

# A BOUNDLESS PASSION

SINCE THE AGE OF 4, BEN SOLEIMANI HAS BEEN DRIVEN BY A LIFELONG LOVE FOR CREATING AND COLLECTING THE WORLD'S FINEST RUGS

PORTRAIT BY ALFRED YANG WORDS BY CLAUDIA BAUER



"I TRY TO CREATE THINGS THAT ARE FOREVER, NOT JUST FOR TODAY. I HOPE THAT THE RUGS I MAKE TODAY WILL ONE DAY BE KNOWN AS VERY SPECIAL RUGS, DESIGNED BY SOMEBODY WHO LOVED TO CREATE THEM."

—Ben Soleimani



As Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds," but then he never encountered anything like the expansive mind and prodigious talent of Ben Soleimani. Purity of vision. A singular focus. Less is more. If you're Soleimani, those are words to live by.

"When you keep to your vision, and stay true to it, that is when you do your best work," says Soleimani. "I cannot design anything I do not love." That vision, born years ago and nurtured for decades, has blossomed into a collection that realizes everything he believes in: rugs defined by clean lines, neutral colors, the finest natural materials and masterful craftsmanship. Those qualities struck a chord with RH Chairman and CEO Gary Friedman in 2011. Since then their shared vision has remained a constant, and Soleimani's creativity has expanded beyond anyone's imagination. The culmination is a partnership with RH to design all of its rugs.

"Before, one could only get this quality of rugs at very specialized galleries or boutiques," he says. Now, because of their partnership, Soleimani's RH rugs have found a new worldwide audience. "Gary and I understand quality the same way. And that understanding is what pushes me to try the impossible." Impossible, however, isn't a word in Soleimani's or Friedman's vocabulary. As Soleimani states, "Neither one of us takes no for an answer. Impossible is not an answer to a problem." Soleimani will admit that when you possess the creativity of an artist, the focus of a chess master and the passion of an athlete, nothing is impossible. As someone who loves a challenge, he relishes channeling his energy toward creating a unique piece of art.

The process starts with inspiration, something in generous supply in Soleimani's world. "Every day I'm inspired," he says. "I get inspired by old tiles, old fabrics, even by walking into a sneaker shop and remarking on the mix of colors and fabrics. Or I could be driving down the street and see an amazing landscape." A photographic memory also serves as a bank stretching back 25 years to supply ideas. It's his rare ability to integrate those fresh ideas with two millennia of rug-making heritage that keeps him at the forefront of originality, creativity and craftsmanship.

As open as he is to the new, even the avant-garde, his every creative choice is informed by a heritage that runs so deep, it's simply in his blood. Growing up in the fourth generation of a world-renowned rug business, he recalls, "I jumped up and down on rugs when I was three or four years old; I was rolling rugs up when I was seven years old; I was opening rugs for clients when I was ten. Every day after school, I would go and learn. It all comes naturally to me. If I want to achieve a certain look, I draw on my knowledge of antique rugs, and I know what weave to use, what texture to create, what pile is right for the design," he adds. When Soleimani touches a skein of hand-spun wool or hand-knotted pile, he feels the connection to rug-making's millennia of history, and he senses the presence of those artisans who came before him.

This season, the new collection highlights the use of natural fibers, something Soleimani passionately embraces. He uses words like "true," "real" and "untouched" when describing his affinity for all things natural. Intimately involved in every stage of production, he selects, fine-tunes and layers each element to create the effect he desires. One of the many points of quality that he insists on is using old methods of spinning and dyeing. "When sheep are just shorn, the wool's natural striated colors are so exquisite. And that is the beauty of them," he observes with emotion. Hand spinning enhances the fibers' organic richness. "When you cut the wool yarn into pile, you see five colors within one strand as it opens up. The variation of the wool comes through." That distinctive texture is one hallmark of a Soleimani rug - each strand of yarn is a nod to tradition, an expression of nature, evidence of the wonderful vagaries of handcraftsmanship.

Drawing on his vast knowledge of antique carpets, this season Soleimani also significantly expands his offering of one-of-a-kind vintage rugs from the 1940s and '50s, curated exclusively



by him. Traveling the globe, he brings his singular vision to unearthing these treasures, gently restored but still displaying their weathered age and timeless character.

For Soleimani, making new rugs is much more than a series of production steps; it's a calling. "It is all about relationships," he says. "A rug is such a human product, an art form. It is not manufactured, it is not by machine, it is by people." Many of his artisans have worked with him for more than a decade. He also maintains a close kinship with the extended families of artisans who work with him in the world's historic rug-making regions. He considers the artisans his family, and the feeling is mutual. "We sit on the floor, we share the same food, we talk the same talk. I salute them, and I am so grateful to all of them."

Before he agrees to work with new craftspeople, he ensures that they share two essential values - pride in a masterful skill and a deep sense of stewardship. "Creating rugs is in the family; skills are passed down from generation to generation. It's work that keeps families together and sustains their way of life," he explains. "When you find the right people to bring out your vision, those are the people you support, and you grow with them."

Handcrafting one of Soleimani's rugs can take six to seven months. After all, there are no automated machines, no assembly lines and no factories. There are only people, making rugs the way they've been made for over two thousand years - with care, using only the finest hand-selected materials, with respect for the past and an eye to the future. For Ben Soleimani, it's the only way to bring his vision to life. Because when a rug is artfully made by hand, it is much more than a floor covering or a room accent; it is a document of truth and life. "I try to create things that are forever, not just for today," he says. "I hope that the rugs I make today will one day be known as very special rugs, designed by somebody who loved to create them." RH



"WHEN YOU KEEP TO YOUR VISION, AND STAY TRUE TO IT, THAT IS WHEN YOU DO YOUR BEST WORK. I CANNOT DESIGN ANYTHING I DO NOT LOVE."

—Ben Soleimani