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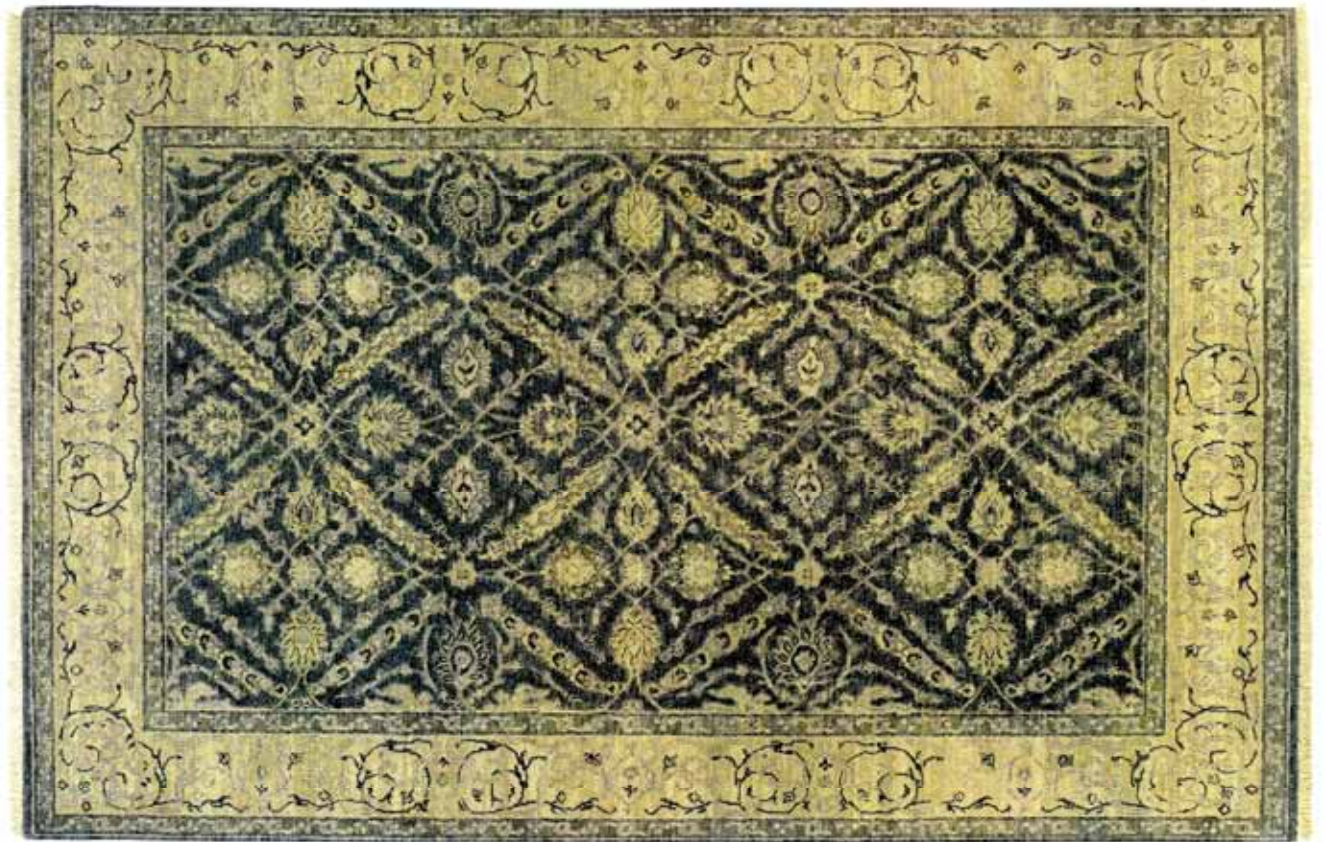
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SHOP TALK

The Taja rug, part of the new collection by Ben Soleimani for Restoration Hardware.



Carpet Kings

Restoration Hardware turns to rug guru Ben Soleimani to develop a line that makes high-end style accessible

By David Keeps

As a designer and purveyor of fine floor coverings, Mansour's Ben Soleimani has watched with interest and admiration the growth of Restoration Hardware. The company's products have evolved from Craftsman reproductions to hip Belgian and industrial-inspired home furnishings. When it came to rugs, however, he had to call the catalogue retailer on the carpet. "For me, the rugs were a disconnect," Soleimani says of Restoration Hardware's past offerings.

Knowing he could help, the Los Angeles-based Soleimani—whose company provides carpets to the Prince of Wales—approached Gary Friedman, Restoration Hardware's chairman and co-CEO. Friedman was a fan; he already owned four prized Mansour antiques

and agreed that his own company should carry rugs that fit more closely with its evolving aesthetic. Soleimani, who also creates the Mansour Modern collection of contemporary rugs, proposed a signature line.

After one fast-tracked year of development, Ben Soleimani for Restoration Hardware, a collection that runs from \$600 for a medium-size flat weave to more than \$12,000 for a large hand-knotted rug, launches this month. "Ben is the best in the industry," says Friedman. "I was blown away by the passion and emotion he put into this."

Soleimani created some 300 designs that were edited down to an initial array of 52 rugs suitable for a wide variety of interiors, from >



Ben Soleimani, left, with Gary Friedman, Restoration Hardware's chairman, in Los Angeles.

SHOP TALK



Ashra, a hand-knotted wool rug.

period-correct traditional rooms to sleek urban lofts. The full collection offers a choice of shaggy North African designs, dialed-down ethnic patterns, delicate stripes, and lustrous solids. Care was taken to achieve the appearance of well-worn antique carpets through botanical dyeing and weaving techniques that give a textured look—and not with harsh washing processes that, Soleimani insists, give rugs a fake fade. “The texture, the finish, the knot, are the chromosomes of a rug,” he explains. “Anyone can tear a page out of a magazine and copy the color and design, but what makes a difference is creating unusual textures.”

The Corte series, for example, is a solid ribbed rug that combines cut-pile silk and looped Tibetan wool at different heights to

create the effect of two-tone stripes. The Ferr collection uses cactus, hemp, and linen fibers in a design that references architectural iron scrollwork. Hand-knotted rugs, such as those in the Patara, Chaya, and Laila collections, recall tribal patterns of antique Persian and Oriental carpets, updated for more contemporary homes in a subdued palette of beiges, grays, and blues. And the Talisa, a tone-on-tone design, pays homage to Art Deco patterns with a Scandinavian simplicity. Many of the rugs are dramatically sheared. “I like rugs to be flat,” Soleimani explains. “It shows the pattern better and looks more aged.”

Pattern has always been Soleimani’s strong suit, and the partnership with Restoration Hardware has allowed him to reimagine the look of luxury rugs for the mass market. ▷



Rug samples in a variety of patterns.



Miya, inspired by North African tribal motifs.



Arabelle, a contemporary take on an ancient design.

TOP RIGHT, JASON O'DELL; RUGS, COURTESY OF RESTORATION HARDWARE

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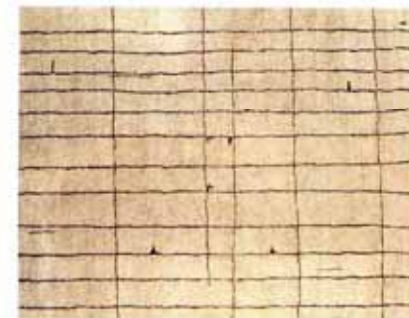
“When I design rugs I have a memory of thousands of textures and motifs, from different tabletops, fabrics, and mosaics. I combine all of these things to create something special,” Soleimani says. The Persian-born, London-raised designer, who emigrated to Los Angeles at the age of 16, sketches patterns by hand for his weavers to follow on the loom: “I travel the world seeing different looms and looking for the most skilled people who can bring out what I have in my head.”

Being an expert in the history and ethnography of rugs—and how they are made—gives Soleimani the ability to deconstruct and reinvent the common carpet with a maverick sensibility. And as rugs are so often the starting point of a room’s decor, Friedman and Soleimani are hopeful that they are creating heirloom pieces that not only honor the heritage of the weaver’s art but also embrace the present and point to the future. “Ben has created a new kind of rug that looks amazing,” Friedman says. “Great design is fresh but familiar. It looks beyond what something already is and makes it new.”

Perhaps that is why Friedman, who works with dozens of artisans and dealers, has chosen Soleimani as the company’s sole source for handmade rugs. “It’s not an easy business—there are lots of issues, and we didn’t have that expertise,” he adds. “We’ve never made a bet like this, but I trust this gentleman.” ■



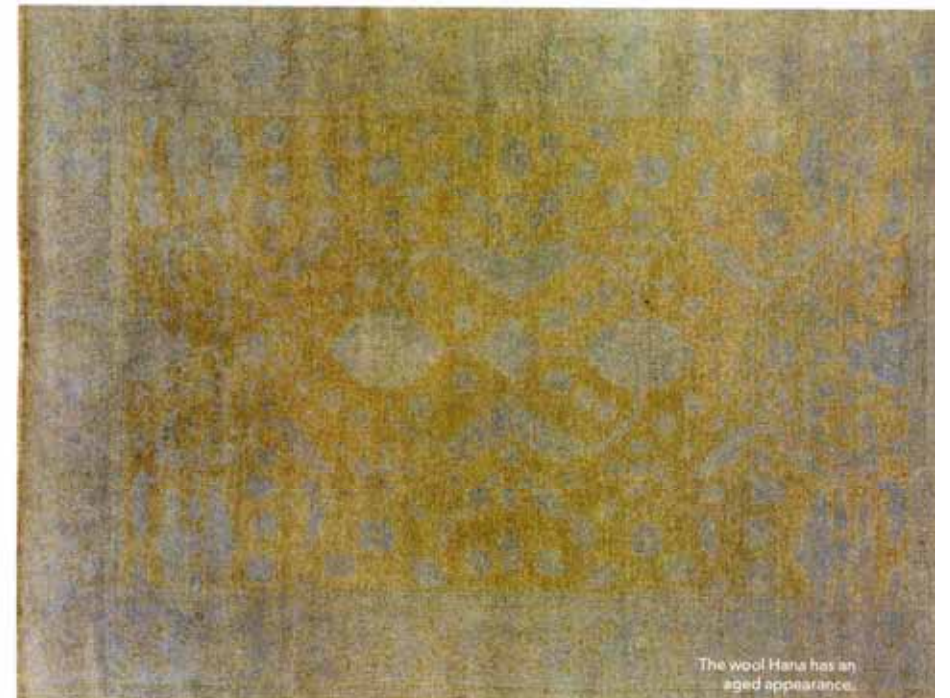
Soleimani at work.



The plush Marra evokes hand-drawn lines.



Raya, a high-pile rug with a muted palette.



The wool Hana has an aged appearance.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOE SCHNEIDER; RUGS, COURTESY OF RESTORATION HARDWARE