MacGuffin

The Life of Things

N° 9

# The Rug

If carpets are pieces of art, so too is the business of buying and selling them, a skill passed down from generation to generation, a practice that takes merchants from the Negev Desert to New York dinner parties. Five traders tell their story.

# BUYERS AND SELLERS

Text by Kitty Drake

## Tarun Goel
## India

In India, all the palaces have antique woollen carpets, but in summertime the king's servants would roll them away to reveal brightly patterned cotton kilims, called dhurries, that lie beneath. It was a practical change; ours is a hot country, so for much of the year you don't want wool beneath your feet. But it was also about transforming the look of the palace to welcome the hot weather. The dhurries are pure white, beautiful red and indigo blue. Colours come out stronger on cotton than on wool. Indigo blue has a long tradition — it is a particularly Indian colour. It is cool and soothing.

I inherited the business from my father, who dealt in antiques. We used to only sell antique carpets — but they were awkwardly shaped, because they were mostly made for the corridors in the kings' palaces, or for the kings' tents when they would travel. Around 30 years ago, I had the idea to start making new dhurries, made-to-measure to customers' specifications. I decided to use the exact same yarn as they did in olden days, and the same organic dyes. My dhurries are hand-spun on a panja loom because what I love about the antique dhurries is their simplicity. Persian carpets are so busy. Indian carpets aren't like that.

An antique cotton dhurrie usually sells for between 500–5,000 dollars, but they can sell for 20,000, 35,000, even 40,000 dollars. I sell my new dhurries for 3–10 dollars. I think part of their success is down to the fact that they're affordable. And they're so bright.

## Naïry Vrouyr
## Belgium

Buying a rug in Iran isn't straightforward; it's an art. I learned that art from my father, who took me to Iran when I was 18. Travelling was part of my education in the family trade: we have a shop in Antwerp that was started by my great-grandfather in The Hague in 1917. That trip was the first time I fell in love with a carpet. We were walking around a bazaar and I spotted it rolled up in a corner: I could tell how rare and valuable it was immediately by the fact it had a very specific weave; it was a very finely woven kilim made by a tribe called the Bakhtiari. The winter home of the Bakhtiari is on the plains of Khuzestan, around Shushtar at the head of the Persian Gulf. In summer they migrate through the Zagros Mountains to the Chahar Mahal valley to the west of Esfahan where they graze their animals. To weave the kilims the Bakhtiari women use the double interlock tapestry weave technique. The weft yarns, instead of forming slits at each colour change, are linked to one another at every passage, and so colours bleed into one another beautifully.

I remember getting too excited and my Dad telling me, "Keep quiet: the dealer has no idea what he has on his hands. So if you stay calm we'll get a reasonable price." This is the art: when you're interested in one rug, ask the seller to look at ten other rugs before you casually ask to see the one you actually want to buy. The idea is to feign interest in everything and keep your true intentions under your hat. You spend days in bazaars, not hours. For that particular carpet I managed to hide my interest and we ended up getting a good price. But I was so deeply in love we never sold it in our shop. It hangs on my wall in my house now; it's so thin and delicate I could never step on it. Every time I look at it I feel happy. A rug can do that.

I sell carpets from all over the world in the family shop — from Turkey, Afghanistan and Romania — but Iranian carpets are what I'm most familiar with. In Europe we go through phases with rugs: when empty interiors are 'in', it's all concrete and parquet. But in Iran you couldn't even conceive of an interior without a rug. In old traditional houses Iranians don't have tables and chairs so they sit on the rug, and most people even sleep on the rug. Clients are often trying to find stories in the various symbols woven into their carpets, but with village-made rugs designs are more instinctual. In the same way that your mother might teach you how to cook a spaghetti sauce — and then you just repeat that recipe over and over again, and pass it on to your children — the women who weave these rugs have a design in their heads that is passed down to their daughters.

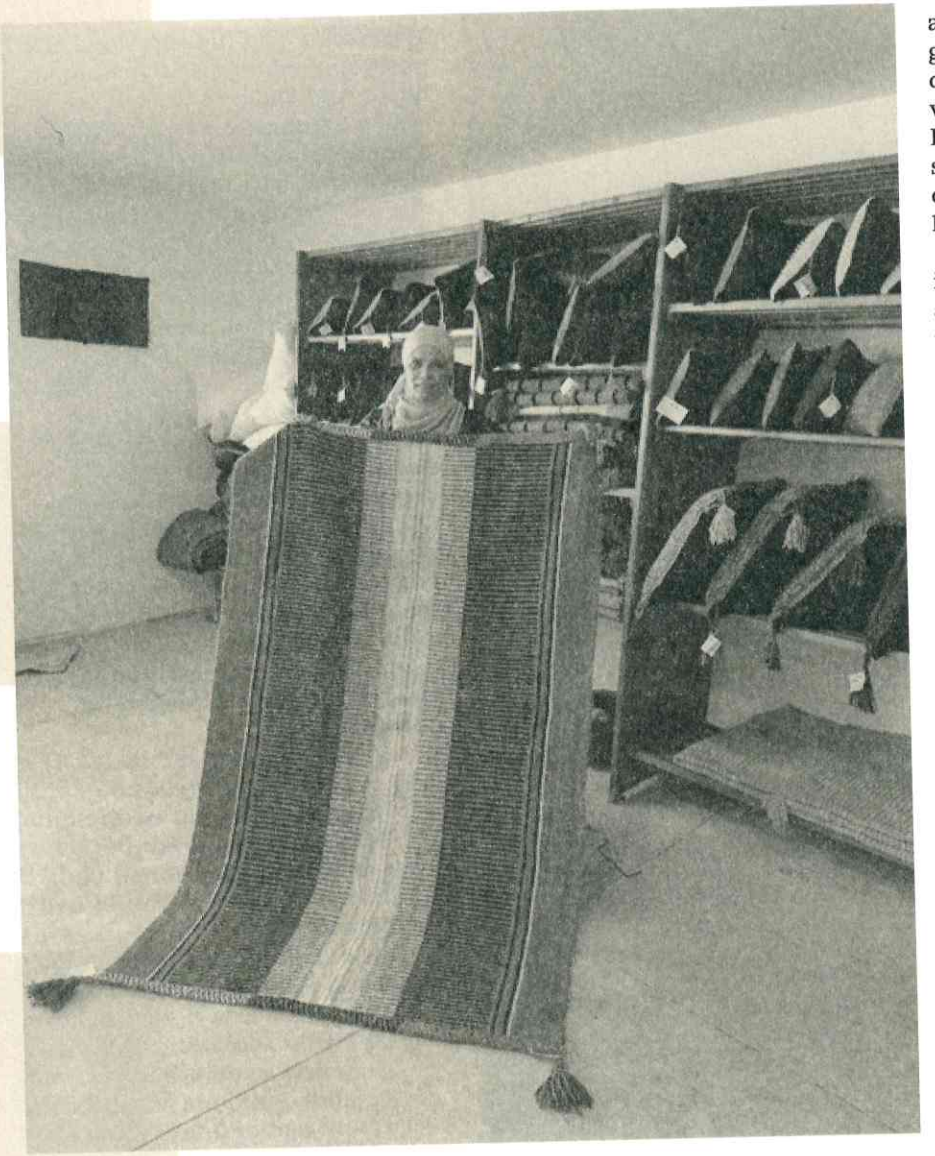
Some of the rarest and most intricate carpets can be worth €10,000 to €50,000 or even €60,000. For some people that is unimaginable. But if you can afford to have something really nice, then why not?

## Ismael Bassidi
## Morocco

There are 600 tribes in Morocco, and before there were ID cards, people used to tattoo their own faces with the marks of their tribe. Rugs work in a similar way: you can tell which tribe wove a specific rug because it will bear the marks of the tribe. I work with many tribes across Morocco, but the most beautiful rug I own is made by the Beni Mguild tribe of the North-Eastern Middle Atlas Mountains. In Morocco, men work a horizontal loom whereas women work the more traditional vertical looms. It takes much longer to work a vertical loom and it requires more art and patience. They are made in the summer: after the men shear the sheep they give the women the wool to wash in the river. The rug I love is a flat-weave, made with double knots at 1,250 knots per square metre, so it's very thick and shaggy. In winter it's used by the tribe as bedding. It's blue, hand-dyed with blue indigo stones from the mountains. That way of dying means no blue is ever just one block of colour: there are so many different shades in the wool. It's like looking at the sea.

I was very naughty at school but I always liked helping my father in the rug shop. It's a family trade — we are all addicted to rugs. I'm always looking for something rare. I like to do my own designs; I like to do commissions; I like to be different. I find the most interesting rugs at auction in shoulders and carry it around every shop. The bidding starts after the third prayer around 4 pm and lasts until the fourth prayer around 7 pm. The man with the rug on his shoulders will let you know the current bid when he walks into your shop, and if you're interested you'll open it up, feel it, walk on it.

We do good business online now, but it used to be that you could never sell a Moroccan rug online. Buying a rug is a deeply personal experience: you want to be able to feel its softness and see the quality of the warp. You need to be able to walk barefoot across it and feel the softness under your toes to truly love it. Maybe lie down on it.



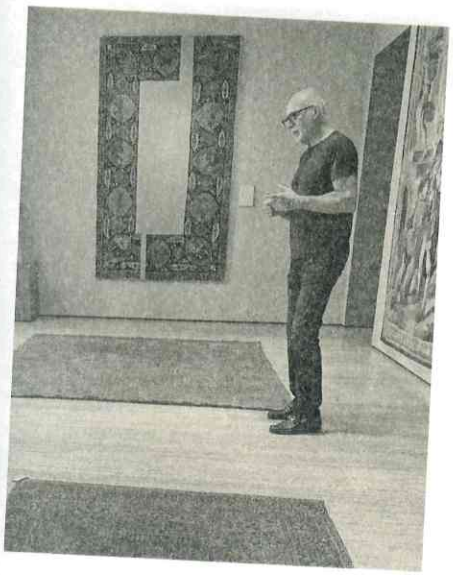
## Khadra Alsana
## Palestina

My people are the Negev Bedouin — a nomadic Arabic tribe who lived, before the Arab-Israeli War of 1948 — in the desert. In the desert we wove everything, even our tents: camel hair was used for pillows and blankets because it is soft; pure wool from the Aswasi sheep for the carpets. After the Israelis took our land, we lost our way of life. Half our population now live in Israeli-built 'recognized' towns; the rest live in 'unrecognized' villages, where there are no roads or running water. They put all the Bedouin people in one area, but the sheep started to stray because they needed to go where there was water and food.

Before '48, the Bedouin woman was the creator. She was the leader in her community because she was the builder. After she lost her ability to weave, she could no longer create.

Lakiya Weaving was founded in 1991 as a way to give us back our weaving skills. The organization works to provide us with wool — which is a fight, because no one from the Israeli culture department will take us seriously. Our weavers use traditional homemade ground looms to spin carpets at 70 knots per 10 centimetres. Our rugs are very heavy and very beautiful, 100% wool. In the desert we would use vegetables and fruits for colour: onion for yellow, berries for red. Now we use synthetic dye, and we have an international market. We incorporate traditional patterns and colours — red, blue, white, green and black — with custom designs. Ours is the highest qual weaving in the Middle East. Recently we had a British desig send us a picture she took of th desert. She wanted her carpet t look like the sand.

The thing about a carpet is t it is a piece of art. I have a rug t at hangs on my wall and every it gets more beautiful. I can't st looking at it — it's almost like t colours get richer.



## Moshe Tabibnia
## Italy

I run a gallery in Milan where I exhibit and sell precious, ancient carpets. I cannot think of a carpet as something limited or earthly; it is like a window on time. When I look at a carpet I see the women who have woven it, their tribe, their landscape, the historical period, and the imperial court in which it was displayed. My gallery runs a publishing house, Moshe Tabibnia Editore, where we collaborate with academics to print scholarly work around the textiles. When collecting, I look for carpets that best exemplify a certain historical moment, culture or country. One of the best examples I could give is an Ushak medallion carpet from the second half of 15th century, extremely antique and rare. I acquired it from a noble Italian family and subsequently sold it to the Abu Dhabi museum. A beautiful carpet can tell you something about the succession of kings that reigned in a country. As with great art, great carpets are created during periods of history where the clients are numerous and cultured.

I got into carpets by chance, back in 1982. I studied electronic engineering so it wasn't exactly an obvious career choice for me. For many populations in the world, especially in the East, the carpet represents a sacred ground that isolates people from earthly life, in a moment of recollection, prayer, meditation. Testament to the great significance of the carpet, even in Western culture, is its frequent depiction in sacred paintings throughout the history of art. The carpet is a weave of warp and weft, and therefore it represents life; it is one of the oldest known forms of art, and for millennia man has tried to transmit his culture and his creed through colours and symbols in rugs. That is why I decided to dedicate my life to them.

## Kevin Sudeith
## USA

The first time I saw an Afghani war rug I was at a dinner party. It was the mid-1990s at an Italian industrialist's apartment in New York City. He collected mid-century Italian art and antiques — I remember he had a Jannis Kounellis and a Boettis — and in the room where the cocktails were being served there was this big yellow rug. It had a very traditional border, like a classic Persian rug, but in the middle there were armoured tanks and helicopters and rockets. At the time I was dealing antiques, but I had never seen anything like this rug in my life before. I mean, this was woven at 100 knots per inch, and a weaver can tie 6000 knots per day, so this rug would have taken about 50 days to make. And it was covered in military hardware: tanks, helicopters, grenades, and rifles!

I became obsessed with tracking down a war rug of my own. Pretty soon I realized I could afford to have more carpets pass through hands if I bought and sold them rather than just collecting. I wo with a friend for 12 years who travelled round Afghanistan and Pakistan sourcing rugs and I created a website, warrug.com, where I could build a comprehe sive index. The first of these car originated in 1979, after the inva sion of the Soviets, when Afghan village women started depicting Kalashnikov rifles and MiG fight jets in their carpets. Later came 'World Trade Center' rugs, depict the 2001 attack on the Twin Tow These are highly skilled Afghan weavers witnessing important historical events and recording them in the local vernacular.

The million-dollar question wi war rugs is: what is their intent? In 2003, I was selling World Trad Center rugs at a flea market in Manhattan and a firefighter showe up and was absolutely livid because he thought the carpets were glorifying 9/11. It was understandable he was angry; it was a very painful time. But the truth about World Trade Center rugs is actually more complicated. Many of the images on these carpets — for example a dove with an olive branch and the towers themselves — are copied directly from propaganda leaflets that were distributed during the war by Americans. So Afghan people would pick up leaflets dropped from the sky by American aircraft as part of their Psycops (Psychological operations), and weave those same images into their carpets.

If I'd had more sense, in August 2002 I would have bought great stacks of World Trade Center rugs. A good one from 2002 is worth around $1200 and you can't get them at all now. They're not really to my taste — I prefer carpets with traditional designs that are less didactic, like the first rug I ever saw. After 9/11 I thought it was all over for me with the war rugs — that they would become taboo. But I found the exact opposite to be true. Once people worked out they weren't celebrating the attacks, there was a huge surge in interest. I have a waiting list for World Trade Center rugs now.