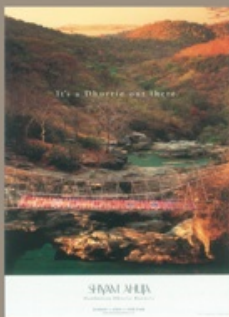




Palatable pastels

SHYAM AHUJA REINVENTED THE DHURRIE WITH HIS FRESH APPROACH TO COLOUR AND PATTERN

With his new take on a neglected tradition he reawakened interest in Indian flatwoven rugs.



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01 Mountains of yarn surround weavers in Ossiyan an ancient town in Rajasthan. Here, balls of dyed cotton are weighed in larger than life scales before distribution to the weavers.

02 Advertising campaigns established the distinct pastelness or Shyam Ahuja Dhurries contrary to conventional advertising strategy, these advertisements were never repeated.

03 & 04 The weavers transport the yarn back to their desert hamlet and return later with the completed rug for weighing and inspection

A dining table covered in a beautifully patterned, woven fabric and a fork delicately picking soft yellow, pink and blue skeins off a plate accompanied by the words 'Feast On Pastels' is an advert that reveals Shyam Ahuja's preoccupation. You don't have to be Sigmund Freud to realise Ahuja is a man who eats, drinks and breathes flat-woven rugs or 'dhurries' as they are known in India.

His adverts hint at an adventurous persona, reminiscent perhaps of Indiana Jones forging through unknown territories. Across a jungle-flanked river, his handcrafted textiles stretch out forming a long, narrow rope bridge accompanied by the heavily ironic text: 'It's a Dhurrie out there'. It is important to realise that it takes this level of 'Jonesian' dedication and this perfectionism to build a company whose textiles furnish some of the best hotels and homes around the world.

Dhurries are a quintessential part of Indian life. Traditionally woven at home from cotton and wool, these tough rugs are striking and versatile. Both utilitarian and decorative, their function depends on their quality. Used as animal coverings, as seating spread out on the floor or as gifts to brides, the most spectacular dhurries were woven for royalty and today some of the most unusual are even woven as occupational therapy for the inmates in prison workshops in the 20th century.

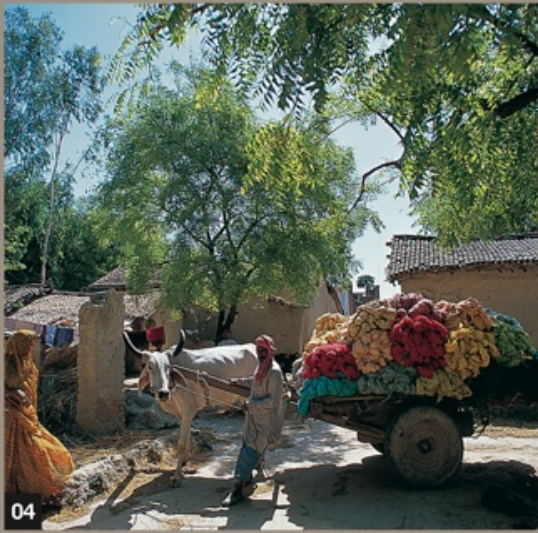
Developed and crafted through time, their origins trace back to grass mats woven millennia ago. Ahuja's addition to the rich history of Indian dhurries began just as the quality of dhurries began to decline in the second half of the 20th century and,

coincidentally, a vogue for ethnic textiles gripped the West.

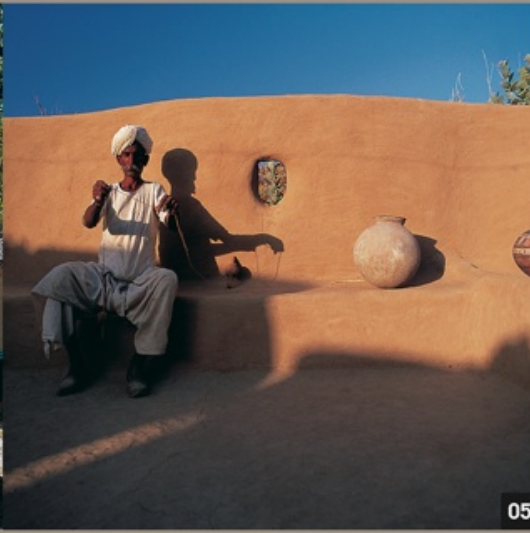
In 1969, a New York commission to create a flat woven rug prompted Ahuja to travel to India forsaking his previous interest in knotted pile carpets. It was a trip that became the basis of a lifelong journey. Ever the perfectionist, he sourced the finest white wool, shorn at the end of winter, from Rajasthan and, after months of painstaking experiments, it was decided to spin the wool to a 60 count, 5 ply yarn. Yarns were dyed to exact shades; meticulous paper designs created and these precious colour-coded design sheets with attached samples of dyed yarn were handed over to weavers who then transformed them into dhurries on horizontal ground looms.

According to a time-tested and perfected sequence, the warp threads – predominantly cotton to provide the holding power – are tautly fixed to the two end beams of the loom to form the basic skeleton of the dhurrie. The tension is kept as high as possible to achieve near perfect symmetry and straight lines. The dhurries are woven in a weft-faced plain weave with dovetail joins to create a pattern, which evolves through colour changes of the weft threads. Once each pass is complete, the weft-thread is tightened and beaten down with a wooden comb, to create a dhurrie 'crisp in design and texture'.

Soon after the 60 count, 5-ply dhurrie was perfected, a new challenge was identified. Besotted by an original French Aubusson flatwoven rug with 103 colours, Ahuja photographed it, created a scale-drawing and set about dyeing 103 different colours and shades. Developing a finer yarn, he used this



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05 In a Hamlet in Rajasthan, an elderly weaver spins goat yarn on a rudimentary spindle.

06 A pastel cotton dhurrie is perfectly at home in an airy sunlit room of a French chateau.

07 & 11 The final scrutiny and finishing now begins. The dhurrie is thoroughly inspected for flaws and any tiny holes all faults are corrected using fine silk yarns.

08 The traditional weaving tools used by dhurrie weavers today.

09 This scene could not have been more eloquently perfect. The lady, clearly an aristocrat, does not sit directly on the pale blue and pink dhurrie but on a yellow embroidered quilt placed over it.

‘The fountainhead of all my dhurries is not design, but colour ... there has to be poetry. There is no set formula, only an unerring instinct – you have to feel the colour and design in your gut’.



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100 count 3 ply yarn with 240 warp threads per inch (instead of the earlier 135) to capture the curves of the rug perfectly. The thin yarn minimized space between adjoining threads, allowing a dense weave and the smooth execution of curvilinear motifs.

Today, cotton and wool from India and New Zealand, and the finest quality silk from China are procured to produce Shyam Ahuja dhurries. But although an age is spent ensuring that the materials and designs are unparalleled, Ahuja acknowledges it is colour that makes the dhurries special. ‘The fountainhead of all my dhurries is not design, but colour ... there has to be poetry. There is no set formula, only an unerring instinct – you have to feel the colour and design in your gut’.

And nine times out of ten his instinct tells him to design in pastels. It’s a choice that, early in Ahuja’s career, appealed to western buyers and has become synonymous with elegance and sophistication in India. His colour palette has now widened to include richer, deeper tones satisfying a western desire for ‘ethnic’ products.

But the maker knows his own work best, for if a pastel hued dhurrie looks elegant, you can be assured that its superiority is not just visual. The yarn for pastel dhurries is spun

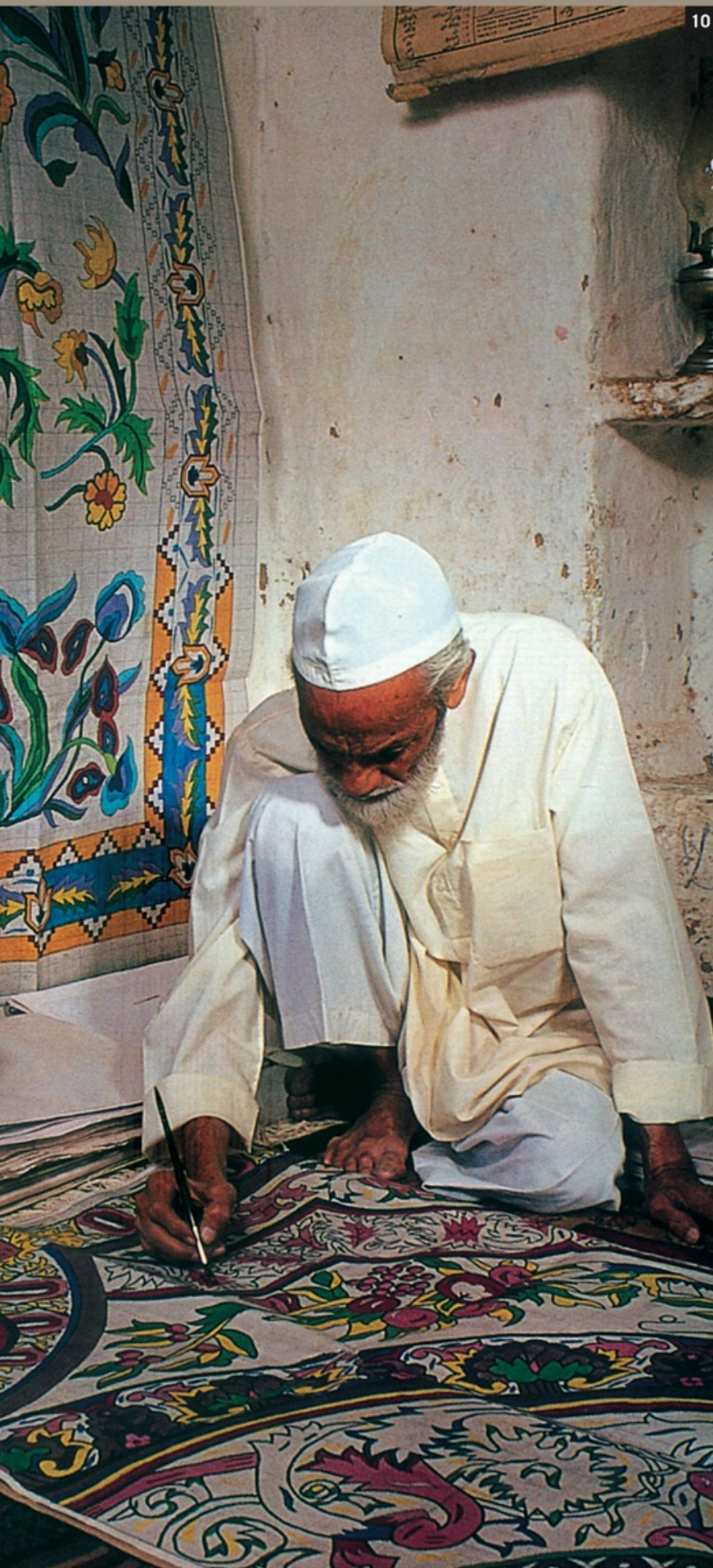


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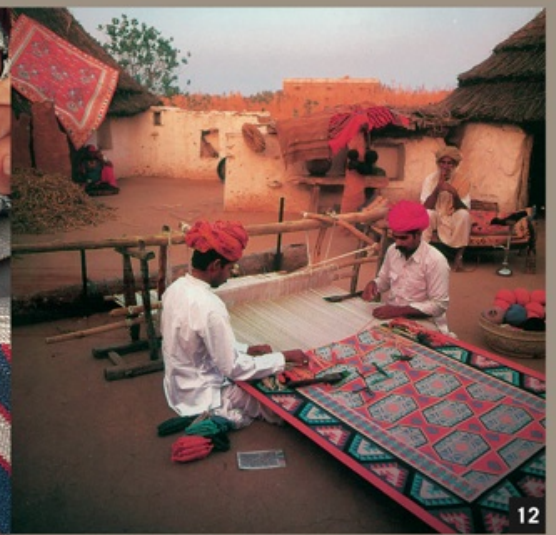




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from the finest wool for a practical reason, the virgin white wool is necessary to achieve the tranquillity of soft blues, pinks, and greens. Pastel dhurries do not just look superior – they are superior.

Although Ahuja prefers pastels, his designs now include a range of tones and he is equally diverse in his choice of pattern. He explains, 'For the last twenty years I have been animated by a rich fund of design ideas from nature, architecture, books and textiles.' Patterns vary from the classic striped and geometric designs to intricate floral motifs and inspiration is welcome from any quarter: gift wrapping paper in Sao Paulo, an architectural motif in a Mughal monument, a Scottish tartan or Navajo textile – every article has possibility. And his efforts have paid off; they have changed the way people view dhurries.

If one takes the company literature at face value, then Ahuja is a man with lofty ambitions, a man with 'visions of a world of pastels and perfection'. But don't be frightened. 'Pastels and perfection' may evoke a Middle England vision of pristine chintz and pretty china figurines, but here he simply refers to an expanding range of gorgeous hand woven furnishings, and they are not all pink! This is a man with a mission, who sought to reinvigorate

a tradition and succeeded. He now produces dhurries, bed linen, fabrics and accessories. The phrasing may be idiosyncratic but the products are universally appealing.

Dhurries are available from Shyam Ahuja showrooms throughout India, in Paris and New York. Orders can be placed to create a specific rug and at a nominal amount a design plate for approval along with matching tufts can be provided. Mr. Ahuja's experiences and the fascinating history of the Indian dhurrie can be explored in '*Dhurrie, Flatwoven Rugs of India*', India Book House Limited 1999 ISBN: 81-7508-111-2C ●●● Brinda Gill

10 Jalil Ahmed Ansari furrows his brow in concentration as he paints the colours of each minute square on graph paper. Transferring hand painted sketches into cartoons is said to be like translating poetry from one language to another.

12 In the weaving hamlets of Rajasthan weavers copy the designs of small paintings on to large cotton dhurries without the aid of a full size cartoon.