

Magic Carpets

Pamela Hiller's antique rug restorations bring back old carpets to life

By KATIE WATTS

Argus-Courier Staff Writer

“I can go out and meet the sheep,” says Pamela Hiller, “depending on how far the client is willing to go.”

Hiller, 40, is referring to her profession, the art of antique rug restoration – putting the magic back in a carpet. “With each job, it’s completely customized – what is best for the carpet and how far the client is willing to go.”

The concept seems simple and if you’ve ever latch-hooked a rug. Hiller’s movements and methods will be familiar, for they are similar. But the variables are enormous. The age of the rug, where it came from, how the yarn, was dyed, the plants used to dye the wool.

Hiller enjoys working with yarn dyed with natural sources. She offers a sample book of chemically dyed yarn – a blazing rainbow of hues. She points out these dyes produce a vivid palette of “flat, even color.” The she opens a sample book of naturally dyed yarn – still a rainbow but of muted, earthier tones, showing the deep, rich and subtle variations that natural dyes can produce.

One reason why so many antique carpets have a red background, she explains, is because it’s an easy color to dye. Green on the other hand, takes two

processes, dying first the yellow and then the blue.

“It takes a lot of detective work,” Hiller says, to determine the colors, the age of the rug and the type of yarn used.

Assuming the client wants the closest possible match to the original, Hiller is indeed willing to go hand-on with sheep until she finds one whose wool comes closest to that ewe or ram who sacrificed its long-ago Johns. Although she could go as far as growing the herbs, lichen and other plant sources used in the dying,” there is a limit as to how much time I have. I grow and gather what I can, though.”

After the sheep is sheared and its fleece washed and dyed, Hiller spins the wool into yarn, a “peaceful, relaxing” time. (“There’s a real rhythm to any of these crafts, a calming influence.”). Then the yarn is knotted into the rug, each knot hand-tied, with anywhere from 30 to 300 knots per inch.

No restoration can be exact, of course, because the rug was created in another time and place. Water and soil have changed, plus the rug itself has aged and been exposed to dirt, shoes and small boys with carpet-beaters during its travels. “I can’t recreate the environment, the sheep and the plants,” Hiller says. “I can come close, about 98 percent, so it’s mostly undetectable.”

Spinning and weaving, Hiller says, are “very, very ancient, dating back at least 20,000 years. One of the oldest legends is of a goddess, spinning a thread of time and weaving it all together. There is a history of weaving in so many countries.”

She began rug restoration as an apprentice. It was an art that appealed to her. “I think it’s in the genes,” she says. “My mother and grandmother quilted; my daughter’s interested enough to learn

it,” Later, the craft worked beautifully for her lifestyle, “it was flexible, something I could do at home while raising children.”

The family moved to Petaluma when the children became teens. “They’ve blossomed in this atmosphere,” says Hiller of her two high schoolers. She has enjoyed the change as well, saying this area is “really good” for a craftsperson, and has recently joined the Redwood Empire Hand Weavers Guild.

There’s no standard answer, she says, as to how much a rug restoration can cost. It depends on what’s being done, the quality, age and condition of the rug, the time involved and just how close the client wants to get to the original.

Local Aladdins who are interested in having a magic wand waved over their carpets may contact Pamela Hiller at 707-789-0784.

www.hiller-restorations.com

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