

The Blanchard Family Bringing the Magic of Carpet Art to Winnipeg

by
Brian Campbell

The Blanchard family's love for traditional Middle Eastern and Asian rug and textile art began when James and Amy Blanchard travelled to Pakistan in the late 80s, while James was in medical school. James grew up in Pakistan where his father, Robert, was a surgeon and his mother, Madeline, was a nurse, so training there was a natural choice.

James' parents first introduced them to rug and textile art. Amy says, "My father-in-law grew to be fascinated with these old rugs because they are pieces of cultural history and we learned to appreciate them initially through him."

During their two months of training in Pakistan, they met a couple of gentlemen who sought refuge in Pakistan from Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion and it turned out that they dealt in traditional hand woven rugs. This added to their love for this traditional art form. Amy says, "We were able to spend some time with these lovely fellows, had tea with them and got to know them and the carpets they were selling."

They bought some of their rugs and brought them home and the seed was planted. James and Amy have passed their love for textile art along to their daughters, Andrea and Sarah.

The family moved to India in 2001 for six years while James was working on health projects through the University of Manitoba, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the Gates Foundation. Andrea and Sarah got part of their education, and expanded their love for textile art while living there. When it was time for them to leave India, they decided to return to Winnipeg, as Amy says, "We thought of where on earth we should go after India and our hearts were in Winnipeg. We and our families are happy we came back."

Their love for rug and carpet art started as a very personal interest. They have travelled around different places, checking out rug shops, admiring and sometimes buying favorite items. Amy says, "We have them in our home and we have always appreciated them. A

lot of our pieces are well over 100 years old, going back to tribal areas from days gone by.”

While they were living in India, the family travelled to Pakistan, where they met Hajji Sufi Abdul Wahid and Abdul Tawab, a father and son from Afghanistan who were in the rug and carpet business and they quickly became friends. “They have beautiful carpets, because they travel to Afghanistan and Iran into areas where they sell the really old ones made by tribal women that no one else can access,” Andrea says.

“They were asking us if there was any interest in Canada for this type of rug, because they had a lot of business from Europeans and Americans, but at that time we weren’t sure,” Amy says. “At the same time my brother-in-law (Bob Krul, who was in India sourcing coffee and tea in preparation for opening Cornelia Bean Ltd.) said to us, ‘what do you think of the idea of tea and carpets?’”

“We thought, oh no, we couldn’t do that,” Andrea says. But when they moved back to Winnipeg, they reconnected with Bob on this idea and his expertise as a business partner has helped them get the business off the ground. So Rubia Darya Gallery was born.

For the most part, they source the majority of their rugs and carpets through Sufi and Tawab. Amy sometimes travels to see carpets, but much of the travelling is done by James when he is overseas for work. Amy says, “He’ll spend a few hours on a Sunday and Sufi and Tawab will show him some special rugs that they know we might like. James will take pictures of his favourites and send them to us for a family decision.”

James is now an Epidemiologist at the University of Manitoba and works as the Professor of Community Health Sciences and Director of the Centre for Global Public Health, a job that has him travelling all over Asia and Africa.

Amy began in the nursing profession but left it to support the family, and has since been very involved in volunteer work, both overseas and here at home. She says, “In India, there was a very good overseas women’s group who worked with a lot of charitable organizations and it was a great place for me to plug in.”

Andrea is following in her father’s footsteps by completing her Masters in Community Health Sciences at the University of Manitoba, travelling to India several times to complete her Master’s Thesis. Andrea says, “Having lived overseas you get a desire and a heart for travel and multicultural encounters.”

In this art loving family it was inevitable that someone would pursue an art degree and in this case the person is Sarah, who is in her third year at the School of Fine Arts, at the

University of Manitoba. She has been able to infuse her studio work with influences from Asian and Islamic art and history.

Rubia Darya Gallery is very much a family business with everyone doing their part. James does most of the travelling and rug selection, while Amy runs the store and does most of the sales work. Regarding Andrea and Sarah's involvement in Rubia Darya, Amy says, "Of course they are very busy on their own, but they are part of the decision making process; it is something we do together. Hands-on wise, sometimes I need help in the store, and they both come in. Sarah works here with me during store hours"

"Luckily we both have been around rugs enough in our lives," Andrea says. "Because it has been a family hobby and appreciation, you learn things out of interest."

"Every time you have a new piece, you have to find out what's the story on this, what is the origin? Once you start learning, the history becomes much richer. You understand that this must have come from this certain region because of the colours or patterns, and that must be from that region," Andrea adds. "We tried to organize the shop around different areas or tribes."

Although the majority of their rugs and carpets are older tribal pieces, they do have some contemporary pieces, particularly in support those who are skillfully reinvigorating the old traditions. Amy says, "Tawab and Sufi are very good about supporting regions who have been displaced and lost their cultural roots. They help them restart weaving in the traditional way and we buy some of these pieces to support them because otherwise the tradition will be lost and the people will lose this means to support themselves."

The name Rubia Darya links the origins of the carpets with Winnipeg. Rubia, or red, is part of the Latin name for the type of natural red dye that they use in most carpets, and Darya is Persian for river. So Rubia Darya means Red River.

The East side of the Exchange District near Waterfront Drive and the Red River has turned out to be the ideal location for their gallery, which is still less than a year old. Amy says, "We have a wonderful time with First Fridays in the Exchange District. People love learning about our rugs and textiles."

"Sometimes our customers are out-of-towners," Amy says. "And we are looking forward to having more. We have sold to people from as far away as San Francisco and it was easy to ship to them."

For the entire family rug and textile art is a first love and passion. They also absolutely love living in Tuxedo. Amy says, “It is such a beautiful part of the city. It’s peaceful and so full of nature.”

Andrea and Sarah agree that it is a marvel to be down the street from Assiniboine Park and Assiniboine Forest.

“There seems to be more of a focus on family here now, since they have updated the park,” Sarah says. “They have invigorated the park in a new way.”

“It has been a wonderful neighbourhood to live in,” Amy says.

The family still loves to travel, but while living in Winnipeg they are happy in their Tuxedo home and are eager to share their love of traditional woven art with Winnipeg. Amy says, “It is fun to share our love for carpets and the rich cultures and history behind them.”