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High Style and Cleanliness: Oriental Rugs in Toronto Homes 1880 - 1940

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Academic scholarship pertaining to Oriental rugs, which began at the end of the nineteenth-century, has concentrated mainly on connoisseurship and the study of the cultures of origin and the peoples that have produced these items with a particular bias for items produced without the taint of Western influence. Little attention has been paid to the actual consumption of Oriental rugs in the West and the general influence of this trade on the evolution of decorative taste or how they may reflect changes in cultural and social attitudes. Oriental rugs within the Canada have received even less attention leading to assumptions that the taste for Eastern floor-coverings in Canada followed similar trends to England and the United States. This discussion will focus on the Canadian context by using Toronto to explore the consumption of Oriental rugs during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and examine the decorative taste of middle and upper class households in order to understand the various factors that influenced the popularity of Oriental rugs during this period. The simultaneous influence of international decorative trends coupled with changing attitudes toward domestic cleanliness and the work of retailers and the carpet trade all contributed to elevate the popularity of Oriental rugs to the point that they became commonplace floor coverings absorbed into the general lexicon of the *tasteful* interior.

Eastern rugs first came to North America with wealthy colonists keen to outfit their homes with fine furnishings. Initially, they were imported through trade with England, but direct trade with Turkish ports opened after the American Revolution in 1784. Numerous eighteenth-century American portraits illustrate rugs underfoot and draped on tabletops. Such carpets also appeared in numerous American household inventories from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, attesting to their popularity and widespread consumption.¹

Large scale European settlement of Upper Canada, or what is known as the Province of Ontario today, by the British began in earnest after the American Revolution when England was forced to find land for those that remained loyal to the crown during the conflict. Partly due to the scarcity of resources and partly due to a fashion away from Oriental rugs, hand-knotted pile carpeting appears to have been virtually non-existent in Upper Canada during the early years of settlement in the late-eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-centuries. Bourgeois interiors during this period would have been similar to the one depicted in the conversation piece painted by William Berczy in 1809. The painting depicted the wealthy Woolsey family of Quebec arranged in a neoclassical interior. The painted geometric design on the floor was in keeping with the tenants of balance and symmetric that typified the classical decorative taste of the period, notions that were seen to be at odds with the design sensibilities of Eastern floor coverings, however it was these same characteristics, particularly asymmetry, that later encouraged their popularity.

As the painting of the Woolsey family may suggest, the use of floor textile coverings at all in a Canadian context appears to have been minimal until the introduction of machine-made

¹ Joseph V. McMullen, “The Turkey Carpet in Early America,” *Antiques* 72 (1954): 220-223.

Venetian and ingrain products introduced in the 1830s (certainly hand-loomed carpets did exist, but on a small scale). In keeping with the fashion of the day, these flat-woven wool carpets were installed wall-to-wall in the formal rooms of middle and upper class houses. Countless portraits and early photographs depicted their sitters posed atop boldly patterned bright coloured ingrain carpeting. The 1852 portrait of Governor General Lord Elgin by Théophile Hamel (an important Canadian portraitist) featured a lavish interior with boldly coloured floral factory-made carpet, thus illustrating the height of mid-nineteenth-century fashion in Canada and the preference for manufactured floor coverings.



Figure 1. Julia McNair Wright, *The Complete Home: An Encyclopedia of Domestic Life and Affairs*, (Brantford: Bradley, Garretson & Co., 1883), 640. This lithograph depicts the typical arrangement of a Victorian parlour complete with wall-to-wall geometric pattern carpeting.

The vogue for domestic manufactured carpeting persisted for most of the 19th century, a preference that extended beyond simple aesthetic fashion. Home furnishings during the Victorian era frequently were defined in relation to moral and religious traditions. Within this framework, carpeting frequently was scrutinized as evidence of good or bad moral or financial judgment. An American domestic manual published in Brantford, Ontario in 1883 encouraged readers to, “get carpets of solid quality, subdued tints, small patterns, that are like known things: only a Turkish carpet can venture to lead the mind into the weary mazes of a crazy man’s dream of things unknown to creation.”² For this author writing during the 1880s, Oriental rugs represented the decadence of the East and therefore were not suitable for a Western home in good moral standing. This reaction to the rise in popularity of Orientalism, which was in part defined by an aesthetic fascination with the Eastern arts, reveals the skepticism that preferred manufactured products that were typical and known, a prejudice that retailers worked hard to change over the coming decades.

² Julia McNair Wright, *The Complete Home: An Encyclopedia of Domestic Life and Affairs* (Brantford: Bradley, Garretson & Co., 1883), 463.



Figure 2. This 1907 photograph of the dining room at Whitehern shows the use of wall-to-wall ingrain carpeting the common practice of layering Oriental rugs over top existing floor coverings. Courtesy, Whitehern Historic House and Garden, City of Hamilton.

The taste for Oriental rugs flourished throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were easily incorporated into late-Victorian interiors adding more layers of colour and pattern to the larger decorative scheme. Small tribal rugs, Indian felts and other Eastern flat-weaves were used as throws, displayed on tabletops and layered on top of existing wall-to-wall ingrain or domestic pile woven carpeting. The vibrant colours and bold designs were integrated into heavily furnished interiors accessorized with lavishly patterned wallpapers and lace, velvet and damask window coverings. During this early period of use they were rarely exploited as a focal-point in a room, rather they functioned as transient elements within layered decorative environments. The 1907 photograph of the dining room at Whitehern, the Hamilton Ontario home of the McQuesten family, demonstrated this tendency. The rug used under the dining-room table was described in family correspondence as “Moravian”, and was used as a crumb-cloth over top of the existing ingrain carpeting. It is not a particular point of interest in the over-all scheme, but rather a functional and artistic layer within a design that was intended to impress notions of class, style and comfort and functioned to protect the ingrain carpeting underneath.

The revived fashion for Oriental decorative art in the West was not the only factor that encouraged wide consumption of Oriental rugs at the turn-of-the-century. New levels of concern for household sanitation also helped their popularity. At this time new anxieties arose regarding the negative health effects of the traditional Victorian interior which was typified by an excessive use of decorative bric-a-brac including layered window trimmings and floor coverings. Because these decorative textiles prevented light from coming in and were difficult to wash, it was thought that they contributed to an unhealthy interior environment. Therefore it was deemed prudent to remove heavy draperies and valances as well as the wall-to-wall carpeting. Denuded of their covering homeowners varnished existing pine floorboards or installed hardwood in order to make house cleaning easier and more effective.

The Eaton’s 1901-1902 catalogue noted that,

*Nothing can compare with parquetry wood-flooring for beauty, cleanliness, and utility. It is not, as many people suppose, a temporary floor covering to be laid down and taken up at pleasure, but is a permanent new floor on top of the old one.*³

The comment on the permanence of hardwood flooring is evidence of the novelty that this product had at that time. This passage also indicates how the new found sanitary advantages of wood flooring were clearly used as a selling feature by Eaton's. The store was quick to make the connection between the new trend in flooring the Oriental rug as the next page of the catalogue for that year, in the Oriental rug section, noted their stock of rugs were ideally suited for rooms and halls installed with such parquetry flooring.⁴

The American author, Mary Beach Langton's 1906 book, *How to Know Oriental Rugs*, was typical in its attitude towards the sanitary properties of area rugs: "house cleaning with rugs on the floor ceases to be altogether a terror. Indeed, housekeeping in general through them is simplified and placed under better hygienic conditions."⁵ These sentiments were echoed in 1913 when an article in a Toronto newspaper noted that, "the substitution of well polished floors with rugs for the old time dusty carpet has gone a long way toward easing the burden of housework, to say nothing of the artistic effect attained thereby."⁶ Local dealers often used the same rhetoric in their advertising. The 1902-03 Simpson's Catalogue made a point to list their selection of rugs for the coming season as "serviceable" and "sanitary."⁷ The hygienic advantages of Oriental rugs were clear, they tended to be smaller and more portable than wall-to-wall carpeting and could be easily dusted or sent out for professional cleaning making the popularity of Oriental rugs more than just an aesthetic fad, they were also thought to lighten the burden of household chores and contribute to the good health of the family.

Many homes in Toronto followed this advice and installed hardwood floors during the first decades of the twentieth-century, at least in the more public areas of the home. The Toronto mansion of the wealthy Austin family, known as *Spadina*, underwent a series of large-scale renovations around the turn-of-the-century. In 1905, the Austins installed hardwood flooring in the drawing room, the reception room and the front hallway, as well as in the new palm room. A 1915 article featuring *Spadina* in *Saturday Night* printed a number of rare interior photographs of the house featuring gleaming hardwood floors and an assortment of Oriental floor coverings and skins, thus depicting the standard of upper class interior fashion and their adherence to the latest developments in household hygiene.⁸ It is important to note that although some of the principal rooms of the home were updated to suit this new criterion of household management, many of the private areas of the house continued to have wall-to-wall carpeting, often layered with supplementary runners, hearth rugs and scatter mats both of Eastern and domestic manufacture. This points to the fact that the new trend for hardwood flooring was as much an aesthetic choice as it was a hygienic one.

³ T. Eaton Company Limited Catalogue (Fall/Winter 1901-1902), 241.

⁴ T. Eaton Company Limited Catalogue (Fall/Winter 1901-1902), 242.

⁵ Mary Beach Langton, *How to Know Oriental Rugs* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1906), 13.

⁶ "Floor Coverings and Furniture", *Saturday Night*, 6 December 1913, 30.

⁷ *Robert Simpson Company Limited Catalogue* (Fall/Winter 1902-1903), 134.

⁸ "City and Country Homes," *Saturday Night*, 9 January 1915, 19.



Figure 3. Saturday Night, 9 January 1915, 32. This image of the front entrance hall at Spadina depicts the turn-of-the-century fashion for hardwood flooring and the use of Oriental rugs as part of the decorative scheme.

Although it is generally accepted that the vogue for Eastern decorative arts began during the 1880s, archival evidence of Oriental rugs in Toronto does not appear until late in that decade. An auction announcement for C.M. Henderson & Co in 1887 advertised a sale of new and second hand furniture, as well as “Persian rugs and mats.”⁹ In April of that year, John M Farlane & Co advertised a catalogue auction sale of household furniture and listed Turcoman rugs among the contents of the sale.¹⁰ Later that month at the residence of F.J. Gosling of 145 John Street, who was leaving for England, noted Persian rugs among the items offered for sale.¹¹ The listing of these items for auction in 1887 indicated that they were likely available in Toronto years previous although their availability may not have been wide-spread, they were perhaps either brought to Canada from the United States or England, countries that have a longer history of ownership of Oriental rugs, or sold occasionally through department stores or other carpet retailers.

As Oriental rugs became more popular the typical nomenclature became more sophisticated. With the turn-of-the-century came the publication of the first monographs on Oriental rugs, publications that attempted to standardize the language used to describe and categories Middle-Eastern weavings. The effect appears to have been that retailers began using much more specific language in their catalogues and advertisements. The listing of Oriental rugs in the Eaton’s Catalogue 1901-1902 named a much wider spectrum of carpets than in any previous catalogue. The entry noted, “A beautiful range of Turkish and Persian rugs, in the following well-known makes: Oushak, Shiraz, Boukhara, Anatolian, Geundge, Kara-bagh, Kazak, and Ghurdes, both antique and modern.”¹² It is doubtful that any of these makes were “well-known” to very many Torontonians during this period. Despite the growth of scholarship and collecting in cities like New York, Chicago and London, Toronto remained relatively conservative in its taste for Oriental rugs preferring to view them as items of decoration and or indicators of class rather than art objects worthy of serious connoisseurship.

⁹ *The Evening Telegram Toronto*, 12 March 1887, vol XI no 264, p. 4.

¹⁰ *The Evening Telegram Toronto*, 7 April 1887, vol XL no. 286, p. 4.

¹¹ *The Evening Telegram Toronto*, 7 April 1887, vol XL no. 286, p. 4.

¹² *T. Eaton Company Limited Catalogue* (Fall/Winter 1901-1902), 242.

Despite attempts by scholars to generate an academic appreciation of Oriental rugs, retail displays and advertisements continued to capitalize on Orientalist themes and imagery popularized in decades previous. Eaton's regularly used its stock of Oriental rugs to create tent-like structures as a central part of the carpet department display. Presumably customers were encouraged to have-a-seat in the pseudo nomadic constructions and contemplate the beauty of the carpets before them and imagine their exotic pedigree while selecting one or more to take home. These displays were set-up many times over the coming decades. The Hudson Bay Company Catalogue also capitalized on exotic themes in order to help sales. The 1910 – 1911 store catalogue described its stock as, “real Persian pieces, secured direct from the Plains, and from the natives of the desert. Bought for us by our agents from the Chiefs of Arab tribes. Several bits are worn, having been for some time in use in temples, mosques, harems.”¹³ Complex store displays and suggestive passages like this demonstrated that exoticism was a central part of the identity of Oriental rugs and was used as a selling feature equal in importance to the quality of the physical object itself.

Other themes were also used to bolster the imaginary surrounding Eastern weaves. The image of the bazaar appeared frequently in store catalogues and advertisements. The rug section of the 1902-03 Simpson's Catalogue depicted a bearded man wearing a robe and a fez presiding over a pile of rugs, it is interesting to note that the catalogue failed to include Oriental rugs in the stock listing. During the early twentieth-century retailers used the image of the Oriental rug tied with Eastern exoticism to sell carpets regardless of their origin. This effective marketing tool, combined with a degree of consumer ambivalence, lead to a market place where machine-made and hand-knotted pieces were often confused or interchanged.

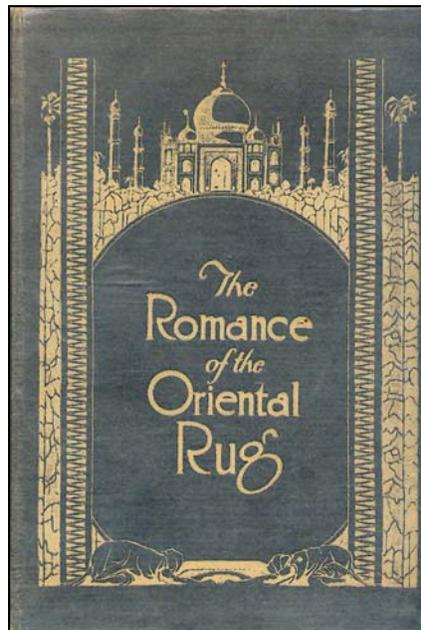


Figure 4. Cover of the Babayan's Limited publication, *Romance of the Oriental Rug*, 1925. Babayan's was this first retail store devoted to selling and importing Oriental rugs in Toronto.

Department stores were not the only retailers to align carpets with an exotic foreign voyage. Armenian émigré Levon Babayan was Toronto's first carpet dealer to specialize in the sale the

¹³ *Hudson's Bay Company Catalogue* (Fall/Winter 1910-1911), 140.

Oriental rugs. Promotional material for Babayan's Limited states that the business was established in 1896, however he was also listed in the 1898 Toronto Directory as a department manager at the T. Eaton's Company store, likely in the carpet department, and it is possible that he worked at Eaton's while getting his own business off-the-ground. Levon Babayan began the business with fellow émigré Paul Courian, a partnership that lasted until 1913, both Babayan and Courian were one of many Armenian immigrants that first began importing, wholesaling and retailing operations in major American cities like Boston, Chicago and New York as well as Canadian centres such as Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. Babayan noted in his store publication, *Romance of the Oriental Rug*, produced in 1925 that, "Armenian dealers and Rug importers throughout America and Canada who have been the founders of the Oriental Rug business on this continent have proven to be, in most cases, reliable and competent to give the accurate information about Oriental Rugs, through native knowledge on this particular line."¹⁴ The comment on reliability and competence was clearly aimed at extinguishing prejudice against buying rugs from a non-Western dealer who's reputation may have been considered suspect in conservative early twentieth-century Toronto.

More of an advertising tool than academic survey, the Babayan's book likely was given away as a premium with purchases from the showroom, and judging from the number that turn up in second-hand book stores, its circulation was relatively wide. The publication was a near copy of *Oriental Rugs in the Home: A Monograph*, produced in Chicago by the Nahigian Brothers in 1913, and provided a brief overview of weaving traditions of the Middle East, gave advice on how to select a rug for the home. The book also describes how the company used its own "native" representatives to secure rugs for export. Once collected the rugs were tied in bales with "native hair rope" and transported by camel to Baghdad or the Persian Gulf, from there they were shipped to Constantinople, Europe or America, a journey that would take four to six months. The book also describes the large warehouse depots and notes that they were not "inviting places."¹⁵ The rug business was depicted by the book in a manner that heightened the sense of other worldliness while revealing the mechanisms behind the trade.

Babayan's Limited was not the only merchant to publish a book on Oriental rugs with a view to increase sales. The T. Eaton Company self produced a small publication titled *15 000 Miles Through the Orient*, in the late 1920s or early 1930s. The booklet detailed the trip taken by store buyers to Baghdad, Kermanshah, Hamadan, Sultanabad, Constantinople and Smyrna in search of carpets for Canadian markets. The large assemblage of black and white photographs depicted the store employees in a variety of Middle Eastern settings possibly negotiating for stock with brokers. In the 1930s Simpson's also sent a team of buyers to Turkey to buy carpets direct from brokers rather than through Western wholesalers. The Simpson's buyers had an album of professional quality photographs on display at their Queen Street store in Toronto. These photographs pictured store staff in large carpet depots as well as in group photographs posed in front of ruins with camels. It appears that by the late 1920s that household cleanliness was thought to be under control and images of dusty bundles of carpets being transported by camels through the desert no longer threatened the image of familial health. On the contrary it was deemed an important marketing tool that Canadians knew they were purchasing carpets that were bought directly from sources in the Middle East, thus adding the sense of prudence buying directly and exotic caché.

¹⁴ Levon Babayan, *The Romance of the Oriental Rug* (Toronto: Babayan's Limited, 1925), 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

Highlighting the exotic origins of Oriental rugs was a double-edge-sword for retailers. While extolling their fantastic origins dealers also had to reassure clients that the carpets they were buying would stand-up as well as domestic manufactured products. One Toronto journalist suggested that those interested in buying an Oriental rug should ensure that their dealer is honest for fear of otherwise buying a “doctored rug that will wear out in no time.”¹⁶ The author of “How to Buy a Rug” told the reader that when buying a rug, if he were prudent, he “wets his white pocket-handkerchief and rubs to see if the colors are fast. Color is of prime importance as the Germans sold aniline dyes to the native manufacturers as a substitute for vegetable dye and if the color rubs off the carpet is almost worthless.”¹⁷ Concerns over rugs made with fugitive dyes and low quality wool abounded during the first decades of the twentieth-century, as they do today. This commercial trepidation was certainly based to some extent in truth as well as rugs of varied quality were traded all over the world or a racist response to a foreign product illustrating the fine-line that retailers had to tread negotiating the appeal of exoticism and the need to create trust for a new and foreign product.

The popularity of Oriental rugs remained relatively unchallenged until the emergence of the modern style at the end of the 1920s. This movement signaled a new streamlined direction in decorative arts that was embraced by some Torontonians. *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, a Toronto based decorating magazine, frequently juxtaposed traditional colonial, Georgian or Jacobean revival homes with emerging modern styles. A 1937 article entitled, “Modern is the Word: In the Spirit of Our Times” showcased a house in Bayview, Ontario, where, “the raisin coloured floor covering is carried throughout all parts of the suite, even including the bathroom, serving to emphasize the flow of the decorative scheme.”¹⁸ This modern interior design movement sought to make a complete departure from traditional decorative fashions by creating a style that was more uniform and streamlined in appearance. In terms of floor coverings, it largely eliminated Oriental rugs, perhaps with the exception of monochrome Chinese carpets, in favour of plush single-tone carpeting installed wall-to-wall (which was easier to clean in the 1930s than it had been decades earlier due to technological advances). A 1971 *Financial Post* article interviewed Toronto rug dealer Setrak Adourian (Adourian got his start working for Babayan) who noted that one of his competitors, S.J. Aliman, had become rich by selling rugs that he bought decades earlier “at a time when a lot of rich old Toronto families were modernizing, putting in springy broadloom wall-to-wall, Aliman was buying acres of dusty old Persian rugs for a song.”¹⁹ Clearly the movement towards the modern aesthetic hurt the popularity of the Oriental rug in the decades surrounding World-War-Two. The desire for simple and uniform decorative schemes argued in favour of wall-to-wall carpeting, thus getting rid of patterned floor coverings, including the Oriental rug.

The rise in popularity of the Oriental rug in Toronto at the end of the nineteenth-century was encouraged by the fashion for Oriental decorative arts coupled with certain advancements in attitudes towards household cleanliness that led to the popularity of hard-wood floors and the preference for area rugs. Encouraged by retailers and journalists, Torontonians embraced the Oriental rug sustaining its popularity through the turn-of-the-century to a point during the early decades of the twentieth-century that it had become fully integrated as a typical component of

¹⁶ Floor Coverings and Furniture, *Saturday Night*, December 6, 1913 p. 30

¹⁷ “How to Buy a Rug,” *Saturday Night* (December 23 1922), 26.

¹⁸ “Modern is the Word: In the Spirit of Our Times,” *Canadian Homes and Gardens* (December 1937), 25.

¹⁹ Raoul Engel, “Levitations of a Persian Carpet”, *The Financial Post*, 13 March 1971.

middle-class décor. During this period the Oriental rug underwent a dramatic conceptual shift when the aesthetic reference moved from exoticism and decadence to something that was viewed as traditional to Western sensibilities and practical to live with. However, without a strong basis for connoisseurship, the Oriental rug in Toronto eventually faded into the background and by the 1940s and 50s they became victim to changes in fashion that made them obsolete. The new style of the mid-century as dictated by mass market retail preferred monochrome broadloom over hand-knotted area rugs, a movement that was perhaps influenced more by domestic manufacturing and product sales. The Oriental rug from the 1880s to the 1940s can be linked to aesthetics trends that were driven by Orientalist and historical models as well as changing attitudes toward household hygiene at the beginning of the twentieth-century. Finally the movement toward modernized aesthetics as defined by North American retailers made this common household item witness to a host of social and aesthetic changes that in-part defined the beginning of the twentieth century interior design.

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