



A high-grade Persian Bidjar rug in a fine contemporary setting

Our second in a series of interviews with Victor Lidchi of Johannesburg, third-generation specialist dealer and connoisseur of fine Persian and Oriental rugs. Victor's decades of international experience in buying, selling, lecturing and consulting in this field has seen him visit all regions of the Orient, as well as the major art and dealing centres of the West.

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Persian and Other Hand-Made Oriental Rugs

Prestige Magazine (PM): Victor, who buys Persian rugs these days?

Victor Lidchi (VL): Internationally, one can broadly divide buyers into those who buy them mainly as a decorative floor covering – they are satisfied with what we call the lower "commercial" grades; and those who love this craft and art form for its glorious colours, fascinating designs, and luxurious texture – much for the same reason that people of taste love

and buy original paintings. They want art and beauty in their interiors and often hectic lives. They will want what we call the "superior or choice grade" examples. Lastly, and more rarely, there are those who love collecting them, as an engrossing "hobby." They tend to take more trouble to research the subject and usually specialise in a particular type, style or region of rugs. For example: prayer rugs, or rugs with animals and nature scenes, or rugs of a particular tribe (such as the renowned Qashgái

of Persia), or silk rugs. Some will collect the antique examples (100 years or more), which can be very valuable, or semi-antique (50 to 100 years old), as well as the better examples of more recent times, which are more affordable. Finally, there is a smart group of collector-investors who buy usually for all the above reasons *as well as* with the hope and expectation of capital growth as a store of wealth.

PM: In your introductory lecture, you emphasise the importance of

understanding "levels" and grades. Why?

VL: Because otherwise people get confused by the often poor marketing in the market place, and remain uninformed. You see, "Persians" and the other no-less worthy and beautiful authentic Oriental rugs and carpets, can best be understood by comparing them to another art form – original paintings. Paintings vary in "levels" from museum masterpieces to rare valuable "collector's items," to fine paintings of merit and beauty, to "ordinary" pedestrian ones, to downright mediocre ones. This applies to any art or craft. And certainly applies to the craft and art of Oriental rugs. Just to use as an example one well-known name in Persian rugs, those from the renowned city of Kashan. There are "commercial" level Kashans of little merit, made of poor materials – ie, mediocre craft level and not much art. "Adequate" as a floor covering, but that's all. Next up in level would be a Kashan of respectable artistic and technical craft standard with a little more "art" content – not only acceptable as a floor covering, but decorative too. Better than the average, but not exceptional. Next up, for the person who wants a really beautiful example, and will pay for it, is the "superior" or close-to-top grade. It is not only a fine piece of craft technically, but it has superb materials, and uncommon beauty and personality – that priceless ingredient of the caring and gifted creator. Finally, (and remember these are broad divisions only) you find the rare Kashan masterworks that are fit for the finest homes or palaces, the finest collections, and even museums for the greatest past examples such as you will find in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and its equivalent art museums of London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Zurich. Now, these last are not just beautiful "floor decorations." They exhibit excellent craft and skill, and top-quality materials, but now also have a high artistic merit content and exceptional beauty. And these, as with any art form, are of course always rare and costly.

PM: What about cost in these categories? And who can afford them?

VL: Staying with the example I just gave of the different levels or "grades" of Kashans, and using a popular size called a Dozar in Farsi (Persian) that is roughly 2 metres by 1.4 metres, the low "commercial grades" could cost between R7,500 and R10,000. The next level up could be between R12,000 and R17,000. These are the grades you will find with ease. The superior ones for the real lover and discriminating buyer would cost, say between R20,000 and R40,000 or more, which is still affordable when you consider prices of even unexceptional paintings. Now, when you get to the top grades for the serious collector-investor, depending on age, rarity and beauty, these pieces could cost anything from R50,000 to R100,000 or more. For masterworks of the past you may expect to pay between R100,000 and R200,000 and up. When you get to the museum examples of earlier eras and centuries, start counting into the millions of Rand or US Dollar equivalent.

PM: Have they been a good investment in the past?

VL: I prefer "store of value" rather than investment, but in the lower grades, very seldom; in the higher grades, yes, very often in the medium to long term. As an example, I recently sold two lovely small semi-antique Kashan rugs, in imperfect but acceptable condition, for around R37,000. They had originally been sold in the 1950s, probably by my father, for approximately Sterling Pounds 125 (converted to Rand in early sixties equals R250). They had given their owners generations of pleasure and beauty. Not a bad return. But caution – there are changes in fashion and shifts in supply and demand which mean there are no guarantees. For example, fine Kilims that few would buy in the 1940s to 1960s became, in the last generation, highly sought after and prices shot through the roof. And on the other hand, certain fine silk rugs of the last generation *currently* are not doing well. But who knows: maybe in a few

years they will rise sharply once again. I much prefer to advise my clients to buy, above all, for love of beauty; to satisfy their personal tastes and decor; and to buy the best they can afford. That's ultimately the best investment – the joy they bring to your life and living, and the originality and style they add to your interiors.

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Rare, early 20th Century collectible tribal Qashgai masterwork

