

Carpet Queen



*Donna Hoffman doesn't just sell Iranian folklore rugs. She celebrates them.
By Laura Wexler*

There's no heat in the three-story brick building that houses Donna Hoffman's growing collection of Iranian rugs, but no matter – she's cooking with gas like any good evangelist. I walk in and am greeted not with “Hello” or “How are you?” but rather, “Let me start with the lion rugs.”

I trail Hoffman past heaps of rugs – some with geometric patterns, some with floral; some in vibrant red and blue, some in faded yellow and orange – and climb to the second floor. Along the way, Hoffman talks frenetically, the names of Iranian tribes and provinces – Quashqai, Kashan, Kashmar, Shiraz, Tabriz – rolling off her tongue effortlessly. Every rug in her store Carpet Beggars (Hoffman didn't realize she'd misspelled the word until after she'd bought her Web domain name, so she's staying with it for now) is handmade and each is one of a kind. But some, as Hoffman jokes, are “one of a one of a kind.” These include her collection of lion rugs.

“Three years ago, I went to an auction, saw a lion rug and bought it.” Says Hoffman. “I found a book on lion rugs!” (*Lion Rugs: The Lion in the Art and Culture of Iran*) and later learned it was the *only* book. I just became fascinated by the symbolism. Then I found out how hard they are to get.”

Women in nomadic tribes in Iran would make the rugs for their husbands to put in their tents, believing the lion would impart bravery as well as protect their men. “But a lot of the women had never seen lions,” says Hoffman, as she peels back one rug after another, “so you have lions with the head of a cat or the tail of a cow. They’re extraordinary.”

After purchasing that first lion rug, Hoffman located an Iranian man in North Carolina who owned a collection. “I thought I would just buy some and start my own collection, maybe have a little museum or something someday,” she says. “But I had them in my basement and people who came over liked them so much, they were cleaning me out of a year’s worth of rugs in one swipe. I realized I needed to have more.”

By then, Hoffman’s knowledge of and passion for Persian rugs (only rugs made in Iran can claim that title) had grown to include all kinds of folkloric and tribal rugs – hunting rugs, tree-of-life rugs, and ones depicting the legend of Layla and Majnun (the Iranian equivalent of Romeo and Juliet), the Persepolis palace and the Noor diamond, among others. “They’re always portraying their lives and their stories in the threads.” Says Hoffman, a former TV marketing director and co-owner of Hoffman Awning Co. with her husband, John. “I was so addicted, I took out a loan and asked the Iranian man to travel to Iran and send me back some.”

The 13-year U.S. trade embargo against Iran had prevented many Americans from being exposed to Iranian carpets, which are considered among the finest Oriental rugs in the world. Hoffman was lucky: right about the time her addiction took over in 2000, the embargo was lifted. Now there are thousands of carpets in Iranian warehouses ready for export. Since last May, Hoffman, who dreams of making the trip to Iran herself someday, has been selling some out of a former hospital on Mitchell Drive in Reisterstown that she’s transformed into a veritable sultan’s den.

Like any true evangelist, Hoffman is only in business partly to make a living. Mostly she’s on a mission: “to offer the public a change, to offer the experience of learning about tribal rugs and learning what kinds of rugs Iranians like – rather than just what we’ve been taught to like by our local retailers.”

After one couple decided to decorate their entire home in lion rugs, Hoffman printed up “adoption certificates” for each one. Every customer is a potential convert, and Hoffman is willing to educate. She explains that her prices (which range from \$300 to \$3,000) reflect a rug’s rarity; the number of knots per inch; and its age. She explains the origin and location of the tribes, deciphers the meaning of their various symbols and explains that the color variation in older rugs is called an *abrash*. Above all, she advises, “Please don’t bring your fabric swatches here. These rugs are floor art. They will conform to any space.”

Carpet Beggars is open Wednesdays and Saturdays by appointment. 513 Mitchell Drive, 410-329-3181, www.carpetbeggars.net