



After the Rains...

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Known to HALI readers as a specialist in the textile art of mainland Southeast Asia and China, the author, like many in the trade, had a very different professional career before entering the art world. Originally an architect, about a quarter of a century ago he and his family were based in the Gulf state of Bahrain, where he fell under the spell of the Persian carpet weavers' craft.

What do rain and buying carpets have to do with each other, you may well ask? "Nothing," you think. But they do. The best time for buying Persian rugs is after the rain, and even better if it's a big storm. Of course this was true only in Bahrain twenty-five years ago.

The island of Bahrain is a small Islamic kingdom in the Persian Gulf just south of Iran which, in comparison to some of its neighbours, is relatively open and free. The general level of education is also comparatively

high, and women are permitted to travel alone and work side-by-side with men. Over the generations Bahrainis have often brought back carpets from vacations in Iran, and because of the proximity of Bahrain to Shiraz, many were south Persian tribal rugs.

After the civil war started in Lebanon in 1975, foreign companies and the majority of banks and other financial institutions relocated their main offices to Bahrain from Beirut. The Bahraini economy was booming, and many foreign executives moved there with their families, creating a need not only for more commercial buildings but for homes as well. It was this that brought my family and me from Thailand to Bahrain, where I opened a branch of my architectural office.

At that time most houses in Bahrain were still simply built according to a traditional style and system: single storey with flat roofs where you could sit in the cooler hours of the evening. The walls were made from stacked stones taken from the sea, the cracks between filled with cement, sand and straw, then all roughly covered with cement. To make the roofs small tree trunks were rested on the walls, over which two or three layers of palm-leaf mats were laid, then covered in cement 4-5 inches thick. After three or four years of intense daytime heat and cold winter nights, the roofs inevitably cracked.

During the fortnight-long wet season, heavy rains

Esfahan prayer rug (one of a pair), central Persia. 1.45 x 2.36m (4'9" x 7'9"). One Friday, when in Bahrain fathers and sons go to the market while daughters and smaller boys walk around or visit friends and family, we too were going shopping. A group of young women were walking towards us, talking and laughing. As they passed our car my wife leaned out the window to greet them in Arabic, followed by the words that we had memorised so well we could recite them in our sleep, "Do you have any old carpets to sell?" They laughed even louder. One of them smiled and said in perfect English, "Yes, I have several, but they are in my old house. If you like, we can go there." And with that, much to our surprise, she climbed in, leaving her friends in the street.

There were many things in the house, including three rugs, but only one that we liked. We bought it, and told her we would like to find old carpets in better

condition. She said that her parents had many, but she didn't know whether they wanted to sell. When we got to their house she went in first, then came out to say that they had three rugs they would sell. We were taken to a huge second-floor bedroom where, on the floor, there were two very large, gaudy new carpets with long fuzzy pile. To our relief, her father said, "These are not for sale." Those he wanted to sell were rolled up under the big heavy bed. I moved it in a flash and pulled out the rugs. Seeing only their backs made me weak at the knees. My heart beat faster and faster. We rolled them out with trepidation. Ahhh, they were beautiful! The condition was good and two of them were a pair! The third was also excellent. I tried to calm myself and not talk too much for fear my voice would shake. We paid the price they asked, quickly rolled them up and fled. That night we ate leftovers as we hadn't bought groceries.

usually lasted for two or three hours at a time, but often went on intermittently all day, sometimes for several days. When it rained like this you could bet that 99.9 per cent of the roofs in Bahrain leaked. Inside the homes, no room was spared. Water dripped and ran from every crack, while outside there was no drainage and water flooded the streets and washed into the houses.

The day after a heavy rainstorm would often be clear and sunny, but the people were not finished with their rain business. They dragged everything onto the roofs to dry: mattresses, pillows, blankets, mosquito nets and carpets. Everywhere we would see colourful Persian rugs hanging from the parapets.

Aside from pictures in architectural and design magazines, this was our first experience of Persian rugs. Because the carpets in magazines usually belonged to wealthy people and corporations, we assumed that they were prohibitively expensive. We liked them but we didn't know much about them, so we stayed distant admirers.

But then the heavens opened up again and this time they dropped carpets right on us. One day, driving home from a job site, I saw an old man walking on the side of the road carrying two rolled-up carpets. Just as I parked and got out of my car he arrived in front of our flat. I asked where he was going. He said he had just bought the rugs from one of the nearby houses and was on his way to sell them in the market, so I asked for prices. To my surprise they weren't expensive! I had more than enough money in my pocket to buy both – a carpet for our living room and hallway too, just like in the magazines.

I took them upstairs to show my wife, and that was it. We were hooked, possessed by the rug spirit. Obsession swiftly followed. We went to every book store in Bahrain and bought everything we could find on Persian rugs. We pored over the photographs of carpets from different tribes, trying to memorise their geographic origins, unique designs and the patterns of their knots.

That old man also got hooked on us. He started coming to our apartment regularly, tempting us with all kinds of

Khamseh long rug, southwest Persia. 1.09 x 2.90m (3'7" x 9'6"). This rug tested our patience. It took us years to buy. The owner's family used it on the cold floor of the bedroom during the brief Bahraini winter. In hot weather, almost all year, they kept it rolled up, wrapped and carefully stored, so it was clean and in excellent condition. We had bought other rugs from this house, but this was the best. But no matter how much we begged, they did not want to sell it to us. Still, we stopped by every four or five months, full of unreasonable hope. We didn't get the carpet but did become friends. Eventually we even stopped asking about the rug until one day, after three years, out of the blue our friend asked if we still wanted his carpet. "Yes! Of course!" we yelled in unison. But his price was much higher than any rug we had ever bought. We were too shy to bargain with a friend, so we

said we just couldn't manage it.

As we left the house, our eyes met over the roof of our car. We simultaneously lamented, "What have we done?" But we felt too embarrassed to go back. At home, we continued to ask ourselves whether we had gone mad. After all that time, when he was finally willing to sell, we had said no. The price really wasn't that bad. Where were we going to find anything like it again? We decided to go back the next week. Meanwhile we couldn't stop thinking about it: maybe he wouldn't want to sell it to us any more, maybe he needed money badly and had taken it to sell at the market, maybe someone else had happened to knock on the door when he was home and bought it. When the fateful day came, we rushed to see him. As he opened the door we said, "We-want-the-rug-and-here-is-your-money." He looked at us blankly for a couple of seconds, then said, "Okay."





threadbare rugs in various states of dirtiness or disrepair. They all looked beautiful to us. He had his own peculiar knock. We would open the door to see the landing covered with rugs. We bought nearly everything. We would take our new acquisitions outside to hose them down, scrubbing out mud, gum and caked-on goat or chicken droppings. Then we laid them out in the sun to dry. At

Above: Afshar rug, south Persia. 1.37 x 1.75m (4'6" x 5'9"). I saved this rug's life. I had to brush and scrub it many times before anyone could begin to recognise it as a rug. The owner had a house behind my office. We saw him and his sons every day for years. They raised chickens and kept pigeons on their roof. One day I struck up a conversation with one of the boys who invited me to see his birds. Everywhere there were cages in all shapes and sizes. Beneath a large rectangular coop on top of a table, buried in thick layers of droppings, dirt, birdseed and feathers, was something that looked like a carpet. It was. I suggested that we should pull the rug out or it would be ruined. The son shrugged and said they had no use for it anymore. "If you want it, you can take it," he offered. "Help me lift up the pigeon coop." "Why not?" I thought "You never know what might be under all that shit."

Right: Qashqa'i rug, southwest Persia. 1.22 x 1.98m (4'0" x 6'6"). The previous owner of this rug was a teacher who had hung her rugs over the edge of the roof to dry after the rains. From far away, it stood out among many, looking better and better as we meandered closer. We couldn't wait to knock on the door. Some of her rugs had been wedding gifts from her parents: traditionally a woman was given cash, gold, jewellery, wooden chests and rugs for her dowry. The mother of one of our Bahraini friends told us that after her wedding ceremony, her relatives had rolled her up inside a carpet in her wedding finery with all of her dowry gifts (except the wooden chest). Marching in procession they carried her to the groom's house. The teacher's other rugs were not quite as old and pretty as this one, but in retrospect we were foolish to buy only one.



night we would stare at our newly cleaned carpets, then grab our books and turn the pages in great expectation. When we found a picture that looked like the rug we had just bought, we congratulated ourselves on our cleverness, and felt as if we had just won the lottery.

After investing quite a lot of money on cheap rugs and expensive books, and getting to know a bit more than before, we realised that most of the rugs we bought from the old man were rags that radiated only the essence of the rugs they once were. We slowed down our buying frenzy and wrestled with bouts of remorse.

Then, after we had been in Bahrain for more than a year and half, a second revelation occurred – we met Abdullah Saad and learned to buy rugs from the villages. 'Saad' was not his real name, but a nickname which in Arabic means "performer of magic". Abdullah, who was close to eighty, was notorious in Bahrain. He had seven wives that we knew of and more than twenty children. When he was young he really had been a famous magician, who was said to have been able to make himself disappear. When he was too old to disappear any more, he became an antiques dealer.

Abdullah's house was near a place that sold potable water (at that time tap water was only good for bathing and washing clothes). Every few days we passed his house, which was bursting with things flowing from the doorway and windows down onto the roadside. His flat roof was packed with old beds, chests and other furniture.

Whenever we had time we would go to look at his things. Once we bought a cabinet, another time a table, and several times carpets (by then we thought we knew what was good). We asked Abdullah to find beautiful,

antique rugs for us at good prices. He told us he often saw rugs in the houses where he bought furniture, but he didn't know what to look for and he didn't care to learn. The ones he had at his house had either come with other things, or occasionally, after spending a lot of money with someone, he would ask for a rug as a present.

Abdullah had no car and in any case he couldn't drive, so he proposed that we should be his chauffeurs and we could go out to find things together. If there were any rugs that we liked, he would bargain for the best price, and we would then buy them, giving him a small profit. Everything else was his. After mulling it over for a while, we thought, "Why not? It would be an adventure."

The first few times we drove him to the villages we felt shy and embarrassed. We had never done anything like this before. Often Abdullah would get out of the car and begin to shout, "Do you have any old things to sell? What do you have to sell me?" We felt like slinking back into the car and hiding. Knocking on doors wasn't much easier. All of a sudden we had become like hawkers or junk dealers. But after two or three outings we began to get into it. We learned from our 'buying guru' how to deal with Bahrainis from all walks of life. In and out from this house to that house and this village to that, we met rich people, poor people, orchard owners, farmers, fishermen, merchants and sheikhs.

Abdullah used clever psychology. He made people want to sell to him. Everyone either knew him or knew about him. Often, as soon as our car pulled up in a village, people would come running from all directions with things to sell. My Arabic was limited, so I followed him around and tried to pick up a word here and there while observing people's body language. I studied the protocol for entering homes and Abdullah's manner in interacting with people, often enjoying their hospitality before walking off with the living room furniture.

He had a repertoire of buying styles. When dealing with wealthy people he had one way of speaking, another for poorer folk. But no matter who he bought from, he always paid in cash. He would take out a large

Khamseh runner, southwest Persia. 0.94 x 2.92m (3'1" x 9'7"). We found this rug in a house in a small seaside village. When we first saw it, it was in excellent condition – beautiful, clean and lustrous – but the owners refused to sell. Every time we went to that village, we stopped by to remind them of our existence (and interest). Each time they invited us in and we sat together, in front of the rug, drinking coffee or tea and eating candies and fruit.

Each time we went there it was in a worse state, with old grains of cooked rice and chewing gum crushed into the pile. One time there was new stain, a big purple blob of gentian violet antiseptic. On later visits we noticed the ends had begun to fray and the sides had developed holes and cuts. Every time we saw it we figured the next time the rug would be completely demolished.

Several years passed, until

one day we were walking in the market and ran into the rug's owner, who said he was getting ready to move. His new house was beautiful and modern, and he was planning to install wall-to-wall carpeting. He didn't need that old rug any more, he told us, and if we still wanted it, we should come to get it as soon as possible.

We didn't waste any time. After his usual hospitality, we asked him how much he wanted for it, but he absolutely refused to take any money. He said he knew that we liked the rug very much and insisted that it was a gift.

We washed and scraped that rug so many times before we hit bottom. When the inner carpet finally re-emerged we discovered that the pile was worn throughout and threadbare in some places and there were even more holes and splits than before. But it was still beautiful.





Qashqa'i rug, southwest Persia. 1.57 x 2.46m (5'2" x 8'1"). One day the building contractor's young engineer, Mohammed, was driving me home from a job site. We got onto the six-lane highway that had recently been built on landfill beside the water. As we drove along, I spotted something rolling this way and that in the middle of the road as cars whizzed by. The car in front of us ran right over it but Mohammed swerved around it. I turned back to look, thinking that it must be a carpet. But why was it lying there on the highway? Maybe it had fallen off a pickup truck. There were no houses nearby and no one except two men working by the seaside on the bottom of an upturned boat.

"Stop! Stop!" I told Mohammed. We screeched to a halt, pulled over and backed up a couple of hundred yards along the shoulder. It really was a rug! I told him. "Walla!" I ex-

claimed in Arabic, "It's a good one. Mohammed, ask them if they want to sell it."

The men were a father and son who owned the boat and the rug, which they had brought along to 'clean' by having cars run over it to knock out the dust. The father told us the price, I bargained a little, he agreed and I paid, all within five minutes. At home I vacuumed and then washed it. There were flecks of white paint all over one side, but luckily it was water-based and all the spots came out with soap and water. It turned out to be a gorgeous carpet, with unusual colours and in excellent condition. The black, dark brown, light brown and cream colours are all in undyed wool, and the rest are all natural dyes. Mohammed couldn't believe how he had helped me. He told everyone at the site about it. For weeks afterward people kept asking me about that rug. My secret rug-buying life was exposed.

wad of big denomination bills from his pocket and peel off each one as if he never had or would have a problem with money. He did this right in front of the seller and he paid for what he bought immediately. If there was no agreement on the price, he always left the door open to come back another day. He taught me to be brave and uninhibited (when buying rugs), to make up my mind and take risks.

Abdullah was the one who advised us to look for rugs after it rained. Seeing them hanging from roofs and balconies saved us a lot of time because we could decide in advance if we wanted to go closer. After our epiphany, every time it rained, while other people were awake all night fighting the elements, we were bubbling with excitement. Tomorrow we would go carpet hunting. Even a few drops of rain would get our adrenalin flowing. When the time was right, we drove about aimlessly with no destination in mind. My eyes were always on the horizon, hoping to spot the splash of colour that might mean a good rug. I was intent on finding rugs, what kind they were, how good they were, and how I should navigate the narrow streets to get as close as possible so that we didn't have to waste time having bought one and looking out for the next.

We would gaze upward to determine whether a rug was of sufficient quality to see it closer. Once we decided to knock on the door, we would stand outside, preparing ourselves. I practiced my rug-buying vocabulary while my wife willed herself to knock. As soon as the door opened I would ambush the person with as much charm as I could muster in my halting Arabic, getting straight to the point and asking if he or she would like to sell the rug hanging from the roof. Very few Bahrainis found this offensive. Perhaps because we were guests in their country they would open the door wide and receive us warmly.

Bahrainis are friendly and hospitable. Most have a wonderful sense of humour and enjoy talking and joking around. One time a man sold us the rug his wife was sitting on, then in the spirit of Henny Youngman, asked, "What about my wife? How much will you give me for her? Take her – she's a real antique!" Then to sweeten the deal, he added, "If you want, I can haul her right to your door! Free delivery!" A few times a rug that looked good from the distance wasn't so nice up close, and we wouldn't want it. Then the homeowner might jokingly offer us a deal that usually included his mother-in-law.

We had many adventures buying rugs. The pieces shown in this article are just a few that we managed to buy or that we were given. They aren't necessarily the best or most expensive or rarest, but they are meaningful to us. Their value cannot be measured in money – they are part of our history and a memory of times past.

Looking at each carpet, we are reminded of that time and of the people who were part of our life in Bahrain. Some we got to know quite well because, like Abdullah, we tried to keep the door open for the future. Many became our friends. I remember vividly the people and where and how I got each carpet. It makes me feel renewed and content, as if I am back in Bahrain in the midst of a treasure hunt. Even though we left more than fifteen years ago, with our rugs surrounding us we never forget the warmth and affection we have for the Bahraini people and their country.