



Best: "Star Kazak,"
circa 1880. In excellent
condition with no restoration

The concept of "good, better, and best" is difficult to apply in the world of antique Oriental rugs because personal taste is so much a part of what makes one rug more interesting than the next. For the purposes of this article I will use the following definitions: A "good" rug is attractive and fits any lifestyle; a "better" rug is one that you could trade in to upgrade or resell (This would be a rug that is at least seventy years old and in fairly good condition, with no alterations to the design or color, and with reasonably limited restoration.); "best" rugs are those that are unique, truly old, in good condition, and are special within their own categories.

The main elements that determine value are color, artistry, rarity, and condition. Weave is important, but usually only in that the weave is appropriate for the design. Geometric designs do not require fine weaves; curvilinear designs done in a coarse weave usually look unappealing. The knot count is not the most important determination of value for most old rugs.

Current taste often plays a role in determining which rugs are considered best at any given time. For several years, rugs with very limited or muted color from the areas of Sultanabad, Oushak, and Mahal in Persia (Iran) have been considered so desirable that some retailers have altered brighter rugs by "stripping" out the color. This might make for a "good" rug if that is your taste; in other words, it has fashionable colors you can live with it, but it won't very likely have resale value. A "better" rug would be one that has naturally soft color, but may have had some restoration, or perhaps is not quite as old. (The key in the middle category is to find something that has not been substantively "remade.") The "best" rug would be a beautiful, antique carpet in reasonably good condition, with only minor restoration and all of its original color.

A regional category that receives a lot of attention is that of Caucasian rugs. They are usually brilliantly colored, strong geometric

tribal pieces from the villages of the Caucasus Mountain area near the Caspian Sea—what is now Georgia. “Good” Caucasian rugs are generally from the first quarter of the twentieth century, have classic designs, and were woven for export. In today’s market, you may find these rugs with extensive rebuilding, or with colors that have been changed. “Better” Caucasian rugs would be the late nineteenth to early twentieth century examples that may have some aniline colors, but are still in fairly good condition. It is important to remember that chemical dyes came into use in this part of the world in the late nineteenth century. Many rugs that have small amounts of aniline dye are well over 100 years old and, more importantly, were woven before the truly commercial era. For collectors, the “best” Caucasian rug is a great, classic, example clearly from the nineteenth century or earlier that is strong artistically and in good condition.

There are many other categories of Oriental rugs and each one has a slightly different set of qualifications, though in general the date ranges conform to those used above for the Caucasian rugs. In all categories great color and classic design are always preferred; in some of the more tribal types of rugs there is a wonderful sophistication to even the simplest designs.



Better: Perpidil, circa 1900.
In good condition;
with some aniline color.

Good Best Better

in Antique Oriental Rugs

by Karen DiSaia



Good: Derbent, circa 1910. This is a charming rug and is now in good overall condition; it has had a large area of damage rewoven

So much of what is desirable in the rug market is in the eyes of the beholder. Each rug is individual; rarely will an exact duplicate be found. The unique color and character of each rug should be appreciated. In today's world, where you can buy anything from a catalog or online, isn't it nice to think that there are still wonderful things that are absolutely one of a kind and have a history and energy that connect us to all of humanity? @

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condition concerns

Most old rugs will have had some work done over time. This is acceptable if it is minor and in the spirit of conservation. When buying rugs it is important to inquire about restoration and to avoid rugs that have too much work; especially those that have been touched up with paint to disguise wear.

Good: Rugs that have had major repair or color changes but have visual appeal and are priced according to their condition.

Better: Rugs in good condition that have not had major damage or restoration. This can include rugs with even wear that still have an overall pile. These rugs may be missing a minor guard border or have some repairs from moth damage or holes. Rugs that maintain original color and that have not been tampered with or changed in any way.

Best: Rugs in excellent condition with little or no restoration and that have been properly maintained over time.

Conditions to avoid: Rugs that have been substantially rebuilt; rugs that have been painted; thin rugs with very little life left; colors that have been plucked out and changed to make them more desirable; color changes from an acid or gold bath.

suggested reading

Thompson, Jon, *Oriental Carpets from the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia*. Penguin Books, 1988.

Schurmann, Ulrick. *Caucasian Rugs*. Allen and Unwin, London, 1964.

Denny, Walter. *Oriental Rugs*. Cooper Hewitt Museum 1979.