

ACTING THE GOAT

Vedat Demiralp is shepherding the revival of Turkish rugs

Memories from his childhood in the Black Sea region came flooding back when Vedat Demiralp spied a remarkable rug on a friend's floor whilst visiting Turkey twelve years ago. He was reminded of the special rugs woven from goat hair which were, at one time, an honoured part of a woman's dowry. Highly valued and painstakingly handmade, these deceptively simple rugs were considered an important part of Turkish rural culture.

As Turkey's rural population has migrated away from remote mountainous areas to the cities in search of work, these rugs have almost entirely disappeared. Younger generations are drawn towards the colourful, mass production of the late twentieth century and these monochromatic rugs have become casualties of such trends. Demiralp visited the village where they were still being made and sold. In the past these rugs would have been made on a regular basis, at home, to supplement a family's income; but as demand has declined so too have the skills required. He found the weavers in their forties and fifties, and not all of the designs good – but there were some lovely examples. Since then he has founded Coban Rugs and dedicated himself to reviving and refining the designs and reintroducing the skills. He began hiring the best weavers to make them for him and his predominantly UK based, interior design market. While remaining completely loyal to the original concept he has fine-tuned their production.

Exquisitely plaited edges adorn and finish the rugs; delicate and abstract motifs travel lightly across the surface. These are often hand stitched by Demiralp

himself after the rug has been woven and are also inspired by his other loves – technology and engineering. Linear rhythms of geometric shape in contrast with the natural tones of the fibres come together, giving them a striking appearance. Their palette is highly specific and results from the natural colour of the goat's hair. Demiralp explains that the goat hair is naturally resistant to dye; a high level of lanolin makes it hard to apply any colour. The goat's natural habitat is invariably mountainous and they can survive in most climates; high altitudes, hot, dry summers and cold, crisp winters. The resulting goat hair is varied and contains several different types of hair. The most (famously) desirable is the soft hair found under their chins and bellies, cashmere. But they also have a very coarse hair which runs along their spines and several other grades in-between.

The key to production here is the shepherd. In fact "çoban" means "shepherd" in Turkish and the whole process starts with buying the hair; at the right time from the best shepherds. Usually shorn in spring before the hot weather sets in, the goat hair is removed (with no harm to the goat I'm assured) in one fell swoop, which means all the different types of hair are mixed together. In some ways, Demiralp explains, the 'combing' process is the most important part, as this is where the different colours and grades of hair are separated out. The combing is done in several stages. As the hair travels through a combing machine the impurities are removed, along with a quarter of the hair which is unusable and impossible to spin. At each stage the comb gauge becomes finer and the quality of hair becomes thinner. After this

process the hair is spun, an extremely time-consuming process – it takes a spinner two to three days to create enough fibre for one day's worth of weaving.

Unlike wool, goat hair is complex and difficult to work and the person spinning must be a real master of their craft. It's something they can only learn by touch and 'feel', according to Demiralp: certain weavers can only work with thread spun by certain spinners as they get used to a particular quality of fibre. If he pairs up different and new weavers and spinners together they can take several days longer to create the rug if they are unfamiliar with each other.

Despite struggling to find young people to train he has gradually created a successful flow of production and now offers an exclusively bespoke service. Production times can vary from three weeks to three months depending on the time of year and complexity of the rug. The final stage of production is the finishing. Generally they are woven in sixty to seventy centimeters widths which is suitable for a stair runner: if a floor rug is required the strips will be woven up to one metre wide and stitched together to create a larger size, with any embellishment or fringing added by hand at the very end. Demiralp concludes that, for now, he has contributed significantly to revive the tradition; its minimal, yet highly crafted, aesthetic proves popular in the UK. His aim is to explore the over-stitching technique further and elaborate their two-dimensional motifs – perhaps even adding a tiny touch of colour; he says with a laugh. ***

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