

# Beauty & Wealth from the Orient



The world's most famous and most priceless Oriental carpet: "The Ardabil"; 1539-1540; Unknown maker

Art lovers and collectors are drawn to tradition and craftsmanship for several reasons. It could be that the aesthetics or the rarity of the items produced may yield a considerable financial return over time, or simply that the pleasure of owning something so precious and beautiful might be gratifying enough.

Words: CHARL DU PLESSIS  
Images: © V&A MUSEUM LONDON, STEVE MOORE; VICTOR LIDCHI

In the world of collecting fine items, there is hardly anything that can compare to owning a superior example of a luxurious and enchanting Persian or Oriental rug or carpet. The tradition of hand-knotting fine Persian and Oriental carpets dates back at least 2,500 years, making this form of art and craft significantly older than most other kinds of valuable collectibles such as haute horology, paintings, vintage cars, personal memorabilia or even some highly desirable ranges of ceramics. Stretching from West Orient to East across a band of climate zones, the creators of handmade rugs and carpets use the wool from domesticated animals that thrive in these climates – from Turkey, Persia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and onwards, deeper into the Orient. If you are as confused as I was at first, "Persian" refers to modern day Iran, while "Oriental" would cover all of the areas east of Turkey, including Iran. The differentiation between rugs and carpets is a matter of size – rugs are smaller than approximately 2.5 by 1.5 metres, while carpets are typically larger. And then you get "runners," those long, narrow examples you see adorning the hallways at very exclusive private clubs and your rich aunt's stately home.

Not all carpets with Oriental designs are handmade. Machine-made reproductions are produced in factories across Europe and the East. As technology has improved, the painstaking work of shearing, cleaning, dyeing and spinning wool, even before a single knot has been tied on a particular carpet, has been replaced by more mechanical means. For this reason, it is the authentic hand-knotted article that is loved and prized world-wide for the finest interiors and which holds true allure, whether it is the almost naive figurines on a nomadic carpet or the most intricately woven masterpieces that could take skilled knotters up to three years to complete. Somewhere in between the rural and city examples, there is also a cottage industry that produces handmade pieces with their own beauty and character.

For most passionate lovers of this timeless craft and art, it is the soul of the creator and the "imperfections" of these handmade perfections where the joy in identifying a treasure is found. It is actually surprisingly easy to spot the difference between a handmade and factory-made carpet. For example, the sides and ends of a handcrafted carpet can never be *perfectly* straight, as the handloom and methods used make it virtually impossible to do so.

To understand more about the magical world of Persian and Oriental carpets, we sat down with one of the doyens of this field in South Africa, Victor Lidchi. Listening to Victor, a gentleman with an old world charm and an irrepressible enthusiasm for his calling, I started to learn about the many intriguing stories that surround these creations and just how fascinating the world of Oriental carpets and rugs is.

**Prestige Magazine (PM):** Mr Lidchi, how long has your family been in this field?

**Victor Lidchi (VL):** Originally from Spain, my family had lived in Constantinople under the Ottoman Empire since the mid-1800s before my father Henri moved to Paris in the early 20th Century. From there we

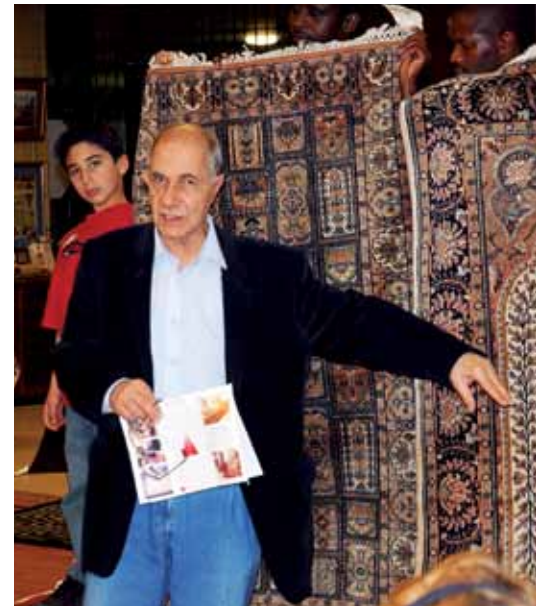
came to Johannesburg for the 1936 Empire Exhibition at the urging of Sir Ernest Oppenheimer, who was a friend and regular client of my father. We stayed, and have become the longest established name in this business in South Africa. I have lived, breathed and travelled carpets all my life, and have been to some of the most distant and fascinating markets across all of the Orient in search of desirable examples for our clients.

**PM:** What is the appeal that Persian and Oriental carpets seem to have for people, and why their prestige, if you pardon me using a phrase we hold dear?

**VL:** It goes back to biblical times in the East, and since the Renaissance in the West when carpets were first imported for the nobles and royalty by merchants from Venice, Holland and other trading nations with links to the Orient. Being handcrafted works of art, each piece is unique and carries something of the soul and personality of its creators. Also, they are an expression of the best of Eastern art, which has always fascinated the West. Their seductive colour combinations and enchanting designs have made them the ultimate in luxury and style for traditional *and* contemporary interiors, from New York to Hong Kong, Cape Town to London.

**PM:** How does one get started learning more about these enchanting objects?

**VL:** Once a month we offer a free early evening "Introduction to the World of Persian & Oriental Carpets" at our showrooms in Dunkeld, Johannesburg, and Clearwater Mall, Roodepoort. These gatherings start at 6:30pm and kick off with a short colour movie on this craft and art. We then cover basics such as identifying authenticity, determining quality and value, understanding the stories each carpet tells, decor considerations, and much more. Anyone is welcome, although booking is essential. We can even set up an evening like this as a private event for friends or colleagues. We also welcome visitors to our showrooms, whether enthusiasts or



Victor Lidchi demonstrating how to spot the authenticity of Oriental carpets.

newcomers, to see our collections without obligation, or to see and handle examples with one of our specialists. Contact us on +27 11 341 0367 (Dunkeld) and +27 11 675 5008 (Clearwater Mall) for reservations. Also visit our website at [www.victorlidchi.co.za](http://www.victorlidchi.co.za).

**PM:** Thank you Mr Lidchi. I look forward to our ongoing series over the next few months, where I will try to learn as much as I can on behalf of our readers. It has been a pleasure, indeed, to spend the time with you. ❁

"Shah Abbas," hand knotted wool carpet from the Victor Lidchi, Classics collection.

