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Oriental Weavers

In Appreciation:

Mohamed Farid Khamis 1940-2020

International Home of Oriental Weavers

I don't remember when in the 1980's I first met Mr. Farid (Mohamed Farid Khamis) founder of Oriental Weavers (OW) who died Saturday September 19th in Atlanta, but this Appreciation was informed by conversations with friends and admirers of his in and about the business of rugs.

Like Ron Couri, CEO of Couristan, who first met Mr. Farid at Heimtex in Germany, I first saw the dramatic black and gold stand at Heimtex. That was in an era when there were very few rug designers in the US. Most companies went to Heimtex to see new designs which they brought home as samples and told buyers how the actual goods would be recolored for the US market.

Fortunately, I was able to interview Johnny Graham when he retired in 2002. He established the Sphinx division (1991) for Oriental Weavers. I am quoting myself from that article in outlining the timeline of the development of Oriental Weavers in the US and around the globe, now numbering 22,000 workers in Egypt/Europe, China and the USA. Interviews and comments have been edited for space and clarity.

In 1978 when Mr. Farid first went into the rug business on his own with one loom, machine made rugs were a) made in Belgium primarily, b) the jacquard cards were cut by hand, making new designs and changes very expensive (N.B. I understand that now there is one, one person company still cutting cards by hand in the US), and c) the fiber used was wool.

In 1982-1984 when Johnny Graham joined Jerry Weinrib at ABC Carpet and Home to found Whitney Rugs there were two basic channels of distribution, department stores and specialty stores, that is Oriental Rug Stores. His point to me was that at that time most of the rug market already had their own sources of supply.

As Johnny Graham told me: "Fast forward to 1988 and a trade show in Germany. Johnny Graham along with Evan Cole from ABC, and Pulette Weinrib walk into this huge booth at the show. As Graham tells it, this good looking articulate man in an Armani suit walks up and they get into conversation. He (Mohamed Farid Khamis) wants to do business in the US. His machinery is computer driven, he has good designs, and can change colors as well as modify constructions."



25+ year old rug from my mud room, washed and sparkling—the dark spot is lighting, not a stain.

Oriental Weavers (OW) in this period were making changes faster than the Belgian mills. First computerized design developed. Then computerized card cutting became a reality. Then the computer head was mounted directly on the loom making it possible to change designs rapidly, and OW would change colors and had the capacity to modify constructions.

After founding the Sphinx division of OW in 1991, Johnny Graham built a medium price point category rug in Marquessa Lana fiber from Amoco—the TUT collection. Then they created the Museum Collection to fill a gap in traditional rugs, and it sold. This is when the big box stores entered the rug business even to the extent of trying to sell hand knotted rugs through this channel.



Mr. Farid at the Gabbeh OW cross woven loom

Following that, on a visit to Egypt, Graham saw a 2x3 sample which was a cross woven fabric in a synthetic fiber. Cross weaving is also known a side woven and means among other things an incorporated fringe instead of a sewn-on fringe, and more colors can be used than loom nominal capacity.

And this is where Mr. Farid excelled. Having asked to see some designs, the next day Johnny Graham saw 15-20 patterns, and then overnight, the mill wove rugs from the approved patterns. This line became Gabbeh, one of the most successful rug introductions in the business. This was the start of the cross/side woven Wilton rug. After introducing the Gabbeh line at market, they needed more machines, having only one to start. Mr. Farid ordered three more machines for immediate delivery. Fast forward to 2019, OW introduced a cross/side woven Axminster called Lilihan, again an industry first that Mr. Farid was instrumental in making happen.

In the early 1980's the company designer was the company owner who placed the orders. When I first visited OW in Egypt my take was that he had already hired more designers than there were in the whole US industry.

As Johnny Graham told me, "at that time, when most mills had one designer, Oriental Weavers had 8 rising to 20 in recent (2000) times. Graham recalls lecturing at the design school in Cairo on the Amer-

ican textile market and how to do business in the American market. His translator was Mohamed Farid Khamis."

"Graham describes him (Mr. Farid) as a very interesting person, who is smart, charming, with a great feel for people, a technical background second to none, and ready willing and able to work 16 hours a day."

John Hanhauser told me that when he was working on a color palette in Egypt one time, trying to create the 8 colors for the loom, Mr. Farid came into the room, looked at the palette, walked over to the wall with several thousand color chips, took one off the wall and handed it Hanhauser and left. As a side note, the older jacquard looms in Belgium were generally five frame looms, meaning using five colors. The newer computer controlled van de Weile looms were 8 frame looms, some even rising to 16 frames I am told, but 8 frames is common. The side/cross woven Axminster has I believe 15 colors. The choices come down to weaving speed and color detail.

Mr. Farid sent 18 wheelers into the slums of Cairo to deliver food directly to the people.

Mike Riley called my attention to the charitable Mr. Farid. When Oriental Weavers was first profitable, Mr. Farid sent 18 wheelers into the slums of Cairo to deliver food directly to the people. Riley said that Mr. Farid never talked about his generosity, but with his amazing generosity he did what he felt and believed in his heart.

LEADER. MENTOR. FRIEND.



OrientalWeavers
G R O U P



MOHAMED FARID KHAMIS

4.14.40 – 9.19.20





Showroom, lobby and offices at OW

Mr. Farid had a long term relationship with the hospital at Emory, not just for his needs but for the many needs of others for whom he paid their way to and from, as well as medical care in the hospital. And according to Mike Riley, that wasn't just for employees but friends and strangers with needs amounting to hundreds. This is a part of Mr. Farid not well known but over time the stories will come out. Mike Riley emphasized his generosity as an amazing humanitarian.

Riley emphasized that after his grandchildren, Mr. Farid loved most buying looms and picking colors for rugs. Each year at Domotex Mr. Farid made a presentation about Oriental Weavers focusing on his expansion plans and new products for the next year based on the number of meters of capacity to be added.

When I asked Jonathan Witt of Oriental Weavers about what was Mr. Farid's biggest success he responded that Mr. Farid had many successes but they consistently tied back into his relationships with rug people. Witt said that "at the end of the day Mr. Farid had passion

and the means to create opportunity for people with passion but who didn't have the opportunity—and he applied access to that opportunity everywhere." Witt said, and I concur, Mr. Farid loved the art of the rug.

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When asked about Mr. Farid's vision Jonathan Witt said Mr. Farid believed in people and that he created passion in other people for a business he loved. He gave his own example when Mr. Farid willingly gave a young man who wanted to buy a new type of loom, do it, calculating the cost not so much as dollars and cents but as his belief in people. That loom and several like it

are still producing rugs.

Jonathan Witt shared a video with me of Mr. Farid giving a talk on marketing in the United States. In it he talked about learning the customs and culture where you were planning to sell. He used himself, and some failures as an example, but when he turned to success, those successes permeated his business philosophy. In a factory it is called cross training, but at the executive level it is called building re-





Mr. Farid at home in the OW design studio.

relationships. Mr. Farid brought executives from one production center to another for two weeks at a time so that they would have working relationships.

Witt reflected on Mr. Farid's respect for every person in the Oriental Weavers family regardless of position because as Farid said, it took all of them to make it work. At the practical level Mr. Farid was able to be hands on in the design department and hands on with a loom, a tradition that we understand continues.

Although it is modern term, Mr. Farid was an industry "disrupter". He pushed machinery limits by first designing the machinery, and then by buying the machines. He made van de weile looms a global industry standard, which actually created some advantages for Oriental Weavers.

Jonathan Witt said like others, that you could feel the presence of his passion for the rug business just being with him. Customers could feel that passion as well as he listened to them.

One of his strengths is he selected a good team.

Bob Lakenan sold rugs for Oriental Weavers. He met Mr. Farid back around 2005 when Mike Riley introduced him. Lakenan remembers Mr. Farid for his soft spoken approach. As Johnny Graham once said "he's one of us". meaning that he too got up every morning and went to work just like the rest of us".

When I asked about: What was the part of his vision that impressed you the most?" Lakenan responded: "Much like Honda, he understood that you put your products as close to your customer as possible. In 1988 he opened Sphinx in order to have a position close to the U.S. rug market." Simply put: Visionary".

After dinner in the desert at Oriental Weavers--Spectacular!





David Mink Sr. visiting the pyramids while at OW

resource. They visited the Oriental Weavers stand. They met Mr. Farid, and like others felt his dignified and assured presence. According to Dave Adams, Mr. Farid's approach was how can I serve you and partner with you. They did place an order for some wool rugs which were very successful. At that time the basic machine woven synthetic was a BCF heat set polypropylene in five colors.

Then came the van de weile looms. Mr. Farid had realized that there were 4 basic color families, and he ran 2 shades in each family on 8 frame looms. 8 colors gave Oriental Weavers more depth of color and design. And Mr. Farid's appetite for more

looms created an effective exclusive on van de weile's loom production capacity for a period of time.

Perceived value plus limited supply, even while Oriental Weavers was ordering more looms meant that the product was attractive in the market.

David Adams said that Mr. Farid had a passion for innovation, that innovation was budget free, that he just loved creativity and innovation. Adams quotes Farid as telling him "Everything bows to innovation, even success."

From what I heard multiple times, Mr. Farid was also a great manager and team builder.

Adams said that the key to Mr. Farid's success was his humanity, compassion towards others; customers, employees, and fellow Egyptians. Adams told a story of being in a meeting in Mr. Farid's office when an obviously upset man was brought to his office. Mr. Farid left the meeting and went to the other side of the room to sit with the man. It seems some truck, not one from Oriental Weavers, had brushed him off his bicycle and run over his bike. Mr. Farid, calmed the man down, sent him off to the hospital, and organized a new bicycle for the stranger before he returned to the meeting.

David Adams view is that we lost a great visionary, and the industry lost part of its vision for the future. David Adams said to me that Mr. Farid left open the observation; "Without vision, it is difficult to navigate", and I responded with a quote: "Where there is no vision the people perish."

Rest in Peace, my friend.

Leslie Stroh ☚

To my comment that I think that Mr. Farid created the modern rug business that we all enjoy today, Bob Lakenan responded: I suspect Joseph Marie Jacquard might disagree.

I also think that people like Edward Fields, Roger De Clerck, Shaheen Shaheen, Jon Ansari, and Alex Peykar were at least as important, and all somewhat before him. Suffice it to say that they all probably belong on the Mount Rushmore of Rug Mavens.

From David Mink (Sr.): "The photo on a camel was taken in March 2004 as part of an excursion to Egypt, sponsored by Oriental Weavers. We had just introduced Oriental Weavers to the Macy's stores and Mr. Farid wanted to thank us with a trip to Egypt that was both pleasure and business. At this time, Americans were nervous about terrorism in the Middle East, but the OWS team made us very comfortable and took measures to make sure we were protected."

"I met Mr. Farid on this trip and was impressed by his organization and thoroughness. Of course, we were impressed by the rug manufacturing facilities."

"I think he was a visionary who took the old-fashioned rug business in a new direction. One of his strengths is he selected a good team."

I had a chance to have a long conversation with David Adams of the Dalyn Rug Company. Dalyn was one of the earliest and largest customers of Oriental Weavers. I started the conversation with the question: What is the most singular thing you can say about Mr. Farid. He responded: "He inspired greatness in those around him. A great leader knows how to form great leaders around them."

David and his father, now Chairman of the Board at Dalyn, Bill Adams, went to Domotex in 1990 just as David finished graduate school in December 1989. At that time mills in Belgium were their primary

*"Everything bows to innovation, even success."
Mohamed Farid Khamis*

