Hand Knotted Rugs Become More Exclusive

By Norman Sweeters

As we enter the second decade of the century, it has become more and more apparent that hand knotted rugs from India – and what had been other major rug producing countries as well such as Pakistan and China – are being produced by fewer and fewer manufacturers. It is a fact that the advent of the attitude "cheaper rugs faster" has had a blatant impact on the hand knotted industry. The result is obvious. The true works of art that have been knotted by hand for centuries are being shoved to the side by imitations – less expensive "renditions" if you will – and fewer hand knots will be woven and available to the buying public.

It should be mentioned here that we have been referring strictly to the evolution of "hand knotted" rugs and have not taken into consideration the impact that the machine made rug industry has made on this category. But for now, let us focus on the "hand knotted" distinction.

So we concentrate on the differences between good hand knotted rugs and why they cost more than mediocre to lower quality hand knotted rugs. The reasons are identical to what was covered in an earlier article on tufted rugs. The better the woolen yarn used, the tighter the weave (higher knot counts = labor intensity) the quality of the dyestuffs, the attention to detail in the washing and finishing processes, and the intricacy of the patterns (which includes the number of colors placed within the design) all command a higher cost. Therefore, if the manufacturer produces a quality that is 320 knots per square inch and he uses 100% semi worsted New Zealand wool, and the intricate Persian pattern demands more than twenty colors requiring detailed finishing procedures and the dyestuffs are premium then you will have a fine, well made rug that will reflect a high cost. If a manufacturer makes a 320 knot quality using a lesser grade of woolen yarn and the pattern is simplified using four colors and does not require detailed finishing procedures - and lower quality dyestuffs are employed - then the cost will be somewhat lower.

I say "somewhat lower" since the cost of labor to knot by hand is a constant, fixed cost. To weave a 320 knot quality – whether it is composed of terrific wool or terrible wool – has the best dyes or the worst dyes – uses twenty colors or four colors - the weaving rate will be the same. It will still remain an expensive rug to produce compared to a rug made with fewer knots. If we talk about a lower stitch count – say 80 knots per square inch – then things change quite a bit from a cost standpoint because the labor cost goes down. Where it may take four weavers fourteen months to weave a 320 knot 9x12 rug, it will take another four weavers but 4-5 months to weave an 80 knot 9x12 rug. It is all relative based on the labor intensity – which also includes the time it takes to properly finish a rug.

What most people think of with a hand knotted rug is skilled hands tying knots on a loom. For the most part, this does take up the majority of the time to make a rug. But I learned very early on that what happens to a rug after it is cut off the loom is just as important as the knotting process. We have used the term "finishing" and "attention to detail" many times, and it is these processes that can either keep a well knotted rug well made, or take a well knotted rug down a few pegs if the finishing and attention to detail are lacking. Example: the 320 knot per square inch 9x12 rug that took four weavers fourteen months to knot perhaps was an intricate Persian design that demanded twenty yarn shades to uphold the integrity of the design and be an acceptable representation of a true original. The finishing steps are critical to completing the mission of creating an artistic masterpiece. The washing process must be handled properly with the correct number of wash and rinse cycles. After the drying period is complete, the surface pile of the rug has to be carefully sheared very evenly for maximum smoothness. Fringes must be unraveled, tied, brushed and clipped. The sides of the rug must be cabled and wrapped (serged) with care. The yarn composing the intricate design – having been scrambled and mixed somewhat from the wash - must then be penciled or line-sorted. This is a key finishing process that requires skill and patience by the men who take a sharp-ended dowel of wood (like a pencil but with a wooden point) and separate all the yarn colors and return them to their original knotted position so the pattern is crisp and clear on the face (surface) of the rug. Poor line sorting can result in a design that appears fuzzy and out of focus to the eye. All of these steps that are taken after the rug leaves the loom can be time consuming

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(labor) but this "attention to detail" is essential for a rug to be completed correctly.

For the 80 knots per square inch 9x12 rug that takes 4-5 months to weave, fewer yarn shades would be used – say 10 – 12 colors – to compose the pattern, and because the knots would be larger the intricacy of the pattern would be restricted as well. This would mean faster work, less line sorting – consequently less total labor overall for a less expensive finished product.

It all works down to the same essentials/fundamentals as any product. How good are the materials used, how skilled are the weavers, and how much time and attention to detail did it take to finish the rug properly? Obviously there are hand knotted rugs made that have even fewer than 80 knots per square inch. Just keep in mind that the fatter and fewer the knots the less pattern detail is possible and the less intense and time consuming the finishing processes will be. And generally speaking, a manufacturer who puts out a 30 knot quality (and there are a few left who have not turned to tufted rugs instead) will not use expensive yarn and dyestuffs in the mix. There are some exceptions, but they are few. Once again, it is all relative. It is very hard for the end user to fully determine the quality of the yarn used and the cost of the dyes, so they have to count on a reliable, reputable dealer – who, hopefully, contracts and buys from a reliable, reputable manufacturer – to steer them straight when considering a purchase. Just remember that a cheap rug is cheap for a reason(s). You get what you pay for.

One thing is for certain. Hand knotted rugs – whether they be 30 knots per square inch or 320 knots per square inch – are being produced by fewer and fewer companies overseas. What will be the result? They will become more exclusive, more sought after, and more expensive. Like anything else you put your money in though, make sure you know what you are getting. There are diamonds – and there are not.

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