

Heading: A State of Restoration

Sub-heading: Perfecting the art of Repair

By Nick Broad

Hidden away in a small Upper East Side apartment, every inch of which is covered by some aspect of his work, lives one of the world's leading rug restorers, Richard E. Newman. Collectors from all over the world have been bringing Persian rugs to him for hand washing and restoration since 1979.

To attain a 16<sup>th</sup> century look using modern wool is no small feat.

“Although some people might argue with this,” he said, “there are probably less than five people in the world who can do what I do.”

To my untrained eye, despite his thorough description of exactly what I should be looking for on an 18<sup>th</sup> century tribal piece, his repairs were invisible. Even Newman, who might have spent weeks or even months on one rug, cannot always find his own restorations, resorting to old photos to see where previously there was nothing but a fist-sized hole.

This standard requires a Herculean effort. First, he immersion washes the rugs with PH balanced detergents of precise concentrations. Too little detergent simply mixes with the

dirt, which then absorbs into the foundation. Too much and it will eat at the lanolin of the wool, ruining its luster.

Once the rug is clean, he studies it under several light conditions (including dawn, midday and dusk, as well as varying artificial lights) to find which of his 7,000 colors of wool (he has more than 2,000 reds alone) would most closely match those found in the rug. Precision here is difficult; the hue, shade and intensity of wool changes depending on how tightly it is spun and the direction from which it is viewed, as light is absorbed more by the ends of the fibers than the sides. Non-uniform dyes, the wear of usage and even the varying oils found in wool sheared from different parts of a sheep come into play. To ease his labor, each thread is labeled. APP 916 2P, for example, is #916 (his own label) 2 ply wool, made by Appleton Bros. Ltd. of England.

Then, to the mellowing sounds of endless Gregorian chants, Newman gets on with the task of inserting the knots of colored wool. He works on rugs with between 30 and 200 knots per square inch, meaning a single inch can take him between an hour and a day to knot. He said he has never advertised, as the dealers all know each other and word of exceptional work gets around.

About 5 years ago a dealer brought him an early 18<sup>th</sup> century Turkish village rug from a client of his, which needed extensive repiling and reweaving, with a foot long hole in the middle and various small ones. Usually he wouldn't take on such a big rug, but this was

the right type—“charming, beautiful and with really lustrous wool. He put about \$20,000 worth of work into it, but increased its value “by a lot more.”

A dropout from college, Newman’s first job was for \$1 an hour in a mailroom. Then he joined the Merchant Marines to travel to Asia and South America. After a few years, he started temping at ChemBank in Midtown in 1967, living in a “railroad apartment on the Lower East Side, with a tub in the kitchen and a toilet in the hall.” When his boss offered him a promotion, he thought, “Oh no, you’re not going to pin me down, I’ve got more traveling to do!” However, short of cash, he eventually agreed. Over eight years he was promoted to senior accountant, but resigned against all advice to go and live in a tent in Belize.

Soon after he returned to New York, he stumbled upon rugs while looking for a divider to separate his studio into two rooms, and immediately became hooked. “Fascinated by their energy,” he began buying and selling rugs, but came to believe that collecting distracts from their worth.

“The important thing is not owning a rug,” he said, “but enjoying it.”

Later, after watching a friend wash and repair rugs, he decided that restoration was his calling.

Today, Mary Jo Otsea, senior vice president of the rugs and carpets division of Sotheby's, smiled at the mention of his name.

"There are lots of restorers out there," she said, "but he's one of the few who spends the time and careful attention that collectors value. He's also a very humble man."

Now in his 60s, Newman only does restoration on the rugs he has collected with "high energy," mainly for his own enjoyment. But with the help of an assistant, he does rug washing and repairs at his workshop for friends and clients.

"I especially love washing rugs because it brings up the beauty of the rug," he said.

He used to dream of buying a house in the country where he could raise sheep and weave his own rugs, but at the moment he spends his spare time playing pool late into the night at Eastside Billiards on 86th Street. To the sound blaring out of the pool hall's jukebox, he continues his meditations.

"Pool is another activity in which there are no secrets," he said. "For the mind and the body to work in harmony, you have to have affection for what you are doing, and work with attention; this keeps the mind from wandering. Then you can define every problem and work out a solution. Focus is important; through a higher consciousness all knowledge is attainable."