fully understands that his clients often can't bear to part with their beloved pieces, even if the cost equation doesn't add up. His suggestion for the Aushak: Remove

Once the damaged area has been rewoven, the yarn must be trimmed and worked into the rug. The desired end result is a repair that is virtually indistinguishable from the original fibers. Khalil employs master craftsmen, each with their own specialties from color-matching to replicating intricate patterns.

the damaged outer border, and recut the rug at its interior border, adding new bonding and fringe. "Of course, it will be smaller," he says, "but we can get it in magnificent shape for less than a thousand dollars."

Helping rug lovers prevent such damage in the first place is one of Khalil's current passions. He and his son David, who will enter medical school next fall but is currently taking a year off to apprentice at his father's side, are writing a book about the selection, care and maintenance of Oriental rugs. When it's finished, Khalil plans to give the book to his customers, sharing the fruits of his experience outside the family tree. 

When not at her desk, Jenna Kern-Rugile enjoys shopping for antique rugs.

John Khalil's Tips for Maintaining and Storing Your Oriental Rugs

1. Use under-padding designed for Orientals. It not only gives a cushion when you walk, but also helps prevent wear.
2. Rotate your carpet once a year to alter the traffic pattern and exposure to sun.
3. Professionally clean your rug every five years — less often in low-traffic areas like bedrooms, more often in entranceways.
4. If there is a spill, especially a pet stain (the most damaging to rugs), mop it with a dry or slightly damp cloth or paper towel and take it to a professional rug cleaner as soon as possible, within a few days at most.
5. Professionally clean your rug before storing it. "You might not see moths or their eggs buried in your rug, but the damage they'll cause can be devastating." Use moth balls generously before rolling the carpet. (The smell will disappear after a few days of airing the rug.) Store the carpet in a dry area, never on the ground. Open, air and vacuum the rug for a few days once a year, then re-roll with mothballs. If you don't want the chemical smell of mothballs, use cedar spray, or open the rug every six months, instead of once a year, to air and vacuum.