



A BRIEF HISTORY OF RUGS AND CARPETS

The history of the manufacturing of rugs and carpets begins with weaving. Early weaving began with baskets and crude mats made from grasses, leaves and reeds. The first spinning and weaving of shorn sheep and goat hair occurred at least as early as 6000 BC, according to excavations near the Caspian Sea.

The first true carpets, with pile, were probably rough cured skins that early hunters used as floor covering in their crude dwellings. Modern carpets still consist of the basic elements of a tough flexible backing, upright pile, agreeable to the touch and protection from cold hard floors.

The Egyptians wove linen and woolen carpets in the 3rd millennium BC. The influence of the Egyptian carpets spread to Mongolia and China. A Turkish knotted rug was found in Siberia in the 1950's and was dated back to 500 BC.

Early Chinese carpets were made of knotted silk pile and backings of wool or cotton. Later the Chinese developed the use of wool pile production. Nomadic Central Asian tribes also developed the use of weaving wool rugs. These rugs were woven on simple horizontal frames that were easily rolled up for traveling.

Early Looms were composed of two forked branches joined by a crosspiece. A wooden bar was used to flatten the binding threads. The early weavers used natural colors at first. Gradually they learned to dye the fibers with colors made from vegetable, flower and insect materials.

During the Middle Ages, Italian merchants brought oriental rugs to Europe where they were first used as wall coverings. By the year 1600 there was a powerful guild of weavers in France. In 1608 Henry IV of France set up looms in the Louvre.

In England carpet weavers were chartered in the towns of Wilton and Axminster in 1701. About 1740 carpet weaving was established at Kidderminster. By 1830 a British Parliamentary paper declared that 1/28 of the wool produced in the United Kingdom was carpet wool.

Richard Arkwright invented a machine called the flyer spinning frame in 1769. This machine spun thread onto a bobbin. Ten years later Samuel Crompton introduced the "spinning mule" which spun 1000 threads at a time. In 1787 the first steam powered loom appeared and weaving had become an automated process. By 1839 the steam powered loom process was being used in the manufacture of carpet. The power loom first appeared in the United States in 1841. The invention of the Axminster loom in 1876 stimulated the carpet manufacturing industry by permitting an unlimited range of color and design in carpets. Axminster and Wilton woven carpets now (1992) account for only 3% of the carpet sold in the United States.

Today, most carpet production (94%) is tufted carpet. Tufted carpet is produced 15 times faster than woven carpet. The faster production time greatly reduces the labor costs during the carpet manufacturing process.

In order to achieve dimensional stability in tufted carpet it is necessary to apply two layers of "backing" (double-backed tufted carpet) to the carpet. The backing directly beneath the pile yarn is called the "primary" backing. Attached to the primary backing by a layer of rubber or latex is the "secondary" backing. The original backing on tufted carpet was "jute." Jute is a natural burlap that when over-wet was subject to shrinkage, dry-rot and seam popping. Presently, the backing of tufted carpet is made from a synthetic material called polypropylene (olefin). Polypropylene backing will not accept moisture so the shrinkage, dry-rot and seam popping associated with jute backing is impossible; even if the carpet is over-wetted in the cleaning process.

