

PETALUMA ARTISAN REWEAVES THREADS OF HISTORY ORIENTAL RUGS REPAIRED TO NEAR ORIGINALS

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The handknotted carpet runner in Pamela Hiller's studio glows with muted reds, rusts and deep blues in geometric designs, but there are places where the antique rug is worn down to the bare warp threads.

An antique rug restoration specialist, Hiller brings knowledge handed down through thousands of years of tradition to her task of restoring those bare spots to something very close to their original splendor. She uses techniques learned from her Iranian-born teacher, who began making rugs at the age of 10.

"It's an entire process," Hiller said. "You start at the beginning with a detailed analysis of the type of knot and yarn, which direction the yarns were twisted, the type of wool."

The rug in Hiller's studio was most likely woven by Kurdish nomads at the turn of the century, with handspun, naturally dyed wool from sheep they raised themselves.

"Rug making was traditionally women's work, compatible with child-rearing. It was very time-consuming," said Hiller, 40, who has been restoring rugs since 1980, first in San Francisco and for the past 3-1/2 years in Petaluma. She has raised a son, 16, and a daughter, 14, during that time.

The Kurdish nomad rug speaks to her across the decades.

"I feel like I'm looking at this woman's subconscious," she said. "Women from nomadic tribes had no education, but there is something about the order and harmony they put into their work."

Hiller first attempts to match the wools in a carpet with available commercial yarns that she will dye herself. Yarn textures vary widely, depending on the tightness of the spin and the smoothness and luster of the wool.

If she can't find a good match among commercial yarns, she may spin her own yarn on the spinning wheel that stands in the corner of her studio.

The next step is to create appropriate colors in natural dyes, made by boiling plant materials in water and adding a mineral such as alum, tin or iron to fix the color.

Hiller's basket of dye materials contains dried plants such as weld, a greenish straw-like plant that produces a beautiful yellow, according to Hiller. Twigs of rust-colored madder root yield a red, while indigo gives several blues, depending on how it's processed.

A sample book of naturally dyed wools include some surprisingly vivid colors, whose slight variations in tone give them a depth not found in commercial dyes.

After matching colors with natural dyes, Hiller will reknit bare places and worn areas, a process she calculates will take 30 to 40 hours for the 3-foot by 11-foot runner.

She demonstrates the knotting process, using a traditional tool that is a combination knife blade and hook to dexterously wrap a piece of yarn around two warp threads and knot it. In between rows of knots she weaves one or more rows of weft threads. Finally she trims the newly knotted yarn to match the rest of the carpet's pile.

A restored carpet closely matches the original in color, the way it reflects light and the feel of the wool. The match is never perfect because natural dyes vary from batch to batch, and even the original rug shows those variations.

A less valuable carpet can be repaired using closely matched commercially spun and dyed yarns, which have a flatter and more uniform color. The repaired sections have a different feel and reflect light differently, but are still serviceable.

Working with her hands comes naturally to Hiller, raised in the handcraft tradition of her family from the hills of Northern Tennessee. But Hiller got into rug restoration in a roundabout way.

“I never knew such a thing existed. I was studying ballet in San Francisco, but I knew it wouldn't be a lifetime career. I began learning tapestry weaving with a Russian woman,” said Hiller, who still weaves tapestries from designs a friend provides.

When a friend suggested she try antique rug restoration, a search of San Francisco oriental rug shops led Hiller to Aziz Arwandeli, a man from the Iranian village of Ardabil who took her on as an apprentice.

Hiller can tell a lot about a rug from its design and the spacing of the knots. “Nomadic rugs use more geometric designs and fewer knots per square inch,” she said. The rug she is restoring has 42 knots per square inch, while city-made rugs may have several hundred. Although a whole family contributes to a nomadic rug -- the men raise the sheep and men and children may help with the actual weaving -- women do the time-consuming spinning and dyeing as well as weaving. And recently women have begun forming cooperatives to weave rugs.

“In the late '80s and '90s there has been a resurgence of fine rugs woven by cooperatives in Turkey,” said Hiller, adding that the trend gives women economic power.

Textile technology is ancient. “There is evidence that people began spinning plant fibers as much as 20,000 years ago,” Hiller said. Spinning may have led to the domestication of animals.

Not surprisingly, weaving and spinning imagery are intertwined with ancient mythology. In one origin myth, said Hiller, a goddess spins the thread of time from her womb. From it she creates the universe and weaves the tissue of all living beings.

Then there is the lunar goddess who weaves the moon each month and then unravels it.

“I've started studying about the symbolism of weaving,” Hiller said. “A weaving is symbolic of putting things together to form a whole. To me it's very compatible with having a rich home life -- a strong sense of organic wholeness.”

Weaving represents the web of life, an interconnectedness. “We're coming back to that,” said Hiller, referring to the way in which people's stories are becoming interconnected through the Internet.

“Weaving is also connected to a long tradition of transmission of knowledge -- a very ancient lineage of women. There is a strong feminine element. I feel it is very important that it continue,” said Hiller, who envisions taking on a student of her own.

PHOTO: b&w by Jeff Kan Lee/Press Democrat

Pamela Hiller restores antique rugs in her Petaluma home studio.
www.hiller-restorations.com

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