

CASHMERE TALES

Founded as an offshoot of a nearly 100-year-old concern, Iwan Maktabi is a modernised family business. AD visited the brand's Beirut base

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Siblings Shirine and Mohamed Maktabi in the brand's Beirut store



Modern and vintage designs, from Iran, Indian, Armenia or Azerbaijan coexist in Maktabi's showroom

of the design and the complexity of the texture. For antique carpets, age, rarity and historic relevance become vital factors. A self-confessed "carpet addict" with a sizeable personal collection, Mohamed's personal favourites are the antique Senneh carpets produced in western Iran, so finely textured it's hard to believe they are knotted by human hands.

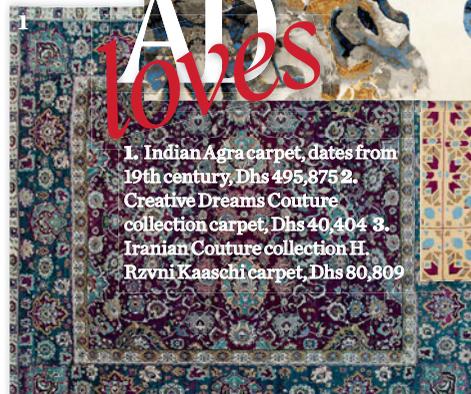
The Maktabi story starts with the patriarch Hajji Hussein Maktabi, Mohamed's grandfather, who emigrated from Isfahan to Beirut in 1926. Like his father before him, his passion was collecting fine carpets. Since then the family business has spread from Riyadh and Jeddah in Saudi Arabia to Zurich in Switzerland and to the rest of Europe. Mohamed is the only brother to his five sisters, and they are all involved in the family business that comprises four stores in Beirut and one in Dubai. "It is a blessing to have siblings who share the same passion and drive. My sis-

ters and I share a common vision," he says. "The roles in our family are well defined, which translates to minimal conflict." The third generation has brought many changes to the business: modernising the designs and taking carpet from being just a traditional handicraft to a designer product, and sometimes even into the rarefied realm of art. The carpets are produced in Iran, Turkey, India, Pakistan and Nepal, by skilled artisans. In the 1980s the Maktabis faced a decline in production, as weavers moved to other, more lucrative industries. Things have changed now. Treating their artisans fairly is a priority. "In Iran, our weavers' children are all enrolled in village schools. In Nepal and India, we have crèches and in Turkey, weavers getting married receive full dowries. We have regained the trust of our weavers, and they take pride in what they do. They are creating art which is winning international awards. Our success is their success as well." iwanmaktabi.com

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Mohamed Maktabi, who helms Iwan Maktabi now, recalls summer vacations spent in the family store as a child and accompanying his father Abbas on buying trips to Iran as a teenager. "After trying out banking and finance, joining the family business was a natural choice," he says. In a way, it was a role he had been groomed for all his life: absorbing the knowledge handed down by his father and uncles, learning from being at the shop since an early age, and getting inspired by museum visits and private collections.

"I remember all of us in the newly opened Iwan Maktabi showroom in 1995, when the walls were still slick with paint, and we had a small number of carpets in the shop," he reminisces. "My father had just rediscovered an 8mm film of my grandfather selling carpets, shot by a Swiss collector. The whole family gathered to watch this rare movie." From those beginnings rooted in history and heritage, Iwan Maktabi has grown to become the go-to address for rare carpets and textile art in the region, as well as avant garde bespoke creations. The handcrafted aesthetic of its contemporary carpets – epitomised by The Erased Heritage collection created by Jan Kath – is finding favour with designers looking to bridge the gap between past and present. "We work closely with architects and interior decorators, anticipating and adapting to trends. But we always keep a small part of our production for researching new and crazy ideas, to be ahead of the curve," Mohamed says. The price and quality of a carpet are influenced by the material - wool, silk or cashmere, knot count, the difficulty



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1. Indian Agra carpet, dates from 19th century, Dhs 495,875 2. Creative Dreams Couture collection carpet, Dhs 40,404 3. Iranian Couture collection H. Rzvni Kaaschi carpet, Dhs 80,809