



The Rugman of Santa Fe: Rug Buyer's Guide

We created this Rug Buyer's Guide based on questions asked by customers over the last 10 years and we hope it enhances your rug buying experience.

How to choose a rug

Old vs. New

Some customers want an old rug; they are interested in collecting antiques, period. But, for those who are not as committed to owning antique rugs, new rugs are an excellent choice. New rugs are made using similar techniques, such as hand-spun wool, Turkish or Persian knots, that you would find in many antique rugs. In fact, not only are new rugs woven in the same durable fashion, but the dyes used now are vegetable dyes, the only dyes known and used before the 1870's. For those customers who like the look of an old Oriental rug, they can find new rugs produced with various washing techniques that captures the fading, charming look of an old Oriental piece. We are fans of new productions, both modern and traditional designs, and we mostly carry new rugs in our store. Not only are they less expensive, but you know for certain what you are buying, and the quality is excellent.

Traditional or Modern design

Traditional designs are often found in rugs made in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and even Egypt. They are usually reproductions of old Persian-Turkish, Turkmen, Indian and even northwest Chinese designs from centuries before that typically incorporate a floral design, geometric design or a mix of both. Traditional designs are characterized by either a central medallion or an overall pattern with a border and exude a more formal feel than modern designs. When one speaks of Oriental rugs, for example, this refers to a traditional design.

Modern designs may also incorporate floral and/or geometric designs, but in bolder colors and with a more contemporary feel, characterized by large geometric sections of color, highly contrasting borders, or no border at all, and/or pictorial designs. Contemporary modern designs are being crafted by artists and given to weavers to reproduce, so often these rugs reflect current color and design trends. Nepali rugs are a good example of this, but the Persian gabbeks are not. Persian gabbeks are based on primitive designs taken from old gabbeks, and then embellished in the new productions.

When purchasing a rug, it is a good idea to determine where your personal rug tastes fall, within Traditional or Modern designs. While these designs are not mutually exclusive and both styles can be incorporated into home design, some people find they have a strong affinity for one over another. In the end, all that matters is what you love and this could be Traditional designs, Modern designs, or a mix of both.



Flat vs. Pile

Most woven rugs come in two types: flat weave or pile. Pile refers to the various heights of the wool yarn used to weave the rug. When a pile rug is woven, the knotted wool stands about 2 inches high before it is trimmed using clippers to its final height. The pile gives the design a three-dimensional look and blends the colors together in a harmonious way. Pile rugs are often chosen for their loft and softness and can be both traditional and modern in design.

Flat weave refers to a basic woven rug without a pile, and Kilim rugs and Navajo rugs are examples of this type of weave. Bold patterns and strong colors are often found with flat woven rugs. Both sides of the rug can be used, and these rugs are much easier to move, maintain and repair to their lightness.

Just like design, whether or not one chooses a flat weave or pile rug is determined by personal taste. Both types of rugs are equally durable if woven correctly and cared for properly.

Natural vs. Aniline Dyes

Natural dyes were used for centuries in the Middle East and Asia for rug production. Reds were obtained from dried madder root or cochineal, blues from indigo, brown and beige from walnut husks and other colors from various vegetal matter available in whichever regions the rugs were being produced. The process of obtaining the natural dyes, and dyeing the wool is arduous and require time, labor and expertise.

Imagine when Aniline dyes, which are synthetically produced dyes, became widely available at very low cost. This became the most popular way of dyeing wool, due not only to its reduced cost, but the many color options available and decreased labor, expertise and time required to use these dyes. By the early 1900's aniline dyes were used throughout the Middle East, and one would be hard pressed to find a natural dyed rug between the 1900s and when the natural dye movement reinvented itself in the 1980's. Before this time, expertise in natural dye techniques was dwindling and largely forgotten.

In general, we prefer natural dyes. Not only are they environmentally friendly, which is important given that most communities of weavers rinse their rugs in rivers, but they will not bleed when washed, and will fade evenly over time while maintaining its color integrity. Essentially, natural dyes are incredibly stable, provide vibrant color, and keep both people and the planet safe.

Rug Quality

Machine made vs. Handmade rugs

Machine made rugs can only use machine spun wool thread. This process strips the wool of its natural lanolin and the fibers dry out faster, becoming more brittle and eventually break. Machine made rugs are harder to repair and difficult to wash. Most of the time machine made rugs have glue on back to secure the knotting since machines cannot fasten the knots as tightly and carefully as human hands. The knots can unravel after washing and require re-gluing to fasten knots once again. In general, machine made rugs are not as good of quality as handmade rugs.



We prefer handmade rugs woven with handspun wool. The wool retains its natural lanolin, which makes the rugs softer and more stain resistant than machine made rugs. Handmade rugs are woven to last, and the handspun wool has a longer life than machine spun wool. Since the rugs are not mass-produced, they are unique and an expression of craft and creativity.

When looking to purchase a handmade rug it can be somewhat challenging to determine if it is indeed handmade, and if it is of good quality. To access if the rug is handmade it is best to look for weaving inaccuracies, for example some knots will be larger than others, and when looking at the back of the rug the lines that the warp follows will not be perfectly straight. When the wool is handspun the threads are coiled then knotted. Over time some of the threads can spring loose and uncoil, looking longer than the rest of the pile. This is an indication that the wool is handspun, and therefore hand made.

Wool quality

Wool quality mostly depends on what the animals eat, the particular animal species, and how the wool is spun. Kurdish wool from Iran, for example, is considered the best quality wool available for weaving. This handspun wool contains a lot of lanolin, making the wool soft and stain resistant. This wool has dense, strong fibers, which makes it easy to work with. Handspun wool maintains the integrity of the wool best.

Knots

Knots are created by looping yarn around pairs of warps and cutting off the standing end. The cut off ends of the knot become the pile, or the nap, of the rug. When looking at the rug from the "bottom" (where the rug was started), you are looking against the nap, with light being absorbed into the pile of the rug making it appear darker. When viewing from the "top," you are looking toward the nap, and the light is bouncing off the rug making it appear lighter. Depending on the length of the nap, this change in color can be subtle or very drastic, but it is present in every handmade rug.

Knots indicate the quality of the rug, and are often a determining factor in the price of rug. The size of the knots comes from the size of the handspun wool. Thicker wool results in thicker knots, while thinner wool creates smaller, tighter knots. More knots per square inch results in a stronger rug, but this requires more labor and time and thus becomes a more expensive rug. When purchasing a handmade rug, turn it over and examine the back. You can see how large or small the knots are, and you can count to see how many are contained in one square inch. This can give you some idea if the rug you are looking at is of fine quality; anything above 100 knots per square inch is considered fine quality.

Rug Care Suggestions

Vacuuming

All handmade rugs can be vacuumed, but it is best not to use a beater. It is better to vacuum the rug with the nap rather than against it. Or, the rugs can be wiped with a damp cloth, again following the nap of the rug.



Sun

Keep in mind that any rug will fade under direct sunlight. If the rug is in a sun filled room, it is a good idea to rotate the rug regularly to ensure an overall even fade.

Moths

Moths like dark, cool space to call home. If a part of your rug is under a table or sofa then it is wise to vacuum that area regularly. Even the back of the rug should be vacuumed to prevent moth infestation. We also recommend sprinkling a mixture of lavender and cedar chips under rugs as a moth deterrent.

Longevity

To increase the longevity of the rug, it is best not to walk on the rugs with street shoes. The dust and dirt from street shoes will eventually work into the bottom of the pile and with time and use they will break down the wool fibers.

Another suggestion for increasing the longevity of your rug is to use a rug pad. Rug pads not only secure the rug from moving on tile or wood floors, but it also decreases the wear and tear of every day use.

Stains

Water, water, and more water! Most people do not use enough water to clean a stain on their rug. When a stain occurs, clean it immediately with a lot of distilled or drinking water. Use enough water to dilute the stain all the way down to the bottom of the pile. You can place a towel underneath the stain and use another towel on the top of the rug to soak up the water. Do not use any chemicals or hard brushes to clean a stain. If you use enough water and blot the area with a clean towel this should be enough to remove the stain. If the stain remains, have the rug professionally cleaned.

Professional rug cleaning

Whether or not you should have your rug professionally cleaned depends on use, type of stains, and personal preference. Rugs in high traffic areas may need professional cleaning every 1 or 2 years. Area rugs that are not in high traffic areas could be cleaned every 4 or 5 years, again depending on personal preference.

Pet stains and oil generally requires immediate professional cleaning to remove. The longer these stains remain the more likely permanent damage to the rug will occur.

All chemical dyed rugs need professional cleaning in order to prevent the color from bleeding. Good quality natural dyed rugs should be color fast and not bleed with washing, which means you can wash them yourself at home.

Antique, Navajo and silk rugs should all be professionally cleaned.



How rugs are priced

We are not sure how other companies price their rugs, but we can tell you exactly how we price ours. First, we consider the quality of the rug. We spend a lot of time and money to find the best quality rugs in terms of wool, weaving technique, and dying expertise. This translates into a portion of the rug price.

We make an effort to work with reputable, honest producers, and this sometimes costs more and can be reflected in the price of the rug.

We also consider the overall design and color of the rug; if it is exceptionally beautiful, we will charge more, so beware the rugs we have fallen in love with!

Often, particular rugs become hard to find and difficult to export to the US, and this also affects the price of the rug.

Finally, the size of the rug influences the price since the larger the rug the more material, time and labor are required for its production. Additionally, there is a high demand for large rugs, but limited looms available for their production, which increases their overall cost. Our family run business tries very hard to provide the best quality rugs at the fairest prices. We do not inflate our rug prices in order to lower the prices during a sale, a common sales tool with rug sellers. We also make sure that every rug is clearly marked with a price, which ensures a fair price for every customer.

For more information on rugs we recommend the following books:

Oriental Rugs Today by Emmett Eiland (2003)

Koekboya: Natural Dyes and Textiles by Harald Bohmer

If you have a question not addressed in the Buyer's Guide, please feel free to contact us:
505.988.2393