

The personal touch of Oriental rugs

The people connected to handmade rugs fascinate Wellingtonian Anna Williams who repairs, mends and restores Oriental rugs. In a recent visit to her tiny city workshop, Anna showed us a rug made by a woman she'd met in Iran who makes rugs in her tent – “she had an enormous horizontal carpet loom in her dirt-floored home.” Another weaving gift that she treasures was given to her by an Iranian nomad friend.

Sometimes she stays with Ali in Teheran who has a rug export business. He employs about 15 repairers (all men) who sit on a concrete floor in a large shed, surrounded by dishevelled piles of rugs.

Anna has been breathing life into old rugs for years now, and never knows what might come through her door next – “You might get a rug that a family has owned for years, or that dad or granddad brought back from the war,” she said. The personal touch again.

She has always had a love of texture. At school, sewing was her favorite subject and at university, studying for her B.A in Anthropology, she managed to find time for sewing. After discovering the joy of weaving, she gained her Certificate in Handloom Weaving in 1977. In 1992, a Wellington rug importer urgently needed a repairer as his shipment had arrived with damaged rugs. Anna slotted into the job perfectly.

She has visited Iran seven times now, she told us, living in local communities and studying with rug restorers. She buys yarns, wool, cottons and silks there but increasingly uses New Zealand wool. Even a damaged shoulder and arm have not deterred her. She just wedges herself to the edge of her workbench and carries on.



Anna Williams demonstrates rug repairs to the visiting Friends of Te Papa group. Beside her are Friends committee members: Ann Hodson (left) and Sheryn Shackleton

She showed us examples of some of the repair jobs she tackles. Often it's fringes that are badly frayed – some have been chewed off by the family dog! If edgings have been added separately, they often need to be reconnected to the body of the rug.

She sent us each off with a small piece of hand-weaving mounted on a greetings card – a reminder of a fascinating session and especially of the personal touch that is so important to her.

Judith Doyle