

Afghanistan: RUG DANGER ZONE

Some rugs you may clean have more hidden landmines than you realize.



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Afghanistan has been a war-torn region for decades.

Though many standard industries have not been able to withstand the turmoil, rug weaving has.

In fact, some of the “motifs” of war have made their way into their rug designs, and these Afghani “war rugs” are collected by some.

However, the stop-and-go nature of tribal weaving in these regions, and the lack of certain quality controls, have led to some dangers in handling and cleaning textiles from Afghanistan.

Thankfully, these dangers can be uncovered before

the cleaning process — if you have an eye for them.

Weaving landmines

The three big dangers with Afghan rugs are weaving flaws that cause buckling, dye flaws that cause migration, and cleanliness flaws that cause unsavory odors.

I'll cover each of these, and offer suggestions to help keep you from stepping on these rug landmines.

1) Rug buckling

Tribal and nomadic textiles are often woven on horizontal looms.

Sometimes the looms are stationary, and sometimes they are moved to travel with the tribes.

Though no hand woven rug is perfectly symmetrical, tribal rugs woven in a village do often exhibit more asymmetry than city rugs woven in a factory setting.

Add to the mix of tribal weaving the element of a war with Russia, and now the element of American and Taliban fighting, you have “chaos” blending into their art of weaving.

You also have the art moving into new regions, as Afghani weavers are weaving in nearby Pakistan and India.

This can make it harder to properly identify a truly “Afghan” rug, but the dangers can still be identified — with buckling being the primary one.

Uneven ends, wavy sides, and creasing throughout the body of the rug before the cleaning can often become much worse after the wash, especially if you are giving the rug a good long bath.



Tribal rugs often show pieces of day-to-day life, so Afghan war rugs reflect symbols of fighting.

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Many times it is easy to see potential rug dangers before you even begin the cleaning process — like these ends.

Rug precautionary measures

Flip the rug over and evaluate the weaving tension of the rug.

Changes in tension will show themselves to you as creases and lumps on the back side. You will also see changes in warp lengths and weft finishing tensions as waves along the ends.

If this is the rug's very first wash, then

these areas of buckling will likely become worse especially if the foundation fibers (i.e. warps and wefts) are wool.

Wool used as foundation fibers does not have the consistency of twist and tension as cotton does, so it tends to stretch or shrink more than a rug with a cotton foundation does.

Tips to minimize the danger of further buckling during cleaning

- If the rug is not heavily soiled, dust thoroughly, tack out on a wood floor and surface-clean. Be sure to rinse as best as you can (use a vinegar rinse if you are cleaning an Afghan rug with dyes that are not colorfast).
- If the rug is quite dirty and must be thoroughly immersion-washed, then tack out during the drying process to help minimize the buckling.
- If the rug has dramatic weaving flaws even before the wash process, it is sometimes possible to minimize these flaws with the use of a sturdy stretching floor
- Always have the client sign off that he or she is aware the rug is a tribal weaving and that buckling is inherent in the piece and weaving flaws cannot be reversed by

washing, blocking, or stretching. If the client refuses, then refuse the job.

2) Rug bleeding

Another danger with some tribal Afghan rugs is the presence of excess or fugitive rug dyes.

Wool is generally washed thoroughly after the dyeing process to remove "excess dye," but some batches are rinsed more thoroughly than others.

When it is not thorough, there could be extra dye ready to "move" either while dry (crocking) or wet (bleeding).

It is not uncommon to see Afghan rugs with pink or red fringes because of this propensity for the vibrant red dye of the rugs to migrate into the fringe tassels.

While white cotton fringes can sometimes be color-corrected using chlorine bleach (very carefully), with wool fringes it is sometimes best to simply keep them a light pink hue and not create a bigger nightmare by using a stripping agent that might cause irreversible fiber damage.

Rug precautionary measures

The dyes must always be tested for stability. The first test is the dry towel test. Run the towel with the grain of the face fibers, and also on the back side, to see if any dye crocks on to the towel.

If crocking occurs, then this rug will have migrating dyes no matter what method of cleaning you use.

I recommend you either turn the job away, or get a complete release of liability so you are not held responsible for handling what essentially is an "uncleanable" rug.

Second, test the dye stability with very warm or hot water.

This can be done on the back of the rug, or by testing from the front by grinning open the fibers for the test.

Take an eyedropper of hot water and get one test area wet and, after it has penetrated the fibers, press a white cotton towel to the area. Do not rub the area (you can move dye this way), but press it for

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Afghan rug being stretched to help it lay flat.



Hanging rugs can create a dye migration problem into the fringe tassels.



Test suspect dyes so you know what to expect during your cleaning process.

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several minutes. If the dye transfers, then you know the dye will move.

Now you need to determine if it will bleed a lot, or a little.

Third, test the dye stability with your dye-stabilizing agent

(i.e. acetic acid 3 to 5 percent, white vinegar plus water 50/50 mix).

Saturate a test area with your solution, and then press it with the dry towel for several minutes. If nothing appears — even on a rug that tested “bleeder” with the hot water — then you know you will simply need to quickly wash this rug and be sure to keep the temperature lukewarm or cool.

Tips to minimize dye migration during cleaning

- If the rug is not heavily soiled, dust thoroughly and then surface clean. Be sure to rinse using an acetic acid solution as this removes cleaning suds as well as leaves behind acidic residue to help alleviate dye migration during the drying time.
- Dry these rugs flat and face down so any migration will wick to the back side. Hanging can bring moisture — and dye — to the fringe tassels, so not hanging them helps you to avoid this problem.
- If the rug dyes crock onto a dry towel, it may be best to avoid cleaning unless your client releases you from being liable.

3) Rug B.O.

Every once in awhile you will get a tribal rug that just flat out stinks.

The sources of smells are many, as often the wool comes from dirty sheep, woven in dirty work spaces, and waiting to export in dirty shipping points.

If the odor is simply from being unclean, then a good wash can remove this type of odor.

If the rug has been placed in a smokehouse (sometimes used to kill/deter bugs), then the livestock odor baked into these textiles can be much harder to remove.

I have had limited success with some deodorizing solutions, and know of some who utilize ozone for this type of odor removal.

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Rug precautionary measures

The sniff test is the best. Sometimes odors will worsen with moisture, so you want to identify there is a problem (your client's problem) before you begin working with it.

When an odor is detected, determine if it is an isolated area, or the entire rug. You must have a game plan on odor removal, and be certain to charge for this type of specialized work.

If the odor is from an after-weaving treatment, either a tea-wash application (a brown dye wash to make the rug look older) or a starch/sizing treatment to help make the rug flatter, these are pre-existing conditions that must be noted.

The tea wash application is rarely permanent and can wash out unevenly. The starch/sizing application if removed with cleaning can remove a source of odor in

exchange for a now wrinkling rug.

Tips to minimize bigger problems after cleaning

- Take more than enough time to pre-inspect all Afghan tribal rugs. You cannot overkill this process, and often the longer you look at a rug, the more you are able to see. It is vital to look closely at the back side as this often shows you more than the front side as far as pre-existing conditions.

- See if there are pets in the house that may be the source of the odors. If so, you can guarantee that any areas affected by urine will migrate on you even if you use a stabilizing agent. Get a release from the client that the urine contamination requires a bath cleaning which may likely result in some dye migration. If the client refuses to release you from rug

dangers created by their pet, then refuse the job.

- If the rug is new and has a strong odor problem, then recommend to the client that she return the rug to the manufacturer. It may be that this type of odor could worsen with cleaning, or the dyes migrate through immersion soaking, and you do not want to be held responsible for a flawed rug. Before the wash it's the retailer's problem, after the wash it is yours.

Various qualities

As is the case with all weaving countries, there are high-quality and low-quality textiles that come from Afghanistan.

By arming yourself with a keen eye to pick up on rug dangers before they become rug disasters, you can remove most of the anxiety that pops up when tribal rugs come through your front door. *CM*