

STATE COLLEGE

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Freedom From The Floor Up...



PHOTOGRAPHY BY D.K. HIGGINS

Masood Arjmand and his daughter, Michelle

“I came to the United States, I went to school, I tasted freedom,” says Masood Arjmand, a former scientist who is now the owner and CEO of the Desert Rug Company. “When I went back to Iran, I wanted to help my country. Suddenly these guys showed up and they said this country is Islamic—no alcohol, no music, even no shaving your beard. No teaching evolution in biology department. I mean, I couldn’t put up with something like that.”

It’s early January, several weeks before the grand opening of the Desert Rug Company’s store on South Atherton Street, and Arjmand is giving me a tour of his Ferguson Township home—a beautiful, contemporary dwelling that showcases, with extraordinary effect, the wares of his rug company. Upon entering the home, however, the first rug I notice is hanging on the wall of the foyer. It’s a portrait of the Shah of Iran’s family, reproduced from the heavily-circulated “official” photo taken several years before the Shah fled into exile in 1979. That event spearheaded the wave of Islamic fundamentalism that would eventually result in America’s current war on terrorism, a conflict that Arjmand, now

a U.S. citizen, proudly supports. “These guys are absolutely destroying our civilization,” he says. “They have done it in Iran, they have done it in Egypt, and they have the ambition to rule the world. So we’d better do something about it.”

Moments later, after admiring a plethora of gorgeous floor rugs, I’m standing in the living room, transfixed by another superbly crafted wall piece. This one features a mandolin player performing for a dancing couple and a woman reclining on the floor, wine glass in hand. “What you see here is the artist’s imagination,” Arjmand explains. “These things are not available [in Iran]—dancing and singing and having a good time. But that is what these people like, and you see it in their art.”

Arjmand, who was born in 1947, grew up in Darab, a small town in southern Iran. He was educated at the University of Tehran and, after earning a B.S. in plant protection in 1969, came to Penn State for his two graduate degrees. He returned to Iran where he taught entomology and pesticide chemistry at the Isfahan Technological University for a year before becoming the chairman of the biology department at Shiraz University in 1979.

But once the Ayatollah Khomeini took power, Arjmand knew his days in Iran were numbered. He smuggled himself out of the country in 1981 and headed for West Germany, where he held a position in the Research Scholar Department of Biochemistry at the University of Freiburg. Using his network of friends in Iran, he managed to bring his wife, Mitra, and his infant daughter, Michelle, to Germany a year and a half later. He immediately began the immigration process so that he could take his family to the U.S. When the process was completed, in 1985, he left a \$50,000-a-year job in Freiburg to take a \$15,000 post-doctoral position at Penn State. "Freedom is the essence of life," he explains. "Someone who isn't free doesn't have anything anyway. And societies that offer you freedom and democracy, they offer you other opportunities, too. Scientists travel light. If you are a knowledgeable person, you don't need to carry anything."

After a year as a post-doc, Arjmand was able to raise \$40,000 from a group of investors so that he could start the Centre Analytical Laboratories, a firm that specialized in testing substances for pesticide residue. In addition to being a respected scientist, Arjmand proved to be an astute businessman, turning Centre Analytical into a multi-million dollar company with nearly 100 employees, including Mitra, his primary assistant. He sold the company in 2000, began to dabble in real-estate investment and, after buying a sizeable piece of land near Penn's Cave, made plans to build a log cabin on the property. Arjmand and Mitra decided that they wanted to buy some Persian rugs for the cabin and learned that Chinese, Pakistani and Indian rugs were dominating the market. Persian rugs, they were told, were too expensive.

Arjmand next called a friend who owns a rug agency in Esfahan, Iran. Although the agent dealt with members of the Bakhtiari tribe, descendents of the gifted rug makers of the Persian Empire, he told Arjmand that the rug business in Iran was nearly defunct, another casualty of the fundamentalist regime. There was a surplus of Persian rugs, however, and Arjmand sensed both a business opportunity and a mission. "Right now, things are so bad that \$500 a year puts one rug maker to work," he says. "So I told [the agent], 'Collect as many rugs as you can,' and I bought 5,000 of them. It took all the money that I had or could borrow, because the first [priority] was to put those people to work. And in order to do that, I'd have to have my own line." He then formed the Desert Rug Company and appointed Michelle as director of marketing and sales.

"Persian wool is the best wool in the world," Arjmand explains. "For that reason, Indian, Chinese and Pakistani rugs are not as flexible as Persian rugs are. They are coarse and tough. And my collection is the biggest collection of Persian rugs in the United States. No one has tried to make [the rugs] so readily available and they've always wanted too much money. They don't want to sell 10 of them at \$1000 per rug. They want to sell one of them at \$20,000. And that doesn't work. Because how many people can afford a rug like that? So I have put the lowest possible prices on all my rugs."

Arjmand recently started the Freedom Rug Foundation, an American offshoot of his initial philanthropic endeavor, the Masood Arjmand Foundation, that he established in Iran. "I wanted to also call it the Freedom Rug Foundation, in Farsi," he explains. "But if I had used the word 'freedom' in the foundation's name, it would have been considered an opposing organization. That's how anti-

ORIENTAL RUG PATTERNS: A SAMPLING

(Excerpted from *Approaches to Understanding Oriental Carpets* by Carol Bier, Curator, Eastern Hemisphere Collections, the Textile Museum, Washington D.C.)

Oriental carpets reached a peak in production in the late 19th century, when a boom in market demand in Europe and America encouraged increased production in Turkey, Iran and the Caucasus (the mountain range between the Caspian and Black seas). Areas east of the Mediterranean Sea at that time were referred to as the Orient.

The majority of patterns in Oriental carpets consist of geometric and stylized floral designs arranged within a central field framed by borders. Traditionally, several designs appear in the field and borders of a single carpet. The sense of intricacy and complexity is achieved by various systems of pattern repeats and by the use of color and its alternation.

Persian carpets

Persian carpets are famous for their curvilinear designs and rich variety of floral forms. Most typical perhaps in the western mind is a symmetrical layout with central medallion and corner quarter medallions, usually overlaying a repeated design of scrolling vines with leaves and blossoms.

Indian carpets

Indian carpets share many stylistic features with their Persian cousins, particularly in the stylization of floral forms. But there are also differences that may be recognized in the use of color and in weave structure. Indian carpets often use a typical combination of reds, greens and blue-greens, and whites, with motifs delineated with dark brown or black outlines.

Rugs from China and Inner Asia

Formats and sizes differ from those of other rug-weaving traditions because they are designed to suit Chinese furnishing requirements. These include chair seats and backs, and *kang* covers (to be placed over the raised heating area in a Chinese home.) Many carpets and pillar rugs bear designs that are related to Imperial imagery of dragons, earth, water and sky.

freedom [the fundamentalists] are." The FRF specifies that 20 percent of all the company's profits be donated to the rug makers in his homeland. He hopes to jump-start a renaissance for the Persian rug industry and, in so doing, help his former countrymen recognize Americans as "champions of democracy and peace."

"These rugs are not really elite items," Arjmand says. "They are commodities, made by poor people, and they want to have the work. And if they are sold too expensively, then those guys are out of work. This whole industry is going to disappear, and I want to do something about that. It was hard for me to buy 5,000 rugs. But how hard was it for them to live without \$500 a year? So I'm hoping that once Americans get to like the product, then [the rug makers] are going to prosper. Every one of those rugs in an American home is a blessing for Iran." ~D.K. Higgins